

Heroes of Redfern walk the walk

Thanks to powerful leadership, the indigenous capital of Australia is transformed

NOEL PEARSON



THERE are times when you have the opportunity to meet a true hero. I had that privilege this week. For his national political leadership I'm on a unity ticket with former Labor national president, Warren Mundine, the most capable indigenous Australian never to have been given the chance to serve in parliament. But he is not the Mundine I am talking about.

I met up with his cousin, Mick Mundine, the indefatigable head of the Aboriginal Housing Company, at the Block in Sydney's Redfern. This Mundine is involved in a tougher line of business than the kind of leadership Warren and I are involved in. We are in the political talk business. Mick Mundine is in the political walk business.

He literally walked the streets of his community to take charge of the problems afflicting his people. His target was the scourge of drugs and alcohol that had seen the Block descend into a Hobbesian nightmare.

I recall the long campaign he waged against the needle-exchange buses that fuelled the illicit drug epidemic in Redfern's Aboriginal community. This was a bracing street-level confrontation with the addicts and dealers among his own people, as well as a huge ideological and political struggle with the harm minimisation orthodoxy in drug policy. At the time the harm minimisers held the commanding heights and they insisted on their right to facilitate the drug epidemics, even at a genocidal cost to the last original Australian community living in the shadows of this country's first and greatest city.

I watched the news reports seven and eight years ago and wondered if Mick and his colleagues heard my cheers echoing from Cape York. This was the real fight. This was the fight whose basic motivation had to be a great love for your own people — and a hatred for the drug culture.

This was the real leadership: at the coalface, on the ground, among the people, on the street-corners. Anybody can talk, but

can you walk the talk? This question humbles me when I meet community leaders with the courage and fortitude of Mundine. And for those whose memory is like my own of the Redfern of decades ago when I was a student at Sydney University, I could not be more impressed with what they have achieved.

This is what struck me during my visit this week.

First, there is a core of moral leadership in that community. You could see the guiding hand of community matriarch Auntie Millie Ingram and a network of younger leaders working in housing, supporting victims of domestic violence, working to help youth stay clear of the so-called youth justice system, helping men with substance abuse, and other histories put their broken lives together and contribute to their families.

Second, they have struck a remarkable partnership between community leaders and the NSW Police, which has resulted in a 70 per cent reduction in street offences in the area. I met the man they say is responsible for the police side of this extraordinarily good development, Commander Luke Freudenstein. He came out of the gym at the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence and the mutual respect between Mundine's community and this copper was palpable. The Redfern version of community policing should be a model for policing in strife-torn communities such as ours in Cape York.

Third, the direction of federal government policy in recent decades in focusing efforts in regional and remote Aboriginal communities is wrong-headed. There is tremendous need in urban communities, and places like Redfern deserve proper government attention to their aspirations. The great majority of Aboriginal Aus-

tralians live in urban locations and while there is a sizeable middle class who are doing well on social and economic indicators, there are many communities who are as disadvantaged and as distressed as some of the most parlous remote communities. What is done in urban areas will often need to be different from remote and regional areas, but turning a blind eye to these communities as if they are prospering in the mainstream is wrong.

Fourth, there is a spirit and vibrancy in Redfern that I never expected and I have certainly never detected before. Hope is in the air. My own frame of thinking about the challenges facing our people experienced a severe paradigm shift when the man responsible for developing the Centre for Indigenous Excellence, Jason Glanville, described the underlying philosophy of the amazing precinct created at the site of the old Redfern Public School: let's move from the head-frame of indigenous disadvantage to indigenous excellence. For someone like me grappling with problems and misery, Glanville's message was tectonic.

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The centrepiece for the renaissance of Redfern is Mundine's visionary Pemulwuy Project, named after the legendary Aboriginal freedom fighter. This is the Aboriginal Housing Company's redevelopment proposal for the old Block.

Mundine and his team have come up with a vision for their community. Their project has three precincts centred in and around the old Block, now razed. One precinct includes commercial facilities, including a theatre. Another precinct is proposed to provide student accommodation. And a third will provide low-income accommodation for the Aboriginal community.

I recall thinking at the time when Mundine waged his campaign against the disintegration of his community by drugs, that all of the signs were pointing to the final destruction and dispersal of the Aboriginal community from the inner city of Sydney.

I recall thinking the people of Redfern needed to take charge of their destiny, and articulate a viable future for their people in the ground zero of black Australia.

And this is what Mundine and his colleagues have done. They have not allowed the strong forces of inner-city gentrification dispossess their people from their home community.

Mundine's plan is one for a new community, founded on an intolerance of drugs and abuse. Founded on responsibility, care, social order, cultural recognition and mutual respect. It was clear from my conversation with him that I have nothing new to tell Mundine about the problems of welfare.

When their development approval came through recently, Premier Barry O'Farrell called Mundine to advise him. This is an important milestone for the Pemulwuy Project.

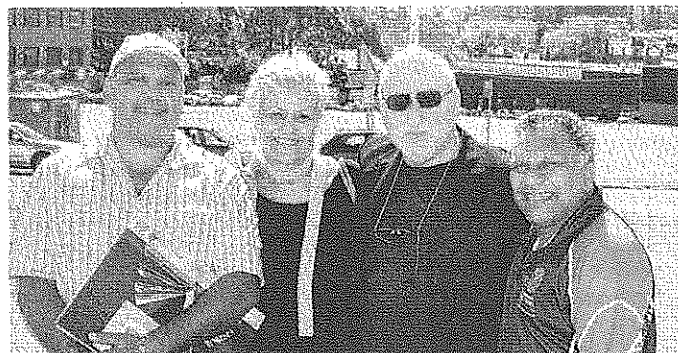
The development is self-funding, other than in respect of the provision of low-income accommodation for the Aboriginal community. To do this the project needs the support of the federal and NSW governments to underwrite the provision of subsidised accommodation.

It is imperative O'Farrell and his federal counterparts honour the leadership that Mundine and his people have shown in confronting their problems, and in defining a vision for the future that offers harmonious co-existence of the multiple cultures that live in Redfern, and retains its strong Aboriginal cultural identity.

It is said that Harlem is the capital of black America. Redfern is the capital of indigenous Australia, and the renaissance of this community is not an option. It must happen.

Mark Spinks, who chairs the Housing Company, reminded me I had no shortage of critics in Aboriginal politics but he assured me "Even Jesus Christ had his detractors." Those who want to get a sense of the change Spinks and Mundine are driving in Redfern should join their Anzac Day march in two weeks' time, honouring indigenous servicemen.

Jesus might have run the money-changers out of the Temple, but Mick Mundine drove the drug dealers from the Block.



From left, Noel Pearson, Millie Ingram, Mark Spinks and Mick Mundine on the site of Redfern's notorious Block

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