

Indigenous leaders respond to land rights overhaul

ABC Radio - The World Today - Monday, 6 December, 2004 12:10:00

Reporter: Louise Yaxley

ELEANOR HALL: There's been a swift and angry response from senior Indigenous leaders to a call for Aboriginal Australians to abandon their communal ownership of land.

The Labor Party's Vice President and an appointed member of the National Indigenous Council, Warren Mundine, has said he plans to advise the Prime Minister that there needs to be a "radical shake-up" of indigenous land ownership.

He says despite being a long-term campaigner for communal land rights, he's changed his mind.

But there appears to be no backing for his position from the Federal Labor Party. And other senior Indigenous figures have labelled Mr Mundine's call dangerous.

From Canberra, Louise Yaxley reports.

LOUISE YAXLEY: The National Indigenous Council is an appointed body, which will sit down this week with the Prime Minister and other senior federal ministers for the first time.

Warren Mundine says he's been under fire for agreeing to join it.

He says he'd prefer an elected body but he's accepted that won't happen.

Mr Mundine says he'll tell the Prime Minister it's time to abandon the land rights concept of communal ownership of land.

WARREN MUNDINE: You know, I've come to the realisation that many other people are coming to, is what land rights is doing in regards to communal ownership, where the profit and the benefits of that ownership, is not being spread throughout the community. In fact, it's retarding our economic development. Where you cannot use land for economic benefit, that you've got it locked away, then what it's doing is we've been asset rich, but cash poor – not putting any food or any clothes any money in our pockets.

So, we've got to take a drastic look at that and start turning it around to our advantage.

I'm not putting any time frame on it, but I think that these things I'm saying should

have been done yesterday. We're going to have to look at a whole raft of legislation, we're going to have to look at a whole raft of things that are going to need to be - policies, procedures and programs – that need to be changed, and quite frankly changed very quickly.

LOUISE YAXLEY: That's outraged Mick Dodson - a former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner.

MICK DODSON: If you do that, you lose the land. That's what happens. That's the boiled experience and this nonsense, this stupidity, has to stop somewhere.

I wonder if this is Labor Party policy? Does Mr Mundine support this on behalf of the Labor Party? This is just silly, stupid, ill thought out, dumb. I think he has no comprehension of what land means to people or how it's held. Perhaps he ought to get out and learn about it, and it's a little frightening that he's saying things like this if he's to be a member of this new appointed organisation. This could be very, very dangerous for Aboriginal people. We've got people who don't understand things and can't think them through.

LOUISE YAXLEY: And despite Mr Mundine's position as Junior Vice President of the Federal Labor Party, Labor's Indigenous affairs spokesman Kim Carr says it's not ALP policy.

KIM CARR: Well, Mr Mundine is entitled to speak to the Prime Minister about any matter he chooses. The Labor Party policy is very clear on these questions and we support the land rights regime, we support the changes that occurred under the Mabo legislation and we say while there always needs to be improvement, and Indigenous people themselves say that there needs to be improvement, we do not believe that we should subvert the basic principles of the land rights regime.

LOUISE YAXLEY: And the Aboriginal Senator from the Australian Democrats Aden Ridgeway also warns against Mr Mundine's plan, calling it a high-risk path.

ADEN RIDGEWAY: Look, I think it's an absolute nonsense and it displays a fair degree of naivety that you can't do certain things within Indigenous communities, you can. And I think what he ought to be talking about is retaining the basic nature of title as it's currently held by many communities, but extending its capacities so that you can lease it, you can sell it, you can do commercial activity, and that's really what he's talking about.

LOUISE YAXLEY: The National Indigenous Council meeting this week signals the start of another approach to addressing Aboriginal disadvantage.

Senator Ridgeway says he has concerns about how it would work.

ADEN RIDGEWAY: Well, I think there are certainly good people on the National Indigenous Council. The problem of course is that I think some may well be out of touch with the politics that's happened over the past few years and certainly with a great degree of understanding of the issues and how they've been dealt with. I hope they don't go in so naively to suggest to government what the Government wants to

hear.

LOUISE YAXLEY: While the 14 members of the Council are giving their advice - another group of Indigenous leaders, which does not accept the validity of the appointed body, is planning more talks with the Prime Minister to follow up on Michael Long's meeting last Friday.

ELEANOR HALL: Louise Yaxley reporting from Canberra.