

Labor's great black hope



*Warren Mundine took the road of education to rise above poverty and disadvantage. Preparing to become the Labor Party's national president, he tells **Bruce Stannard** of his wish to free the six out of 10 indigenous Australians still caught, like some whites, in welfare dependency*

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NEXT month, when Warren Mundine succeeds Barry Jones as national president of the Australian Labor Party, he will become the most prominent Aboriginal person in the country. But in the teeth of vehement Left opposition within the ALP and the Aboriginal community, Mundine has cut his controversial link with the Howard Government as a member of the National Indigenous Council, the advisory body that the Government set up last year to replace the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission abolished early this year.

The decision to quit the council, made public this week, has come late and under pressure. Earlier Mundine told Inquirer he "doesn't give a stuff" what his critics say about him and sees no conflict of interest in having the ear of government. At that point, he saw value in trying to influence the Coalition Government's agenda for change from the inside.

This week he told a reporter from The Australian: "I still stand by what I said previously, that I think it was the right decision to go on the National Indigenous Council and I support the members of the NIC for the work they're doing and what they are trying to achieve. [But] I've made the commitment now to work for the party, to get us to win

the next election in 2007, and I want to do everything that's possible for that to happen. We've [also] got a big year next year [in state elections]."

Although Mundine sounds like an apostle of free enterprise in urging Aborigines to rid themselves of the shackles of welfare dependency, start their own businesses if they want and move to a native-title mix of community land and land leased long-term to Aborigines for private business or home ownership instead of sole communal native title, he has what most would regard as an impeccable Labor background.

It's worth examining those credentials because if his star continues in its ascendancy, the man who is now chief executive officer of NSW Native Title Services, which pursues native title claims, may one day have his hands on the levers of ministerial power in a Labor government. This year he was the party's senior vice-president, and replaces Jones on January 28.

Mundine came up the hard way. The ninth of 11 children, eight boys and three girls, he was born 49 years ago in Grafton on the NSW north coast. His father, Roy, a lanky 190cm and "gentle as a lamb", was a farm rouseabout and NSW government roads labourer. His mother, Dolly, 149cm and "a real firebrand", was the matriarch who ran her crowded house with all the iron discipline of a regimental sergeant-major. She commanded respect, admiration and not a little love from a clan that often included uncles and aunties, nieces, nephews and grandparents, all under the same tin roof, and all happy in the knowledge that they were Bundjalung -- a people whose culture and language remains largely intact.

Mundine goes to great lengths to underscore the importance of home ownership in his life. "After the war, in which my father worked hard building military roads, he wanted what every other Australian wanted, a roof over his head," he says. "A place of security for his wife and his family. He wanted a house. Trouble was he could not afford it on Aboriginal wages.

"In those days Aborigines earned 30 per cent of the wages paid to white Australians. My father joined the Australian Workers Union and it was the AWU that got him the full wage. That's when he was able to buy a house. If he hadn't had that union backing, god knows where we might be today. See, here was a man with a belief in himself and he's saying, 'I'm a worker. All I need is a fair go. Don't give me no handouts. Don't patronise me, just give me a chance to get on'. When he was given that chance he grabbed it with both hands and began to pull himself up and up and up. I admire my father and my mother for that. They worked bloody hard and they allowed all of us to see the possibilities that are out there for each and every one of us."

Roy Mundine, 87, is the only one of his eight brothers to live beyond 50. He worked on NSW north coast farms while his brothers went down the asbestos mines, their lungs laced with the fine white dust that eventually killed them. Dolly Mundine's parents were among the first Aborigines to own their own home. They had once lived in tin humpies built around the cattle yards at Yugalbar Station, resisting attempts to shunt them off to the mission stations that swallowed up so many other Aboriginal people at the time.

His mother's father was a timber-getter on the Nambucca River. They were proud and staunchly independent people who had no wish to answer to a master on the missions. Mundine's maternal great grandfather, William O'Donovan, a carpenter who emigrated from County Cork, Ireland, in the 1870s, left them his Catholic faith.

"We were staunch [Catholics]," Mundine says. "As kids it seemed we were always at mass. My mother would hunt us up. 'No breakfast till after mass', she'd say. So that was always a big incentive. We'd get up early for the six o'clock mass, then rush back home to get a feed. We walked several miles to St Patrick's in South Grafton and several miles home again. We never had a car."

Mundine maintains his faith. "I was brought up a Catholic and I'm still a Catholic," he says. "I don't go to church as often as I should but I go to mass, I go to confession, and yes, I believe in God. I don't have a day where I don't say a prayer." What does he pray for? "Oh, guidance, help, forgiveness, all kinds of things," he says.

Mundine grew up in a two-bedroom weatherboard cottage in Kelly St, South Grafton which, he says, was always full of people. During 13 years he and three of his younger brothers slept head-to-toe in the same single bed. The other children, together with various relatives, bunked down in cots ranged around the enclosed veranda.

Although her sons were barefoot and generally in hand-me-downs, Dolly Mundine insisted that they would be educated at Grafton's St Mary's College. The redoubtable Dolly convinced the priest to change the girls-only rule and make the college co-educational. "My mother's success in winning that concession taught me a very important lesson," Mundine says. "If you have courage, if you have the strength of your convictions, you can make change. If you're determined, if you have faith, even the most insurmountable problems can be overcome. You don't give up. You have a go. That's the story of my life."

If there is one thing about his childhood that Mundine regrets it's the fact that although Bundjalung, the language of his people, was spoken at home, he somehow failed to pick it up. He's learning the language now. "Bundjalung is probably the only Aboriginal tongue regularly spoken in NSW these days," he says. "It's a source of pride to have that living link with our culture. I know a lot of Aboriginal people who are consumed with anger over the loss of their cultural identity but I'm not one of them. From a very early age I've known exactly who I am and I've always felt very comfortable about my Aboriginality. Knowing that we are Bundjalung has always been a source of particular pride for us."

Mundine says there was a time when he considered undergoing the Bundjalung initiation rites because he thought it would make him more Aboriginal. "I don't think that's true any more," he says. "Whether I go through the ceremonies or not, I'm still Aboriginal. I'm very strong in that belief."

In 1963 the Mundine family moved to Sydney and plunged into what was becoming a multicultural melting pot -- Auburn in the city's western suburbs. There they mixed with emigrant Italians, Croats, Lebanese, English, Scots and Irish. Muslims would later come in large numbers. "At the Marist Brothers high school there were 36 kids in the class and probably 36 different nationalities," he says. "That was my introduction to

the wider world. For the first 12 months there was a fight every day as kids tried to sort themselves out. They had never met Aborigines before so they used to follow me and my brother to the toilets to make sure we did things the way they did them. I remember slipping over at the bubblers one day and gashing my knee on a jagged bolt. A great crowd of kids gathered round to look at the blood and one of them said in amazement, 'it's red'. Maybe they thought black kids had black blood. Who knows?"

Mundine has maintained close links with many of his schoolmates; friendships, he says, based on mutual respect. "Respect: that's one of the most important elements in the equation we call human dignity," he says. "I learned that the hard way, brawling in the back streets of Auburn. I grew up among kids whose parents had come from the four corners of the earth. We were all pitched into the same melting pot. We've all come from different backgrounds but we're all Australians. In the schoolyard you cop a bloody nose, you give a bloody nose, and when the dust settles you put your arms around each other and you celebrate your differences. That's the way I grew up and that's the way I approach life today."

Mundine says his vision for Aboriginal Australia is based on the simple proposition that all Australians, black, white or brindle, are entitled to a fair go. "I want Aboriginal people to enjoy the freedom that most people take for granted in this country," he says.

"Freedom to do the things we want to do; freedom to make the choices that will enrich our lives. Aborigines are capable of making up their own minds, you know. They don't need the guiding hand of the white fella at every turn. For years we were regarded as primitives, creatures at the low end of the food chain, inferior in every way and you know, when you're whipped around the head with those sorts of attitudes they become ingrained; you begin to accept that's the way things are, better get used to it, no good fighting it, better go with the flow.

"I remember as a kid going into shops and standing at the back, waiting, waiting, waiting to be acknowledged, to be called up to the counter. You see, I'd learned my place and that place was at the back of the shop, at the back of the bus. I remember once in Armidale [in northern NSW] trying to raise money for an Aboriginal rugby league club. My wife, a friend and I went to hire the local church hall, so we knocked on the caretaker's door and asked politely, could we hire the hall for a function. 'No,' he said indignantly, 'you cannot'. Well, why? 'Because,' he said, 'we don't hire the hall to black people'.

"Oh, well, okay. We looked at each other sheepishly and walked away. We walked away! Can you believe that? We were adults and yet we were thrust back into the kind of acceptance that had been forced on us as kids: the white fella up there and the black fella down here. It wasn't until we walked down the road that it suddenly dawned on us: hang on a minute, he can't do that!

"So back we went back and stood up to him. We argued for about 40 minutes and eventually we got the hall. In fact we hired it on a regular basis after that. That experience taught me another very important lesson on racism. I don't accept that any person is better than any other person because of the colour of their skin. Black, white or brindle, I don't care who it is, people are people and you take them as you find them. Racism is not some peculiarly white characteristic. There are black racists who are

every bit as dogged in their hatred as white racists. They're the people who perpetuate the old stereotypes, you know, 'white pricks' and 'lazy black bastards'. They're the ones who want to keep us permanently apart. My point is that racism, no matter what its colour, is absolutely unacceptable."

Warren Mundine is a can-do man. When he stood as an independent candidate for Dubbo City Council in central-west NSW, he says, people told him there's no way they're going to elect an Aborigine. "I got elected," he says. "Then those same people said, 'there's no way they're going to make an Aborigine deputy mayor'. When I was appointed deputy mayor they said 'there's no way an Aborigine will ever be mayor.' Well guess what? I did wear the mayoral chains. The point is that if you're prepared to have a go, all sorts of possibilities open up. I've learned one thing for sure: you can't make change by sitting on the sidelines."

For years, he says, he and his mates used to stand in a Dubbo pub talking about how wonderful it would be if Dubbo had its own Aboriginal dance company. "Nothing ever got done," he says. "It was all talk, talk, talk. One day I plonked \$50 on the bar and said, 'right, let's do it. We'll put an ad in the paper and kick this thing off'. My mates go, 'Geez Warren, we're just a couple of drunks. We don't know nothing about Aboriginal dance.' Well, I said, we're about to find out.

"So the ad went in the paper and lo and behold on Monday night over 53 kids turned up at the community hall. I said, 'right, give us your names and addresses and we will start on Thursday night'. That gave me two days to find out about Aboriginal dance. I rang the Bangarra Dance Company in Sydney and told them I wanted some videos to help teach these kids. The answer was, 'well who the hell are you?' My name didn't mean a thing. I said 'look I'm just a bloke in Dubbo. I'm trying to get these kids off the streets and into Aboriginal dance'.

"They obviously thought I was a bloody idiot, especially when I told them I wanted to kick this off on the Thursday night. Their videos arrived in Dubbo on the Wednesday morning and I sat in front of the TV screen running those bloody things backwards and forwards until by midnight I knew all the steps off by heart. Come Thursday night I had enough knowledge to get us through the first lesson. It went on from there. No one has ever asked me to perform brain surgery but if they did, yeah, I'd have a go at that too, I suppose."

Mundine says the wonderful thing about that little dance company is that it gave Aboriginal children a reason not to hang out on street corners. It allowed them to take the first important step toward ownership of at least one aspect of their own culture. It also allowed them to feel good about themselves. "Now the same kids are into a Wiradjuri language program," he says, "so it's all part of a wonderful journey for them."

Mundine kicked off his working life as a factory fitter and machinist who walked to and from work in blue dungarees. Later he worked on sewerage pipelines for the Sydney Water Board. He went to a TAFE college at night and earned the Higher School Certificate. That allowed him to move up to a white-collar job as a clerk in the Taxation Office in Martin Place. He had a stint in Adelaide, where he attended the former South Australian institute of technology and earned a community development diploma, as part of Don Dunstan's Aboriginal task force.

He was among more than 2000 Aborigines who came from all over Australia to participate in the land rights protest at the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane. Arrested and charged with violating Queensland's notorious unlawful assembly laws of the Bjelke-Petersen era, he spent a couple of days locked up in the Brisbane Watch House. Back in Sydney he took a job with the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, moonlighted as a barman and waiter and earned the money for the deposit on his first home. He joined the ALP in 1995.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine I would be national president of the Labor Party," he says. "All I've ever wanted to be was Warren Mundine. When Eric Roosendaal [then the party's NSW secretary, now a NSW MP] first broached the matter with me I thought, 'is this bloke fair dinkum or what?' I said I'd think about it. In fact I took two weeks to mull it over. I must say I had some real reservations. I was well aware that when you enter the political arena you're fair game and you have people attacking you from all angles.

"If I was going to dish it out, I'd have to cop it as well. I didn't mind that for myself but I knew it would be one-in-all-in and my family and friends would be dragged in as well. It took me two weeks to decide to go ahead and offer myself as a candidate [in 2003]. I did it because I realised that my whole life has been about making change, about making things better for Aboriginal people and here was a golden opportunity to take that forward. I don't pretend that I can bring about revolutionary change in the way Australia operates during my time in office but I can have a little bit of a say. Change will happen when people begin to think for themselves. I'm going to be throwing out challenges for Aboriginal people and for ordinary Australians."

I ask Mundine why Aboriginal leaders no longer speak of sovereignty and a treaty with the Australian government. "I'm all for a treaty," he says. "But many Aboriginal people see the treaty concept as a huge and very expensive Pandora's box. We've seen what has happened to other indigenous peoples like the native north Americans, who signed treaties and ended up with nothing. We certainly don't want to end up in a banana republic situation like so many of the African countries which are plagued by corruption and violence.

"Aboriginal people took a long, hard look at their own leaders and rightly concluded that they were not the kind of people who ought to be the kingpins. We don't want to go down that track. No, a treaty is no longer on the radar. Aboriginal Australians these days are focused entirely on survival to the exclusion of just about everything else."

Mundine does not shrink from describing the immensity of the chronic health issues overwhelming so many indigenous communities. "Alcoholism, drug abuse, kava, marijuana, petrol-sniffing are all endemic in Aboriginal communities," he says. "These are the things that are devastating the young people in our communities. Extreme violence goes hand-in-hand with substance abuse and we see that reflected in the truly horrifying statistics on domestic violence.

"A recent survey of north Queensland communities found Aboriginal women were 24 times more likely to be raped than women in non-Aboriginal communities. The Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council report says the Aboriginal female prison population has grown by 800 per cent in the past 15 years. That's a devastating

statistic because whether or not feminists like to admit it, Aboriginal women are still the ones who look after the kids and build the future for their families.

"Seventy per cent of those women had been sexually assaulted as a child. This is where there is a good deal of hypocrisy among those who go on and on and on about the protection of Aboriginal culture. They don't acknowledge that our most precious cultural resource, our children, face tremendous risks because of the sexual violence that they and their mothers have to endure. Go out to places in western NSW like Bourke and Brewarrina and in the courts you will find case after case where young Aboriginal men are charged with bashing the people they are supposed to care for. When they sober up they're very remorseful. They cop a fine and in six months' time the same thing happens again.

"Aboriginal men have to wake up to themselves. They have to realise it's not okay to bash your missus. It's amazing how accepted this is in some communities. I've been at gatherings out west where blokes will come straight out and laugh about it. 'Yeah,' they say, 'because I bash the missus. Gotta keep the bitch in line somehow.' They talk about like they talk about the weather. It's almost as though it's socially acceptable out there. With attitudes like that, is it any wonder that people look at us and shake their bloody heads?

"Violence is a huge issue and one we have to get on top of if we're to have any credibility at all when we talk about human rights. You can't cherry-pick human rights. You have to accept them across the board and of course, the human rights of the child have to be protected at all times."

Mundine believes much of the substance abuse and violence in Aboriginal communities is a direct result of childhood violence which has in turn grown out of the loss of cultural identity. "I'm not making excuses for violent behaviour, far from it," he says. "But I think a lot of it goes back to that profound sense of loss that many Aboriginal people feel about the loss of their identity. [After] Europeans colonised this country 217 years ago, they took absolutely everything we had: our land, our culture, our language, the lot. Aborigines were forced into missions and there they were told their society, their structures, their beliefs were all wrong.

"In those circumstances, you can understand why people might feel confused and disorientated. Unfortunately when human beings are placed under those kinds of pressures it often brings out the worst in them. That's not a uniquely Aboriginal problem. I'm afraid that's true of people all over the world."

In receiving the Bennelong Society's medal recently, Mundine hit out at the way in which he says white Australia sought to perpetuate the myth of the noble savage. "There seems to be buried in every government policy of every major political party this basic idea of preserving a mythical noble savage ideal of indigenous Australia," he says. "When these policies fail or indigenous Australians don't live up to these basic white man views of indigenous Australians, then it is the indigenous Australians who are blamed for the failures or are told they're not real indigenous people."

Mundine does not resile from those remarks. "Aboriginal people are not museum pieces," he says. "We are human beings. All we ask is that we receive the respect to which we're entitled as fellow human beings."

Under reformed party rules, rank-and-file Labor Party members voted in 2003 to choose three national presidents for the next three years. The front-finisher among the 11 candidates, Carmen Lawrence, served in 2004, to be followed by runner-up Barry Jones in 2005. Now it is No.3 finisher Mundine's turn.

Opposition leader Kim Beazley says he is immensely proud of Mundine. "He is being entrusted with a powerful position which is particularly important for Labor as we contemplate reconciliation," Beazley says. "His contribution to political life engages all the issues of state as well as reconciliation and issues across the Aboriginal agenda."

Jones, as outgoing president, describes Mundine as "a fine fellow and a thoroughly decent and humane character". Jones makes the point that the Labor presidency is the only bottom-up mechanism in the party for the expression of the views of branch members. "Most of the other decision-making processes are top-down," he says. "Its significance in Warren Mundine's case lies in the fact that although he won the endorsement of the [party's] Right [faction], his views are much more progressive than the standard line."

Mundine's life has been a journey of self-discovery. "Looking back, I can see myself climbing hill after hill, winding up and up and no one has been more surprised than me when I've reached those summits," he says. "One day, who knows, I may be the person who actually decides policy and makes legislation. If I can reach that point, I'll be in a position to help make a real difference not just for Aboriginal people but for all Australians."

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