

Rudd's reality started with Mundine

By Noel Pearson

The Weekend Australian

22-23 September 2007

Federal Labor's competitive position just weeks out from the next election began when Warren Mundine was elected as the third member of the ALP's national presidents at the Labor conference of 2004.

He was nominated by the NSW Right faction as its answer to the Left's insistence on the progressive and increasingly righteous Carmen Lawrence, and the long-reigning but ineffectual Barry Jones.

The Right's nomination of a little-known indigenous local government politician from regional NSW - Mundine had served as deputy mayor on Dubbo City Council - while animated by irony, turned out to be the smartest move made by a party long lost in the federal political desert.

How Mundine gained the nomination may be apocryphal, but the story goes that he and his bumpkin colleagues hanging around the fringes of the national conference had first accepted an invitation to join the Left's obligatory Chinese meal at a cost of \$20 each.

They were then approached by apparatchiks from the Right who were organising their dinner at another Chinese restaurant. On being told that Mundine's mob had already organised to go to the first function for \$20, the Right's men said, "Bugger them, you guys come to ours, no charge."

The ALP has hatched countless fantastic political plots at Chinese restaurants (the connection between monosodium glutamate and political bastardry is yet to be scientifically established) but the plot to nominate Mundine as the Right's candidate for the national presidency was a stroke of genius.

Despite the fact that Lawrence and Jones were senior figures in the party, their tenures were unremarkable.

Being third in line for the rotating presidency extended Mundine's influence over a longer period of time: as incoming president, Mundine carved out a higher profile and had more impact than his two well-known colleagues. He developed a much higher profile than any of the three incumbent presidents.

The combination of Mundine and Mark Arbib, the NSW Right's organiser, operating out of Sydney's Sussex Street, was the start of Labor's revival. Mundine started changing the language and started changing the audience.

I could never understand why Labor would not move on indigenous policy, to embrace the politics of personal responsibility. Labor continued to be allergic to the policies that arose from our critique of passive welfare in Cape York Peninsula, and this was bad policy and bad politics. The refusal to move from the old paradigm stonkered me, and it was not until Chris Evans was appointed spokesman for indigenous affairs that Labor made the fundamental shift.

But it was Mundine who forced the shift. And he did so by lobbing large rocks into the stagnant ponds of prevailing policy. It wasn't just his unflinching denunciation of violence in indigenous Australia, it was his commentary on mainstream issues.

For example, he wrenched Labor back from its politically disastrous schools policy of 2004 when he unequivocally endorsed school choice and private schooling. Mundine said: "Parents who sacrifice their lifestyles to send their children to private schools should be thanked and supported. The Labor Party should consider offering tax breaks on school fees and direct subsidies for parents using the private school system, similar to the childcare rebate."

He went on to praise the parents of children in private schools: "I think they're great parents, I take my hat off to them. They're paying for education twice. Not all are wealthy people, they're just ordinary, average Australians trying to do the best for their kids."

Mundine was criticised by other Labor politicians for his statements but he had started something new by ignoring the progressive consensus.

Mundine was also criticised for accepting the invitation to the National Indigenous Council. He explained his changed approach: "I think that dislike of Howard has clouded people's judgment and ability to engage. Some people are getting caught up with their anger and hatred of Howard and confusing that with the approach that we are trying to make in getting benefits for Aboriginal people.

"When the Howard Government first came to power, I was attacking him as a racist, but I realised that my views were being clouded, too. I needed to sit back and say, 'I might not agree with John Howard, I might be opposed to him, but how do I get benefits for my community?'"

Many indigenous and non-indigenous Labor people said that he had lost the plot. But we can now see that Mundine's presidency was the beginning of the long process that might take Kevin Rudd to power. Last year, federal Labor was said to be unelectable. Media coverage of Labor was dominated by the party's internal turmoil, most dramatically highlighted by the preselection fight in Simon Crean's Victorian seat.

As Robert Manne has pointed out, Labor's internal problems, the dwindling membership base and the collapse of branches and so on are issues of little interest to the electorate. The public knows that the Labor Party is unreformable.

The party will always be characterised by the factional system, the papering over of deep ideological divisions and the extraordinary dependence on special interest groups.

It is that same dysfunctional party that provided some of the best national leadership during the Hawke and Keating years.

It is not fundamental party reform that produces these periods of strength. The talent and efforts of a few people at the top are decisive. What happens at such junctures is really quite small adjustments to the internal balance of the party. The pool of people doesn't change much, but competent and determined people start setting the tone.

Mundine and Arbib's three-year partnership changed the chemistry and the physics of federal Labor's recovery and fitness. With the new generation of Labor hardheads such as Tony Burke, the NSW Right regained its ascendancy within the grand old party and has made the hard calls. It was instrumental in Rudd's elevation and in the burying of Kim Beazley.

The man selected to be the Right's candidate for president at a meal in Sydney's Chinatown, Mundine, is no Chancey Gardiner. He is a most competent mainstream leader who happens to also be indigenous. He has the temperament and tough psychology to walk a difficult path. It is ridiculous that the Labor Party is yet to announce his preselection: he is worth more than most of them.

Some say Labor's commanding position weeks out from the next poll starts and ends with Work Choices. Some say it started with Rudd. I say it started with Mundine and Arbib. With all due respect to his retirement this week, I think Beazley would still have squandered Work Choices.

Wayne Swan and Rudd stand on the verge of power thanks to the unsung work of Labor's first black president.

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