



A commercial path forward

Mr Abbott and Mr Mundine are offering a sensible policy

FORMER ALP president Warren Mundine has had the courage to put the progress of Aboriginal people ahead of politics by agreeing to work with Tony Abbott on a program that favours practical steps ahead of grand symbolic gestures on the road to reconciliation. It is recognition that goodwill exists across the spectrum and that virtue does not reside exclusively on either side of politics. It would be naive to imagine that the new direction under an Abbott government would supply all the answers but after 40 years of failure under a separatist, rights-based, welfare agenda driven largely, but not exclusively, by Labor governments, something has to change.

Like the four indigenous Country Liberal members elected to the Northern Territory parliament last year, Mr Mundine argues that commercial activity and self-help initiatives at community level will achieve more than big government.

Mr Mundine's vision is the antithesis of the disastrous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, disbanded by the Howard government in 2005. It is also far removed from the "rights" agenda and the "exceptionalism" championed by H.C. "Nugget" Coombs that was driven by a guilt-ridden belief that Aborigines wanted space to live according to their own traditions. Its insidious legacy produced deprived, dysfunctional and welfare-dependent enclaves removed from the real economy, wasting billions of dollars and of benefit only to service providers.

Jenny Macklin has been a conscientious indigenous affairs minister. As Mr Mundine wrote on Saturday, the metrics-based Closing the Gap initiative introduced by Labor in 2008 was sound, setting targets for improvements in health, education and employment. But five years into the process, outcomes have fallen short of the targets and in some areas fallen back. On Saturday, Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus decried Mr Abbott's approach and lauded Labor's record over 30 years. As the NT election showed, however, indigenous policy is not an automatic Labor stronghold.

Like other leaders in the vanguard of reform, including Noel Pearson who

denounced welfare "poison" 15 years ago, Mr Mundine, the executive chairman of the Australian Indigenous Chamber of Commerce, recognises that real jobs are created through enterprise, not by government. Mr Mundine encourages young Aborigines to help themselves through his involvement with such initiatives as the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, which supports more than 300 students a year at some of Australia's best secondary schools. Despite the reservations of some who claim the best and brightest should remain with their communities, 90 per cent of the scholarship recipients complete Year 12 and move on to higher education or productive work. Informed by his real-world experience, Mr Mundine's pragmatic approach to closing the gap includes abolishing scores of statutory indigenous governance bodies; opening up communities to the outside world; excising townships from the communally owned land system to create private home ownership and business development; and fostering social stability by requiring individuals to contribute to their communities by abiding by laws, ensuring school attendance and respecting culture.

After decades of false starts and unrealised hopes, it would be foolish to expect rapid or easy progress in what has proved a near-intractable problem. In pledging to abolish a range of ineffectual bodies and engaging Mr Mundine to head a single advisory board on indigenous policy and spending, the Opposition Leader has opted for a genuine "new way" to tackle Australia's worst social problem. Mr Abbott, who has donated his own time as a volunteer in remote communities for years, without fanfare, is right when he says institutional racism is no longer part of Australian life. But from incarceration rates to education, the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is intolerable. Student by student, job by job and small business by small business, Mr Mundine knows commercial systems do not emerge from nothing and "you have to start small". He and Mr Abbott together should have much to offer.