



'I want to be first Indigenous PM'

EXCLUSIVE

JAMIE WALKER
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Tremane Baxter-Edwards has a dream. It's as big as the vast, red-rock Kimberley landscape, bold as can be.

The young Ngarinyin-Walmajarri man wants to be Australia's first Indigenous prime minister.

He's no fool. Tremane knows some people will scoff. Others might patronise him, which is even worse.

At 17, he has overcome enough of life's hurdles – financial hardship, the death of his beloved Pop, to cancer – to



NATHAN DYER

Tremane Baxter-Edwards

understand what it takes to defy the odds and, yes, the prejudice that attaches to someone of his heritage and tender years speaking so candidly about a towering

ambition. He's not daunted. Never has been, never will be. Because this is Australia and in Australia an Aboriginal boy from a far-flung reach of Western Australia has as much right as anyone else to aspire to the highest elected office in the land. - Provided you're willing to work for it. And Tremane is. My word he is.

"I am realistic and I am committed," he tells *The Weekend Australian* from his traditional country on the picturesque Chamberlain River.

"I want to be prime minister because that's the best way to change people's lives for the better. I'm not here to impose myself on others. I'm not here to, you

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know, to sugar-coat things. If you want to take me seriously, then please take me seriously. "I very much represent the values of a lot of forgotten people. I certainly represent the values of a marginalised person, because I've come from that position of marginalisation. Whether it's me as the first Indigenous prime minister or, hopefully, someone sooner, we should give that proposition the due it deserves."

In the week of the 60th anniversary of this masthead's founding in 1964 by News Corp's chairman emeritus Rupert Murdoch – six decades of chronicling the news from the marble halls of power in Canberra to dusty Halls Creek in the Kimberley's tawny hinterland, of holding the powerful to account, bringing a uniquely wide lens to the reporting and analysis of momentous events at home and abroad – it is fitting that we tell Tremane's story.

Our coverage of Indigenous affairs has been a defining tenet of The Australian's mission to inform, enlighten and challenge the nation it serves.

We never shied away from interrogating the hard truths, however confronting. Rosemary Nell earned a Walkley Award in 1994 for exposing the horrifying level of domestic violence endured by Indigenous women in remote communities. Tony Koch, a five-time recipient of Australia's most coveted journalism prize, revealed in 2007 how the gang rape of a 10-year-old Aboriginal girl on Cape York Peninsula was compounded when none of her attackers was jailed.

Expert writers Nicolas Rothwell, Stuart Rintoul, Paul Toohy, Michael McKenna and The Australian's incumbent Indigenous affairs correspondent, Paige Taylor, have delivered compelling insights into the challenges faced by First Nations people.

Turning point

Yet as grim reading as the federal government's annual Closing the Gap report makes, documenting the yawning chasm in living standards and life expectancy between Indigenous Australians and the rest of the community, progress has been made. Filling progress, to be sure. Far too slow for too many of those in need. But genuine progress all the same.

Aboriginal and Islander students are graduating from university in record numbers to go into law, medicine, engineering, social work and other key professions. Federal parliament now boasts eight Indigenous MPs and three senators. The generation of activists who came of age during the triumphant 1967 referendum to count First Australians as full citizens are engaged in the commonwealth to enact specific laws in their favour through themselves into a land rights campaign that culmi-



Teen with a big future ... Tremane Baxter-Edwards, clockwise from main, at El Questrro station, with brother Keenan and grandmother Kathy O'Reer; and with mother Georgina, sister Colleen and brother Malik



NATHAN DILLER

nated in the High Court's historic Mabo decision on native title 32 years ago. New voices emerged and found places in our pages: columnist and community leader Noel Pearson, the fiery academic Marcia Langton, Alice Springs-based activist turned conservative-leaning politician Bess Price and her Canberra-bound daughter, Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, now the federal opposition's spokeswoman for Indigenous Australians, to name but a few who set the pace during last October's failed campaign to enshrine an Indigenous voice in the Constitution.

Importantly, they cast their nets wide. Pearson's wholehearted critiques of welfare dependence are colour blind, like his championing of back-to-basics classroom teaching: personal responsibility is something all Australians need to take, he has long argued.

Editor-in-chief Michelle Gunn points out that both Scott Morrison and Anthony Albanese named Indigenous ministers to cabinet – Ken Wyatt and Linda Burney respectively. Julia Gillard had already broken the glass ceiling on the Lodge for women. It should be no great stretch to accommodate the next, possibly inevitable step to an Indigenous PM. "Indigenous affairs reporting pulses through this masthead – on the front page, on the home page, in our magazines and across

the coverage of politics, business, the arts, culture and sport," Gunn says. "It is in the DNA of The Australian and The Weekend Australian."

Political future

Tremane certainly has politics in the blood. Two of his aunts have been elected to the West Australian parliament for the ALP. Dora Anna representing the seat of Kimberley and Rosie Sahanna, the state upper house's first Indigenous MP. His maternal grandfather, mother Kathleen O'Reer – Nan – is a Ngarinyin elder and former board member of the Kimberley Land Council, deeply versed in negotiating the labyrinth of non-government organisations and government red tape embracing the Indigenous sector.

A smiling woman in her 60s, with an unbridled but commanding manner, she's been the constant in his life alongside his mother, Georgina, 42. Tremane's father, Sonny Baxter, a Walmajarri man whose traditional country rolls into the Great Sandy Desert, left when he was three, after Tremane contracted a rare and virulent cancer. (They have reconciled in recent years.)

Luckily, he was too young to remember much of what transpired during his battle with Burkitt lymphoma, a fast-growing form of Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma seated in his abdomen. It had advanced to stage three

when diagnosed. He underwent aggressive chemotherapy in Perth, unable to eat solid food, his mum hovering at his bedside in hospital.

Nan held the fort in Wyndham caring for the rest of the kids while grandad George Edwards – Pop – drove long-haul trucks to feed the family. Tremane was in remission three years later when Pop suffered a heart attack on the road and died. "That was very hard on us," he recalls, his voice quivering. "Very hard."

'I very much represent the values of a lot of forgotten people'

TREMANE BAXTER-EDWARDS, INDIGENOUS TEENAGER

Learning on country

Pop had taken him on country in what's now the El Questrro wilderness park, a former cattle station that has been handed back to the Wilingjin Aboriginal Corporation under an Indigenous land use agreement with the WA government. The traditional owners were granted freehold title to 655,000ha of the reserve. It's a magical place, lush and green as the northern dry takes hold, scored by winding rivers and sandstone bluffs that glint in rich hues of gold and purple until the soft,

late afternoon light abruptly fades to black. Pop showed Tremane where it was safe to swim, away from the lurking crocodiles, and how to harvest bush tucker.

He likes to think that he continues to walk in his grandfather's footsteps. He found another mentor in Bill Thomas, a retired state Labor MP and government minister who entered his life while he was undergoing cancer treatment, and becoming his "guardian" in Perth. Tremane was six, perhaps seven, when Thomas gave him a

brought him to Aquinas College, Perth, where he has boarded for the past six years. (He says he enjoys the food.) Honest! It's hard to keep up with Tremane. Living up to his childhood nickname of Buster, he's a whirlwind of energy. In addition to completing Year 12 studies, he is working on a Certificate III in tourism to qualify as a tour guide in case he wants to do more with his holiday job at El Questrro. His plan is to take a gap year there, before heading to university to pursue a law or business degree.

Then there's the extra-curricular activities. Burney, the Minister for Indigenous Australians, appointed him to the First Nations Reference Group advising the Albanese government on its \$700m Remote Jobs and Economic Development program. He's also on the First Nations Youth Education Youth Advisory Group working on the national schools reform agreement, putting him on a plane just about every other weekend during term for appointments in Canberra or Sydney.

"I try to study or do my assignments in the hotel at night," he sighs.

He sits in the WA youth parliament and as putative deputy opposition leader pursues an issue close to his heart: juvenile justice.

The assembly is currently debating a 6000-word bill he helped draft on youth offending, proposing expanded pathways to re-

habilitation and jail diversion for non-violent crimes.

Helping his people

At home in Wyndham, a predominantly Indigenous township of 800 haking at the mouth of the King River, 330km north of Perth, Tremane is heavily involved in an Aboriginal youth corporation that runs a range of services including a night patrol and counselling for troubled teens. His brother Malik, 20, is an apprentice mechanic at the workshop funded by the initiative.

"I've been proud that the town's once-notorious youth crime rate is falling, by 22 per cent in 2022 and down again over the past year on anecdotal evidence, backing the trend across much of regional Australia. Tremane never misses an opportunity to put in a good word for the program with the big politicians and business leaders he gets to meet, and professes to have received in several million dollars in funding. He's an inveterate networker, keenly aware that it's as much who you know as what you know when it comes to getting things done. To borrow a phrase from Hillary Clinton – which he likes to do – it takes a village.

"In order to get into the political world I think you need an array of references – let's call them references from the people who make up your village," he says. "It's very, very much takes a village not just to raise a child in the community but definitely in the political arena as well. Nana used to tell me, 'you have to have the right people in mind for the right thing to happen' and I would wonder what she meant. I am starting to understand now."

Powerful contacts
And if you think his contacts skew to one side politically, given the family connection to the ALP, think again. Former federal deputy Liberal leader and cabinet minister Fred Chaney, a longtime champion of Indigenous causes who presided on the National Native Title Tribunal after leaving politics, last year participated in a panel discussion on the voice organised by Tremane at Aquinas College, Chaney's alma mater.

He came away deeply impressed. House of Representatives Speaker Milton Dick is a fan, as are Senate President Sue Lines, former WA treasurer and Rio Tinto director Ben Wyatt and Chaney's son, Michael, chief executive of corporate giant Wesfarmers: each has a place in the young man's carefully-cultivated network.

Here at The Australian, Gunn was so taken on meeting Tremane that she asked him to deliver the welcome to country address at our 60th Anniversary gala dinner in Sydney on July 25.

"There is something quite magnetic about him," she says. Having seen them come and go from national politics, carrying that fabled baton of leadership, Fred Chaney, 82, knows what potential looks like. On Tremane's ambition to reach the top, he says: "If you can't imagine being prime minister, then you'll never be prime minister. I'm very happy he's got that in mind."

Chaney makes the point that Australia is a different country, and he's fearless, all right. You should be at his age, before life's inevitable twists and setbacks turn even the most glorious Kimberley day to grey. His Nan, for one, can't help but worry about her bold and brave grandson. "He carries too much on his shoulders," she says quietly.

Government of South Australia
Attorney-General's Department

INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONER AGAINST CORRUPTION

The South Australian Attorney-General, the Honourable Kym Maher MLC, invites expressions of interest for the role of Independent Commissioner Against Corruption, South Australia.

Legal practitioners of at least 7 years standing and former judges of the High Court of Australia, the Federal Court of Australia or the Supreme Court of a State or Territory of the Commonwealth are eligible for appointment.

The Commissioner is responsible for the leadership of the Independent Commission Against Corruption which works to identify, investigate, prevent and minimise corruption in public administration, including through the referral of potential issues and proactive education initiatives.

The Commission's functions include:

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- evaluating the practices, policies and procedures of inquiry agencies and public authorities for the advancement of preventing or minimising corruption in public administration
- conducting educational programs to prevent or minimise corruption in public administration
- reporting suspected misconduct or maladministration in public administration or other offences to the Office for Public Integrity, the Ombudsman or other law enforcement agency
- preparing an annual report to be delivered to Parliament.

The Commissioner is appointed for a term not exceeding 7 years on terms and conditions determined by Her Excellency the Governor and may be re-appointed for terms not exceeding 10 years in total.

To submit an expression of interest, visit <https://www.agd.sa.gov.au/about-us/careers>

Enquiries: Ann Duff, Office of the Chief Executive, Attorney-General's Department ph: 08 7133 9020 email: ann.duff@sa.gov.au

Closing date for expressions of interest is 5pm ACST, Friday 2 August 2024.

Government of Western Australia
Department of Communities

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