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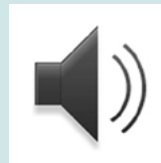
# Its going to be a tough year...

Defending the Aboriginal Budget  
Part Two of An Interview with Nyunggai Warren Mundine

*Part Two of a Discussion/Interview with Nyunggai Warren Mundine, Chair, Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council*

January 28, 2014

Peter Botsman



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**Release : 30 January 2014**

**Discussed exclusively on the  
Sandy Dann Radio Show  
Radio Goolarri Broome  
PAKAM Radio Network  
[www.goolarri.com.au](http://www.goolarri.com.au)**

# Edited Transcript of a Discussion with Nyunggai Warren Mundine, 28 January, 2014

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## Part Two

[PB] Warren there has been a bit of a cyclone since Christmas.. and there is a growing awareness this government is very determined. In the same way that Tony Abbott won the election it seems that is the way the government is doing its business. Since Christmas its been a tough time for many Aboriginal organisations to hear that their funding was cut.. It must also be difficult for you. One of the cuts has been to the National Congress of First Peoples as I see it it was a very unfair cut because they were just getting on their feet. It was always going to be a hard task for them to be independent with the budget that they had.. and now its going to be even more difficult. How does that resonate with you and whats your thinking on that?

[NWM] I was given hints when I was approached to be Chair of the Indigenous Advisory Council in February 2013. I had conversations with the Prime Minister Gillard and the Leader of the Opposition at the time, Tony Abbott and his Shadow Minister Scullion. We had numerous conversations about how we were going to approach this what we were going to do. It was bleeding obvious to me that no matter who won the election in September the budgetary issues were going to arise. I don't care people may deny it these days. I don't care but the reality was that we were going to be in for a tough time. People have read about what I have written and some have had a go at me saying that I should have been stopping the cuts and I did try. The first steps I took were to have meetings with Kirsty Parker from the Congress. I had meetings with Justin Mohammad from NACCHO. I also had meetings with NATSIL. I had meetings with Eddie Cabilo and Shane Duffy to get ready for this space. The first announcement was the cut of 42 million to legal services. We couldn't stop the budgetary cuts but we did cut it back to about 13 million dollars in the end. So that was through negotiation and working hard. So this is the tone of the conversations I have had with people in the government with power and influence. I am not totally naïve. Australia and the Federal government have budgetary issues. Cuts are going to be made. How can we look at the pocket of money \$5.4 billion that is for Indigenous Australians from the Federal Gov-

"How can we defend the \$5.4 billion Aboriginal budget? thats our challenge."

ernment and keep it? If people will remember I have always said since February 2013 I am not going to get caught up in programs. It's about looking at where we want to be. I go back into my article about CDEP it wasn't about CDEP it was about having a 30 year vision or time frame. In the 30 years we had CDEP we didn't get people out of poverty. Where we had success it wasn't at the levels we wanted. In that same 30 year period China lifted 80 per cent of its population out of abject poverty. That's the sort of outcome I want. At the end of 30 years we need to have benchmarks that tell us we are on track. To do that we have to re-allocate funding to hit those marks. We are looking forward 30 years and that oomph factor through schools, universities and training. We want to have good governance and leadership across the board. We want indigenous communities to be stable and thriving. We want crime rates down. We want good leadership across the board. It's about how we grow and get better.

[PB] So I guess what you are saying is: Don't look to Warren Mundine to change the leopard's spots. You are dealing with a Prime Minister who has certain views. You're dealing with a tough situation but you're in there working hard to try to give messages to the right people. I notice you have been very critical of any watering down of Section 18c, the so-called Andrew Bolt laws.

[NWM] Yes I am very critical. I just find it bizarre the government wants to go down this track. We have got a lot of support in this area. The Jewish Board of Deputies, the Australian Muslim Association, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce are very much working with us in this regard – in fact they are taking leadership of it. So this Section 18c will not only affect Indigenous people it affects a wider set of groups in the Australian community.

[PB] I think we talked about the fact that Congress still has a very important role whatever happens to its budget. We hope that will be a mark of its survival in some ways.

[NWM] Its not only Congress. I am getting together again with ATSIL. I am happy to accept criticism its part of life but we have to look at this budgetary situation from a broad perspective. Its like a company – one year you are making profits and next year you are not making profits. So how do you keep things going within those constraints. It means we have to look at funding arrangements. We have to look at re-allocations and re-organisation. I will give you a good example in the form of Native Title Services groups. They formed them-

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selves into the National Native Title Council that was funded from within those groups and there was a lot of arguments and fights with government that had to happen. But it has now become self-funding. That occurred over a period of five years. We need to start looking at the same sorts of things so we are not so dependent on government. Now with Congress its in its charter to be independent of government and so it wasn't under a statutory arrangement because we saw what happened with ATSIC when the government got rid of it and no-body could do anything about it. So it is independent and ongoing and it doesn't depend on government because it was set up as company limited by guarantee. So its about getting independent funding and that's what they need to do a lot more focusing on.

[PB] I will bring you to the Andrew Forrest review.. that has been a very revealing process.. I have personally read most of the submissions to that review.. there is two things that come out.. 1 we have succeeded in getting "the easily placed" into jobs, education and training.. but we are failing badly in so-called tier 3 and tier 4 areas of long term unemployment. In other words long term unemployment both black and white has more than doubled over the last period of time. There is a growing group of people who are falling back further and further and point 2 is that what is so clear is that the job services Australia mechanisms are failing those people. We are talking about Centrelink and like services where people are simply told to fill out the paperwork and go on their way. People lose confidence, faith and they drift away from any interest in getting into mainstream work and education. There have been some magnificent submissions to that Forrest Review from Aboriginal organisations that are working beyond their funding. We are talking about the aunties and uncles who pick up the kid after they have been to Centrelink and been rejected or repelled and ask the real questions: What do you want to do son? Or What do you want to do young lady? They start from there. But these are often totally unfunded and unsupported by government. I am not confident that the Forrest Review have got that message. There are some extremely good people in that review.. but I look at Shepparton in Victoria and I see Paul Briggs completely under funded doing the work that counts at Rumbalara Football and Netball Club and working in Nowra I see Habitat doing the same thing. I know the same thing is happening in Arnhem Land, in the Kimberley, in the Pilbara we are just not getting the right people funded. How do you see all that playing out?

[NWM] That's why I am happy to participate – and some people get nervous about this – and you need to get nervous

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– when they asked for a review of the dole just recently. I take these as an opportunity to drive our view across and you are right. We are not only failing Indigenous people – we are failing all Australians in the category 3s and 4s of unemployment – the long term unemployed, the disabled and so on. We have massive, massive issues in this area. As a nation, if we are going to be competitive in the world and going to continue with the level of social benefits that we have then we really need to focus on how we get the 3s and 4s back into work. That is a fundamental challenge. So I have the draft Forrest Review at present and I am going through it and giving my recommendations this week to the Prime Minister as well as getting feedback from my fellow members of the Council. So it is a massive challenge and this is where I talk about re-allocation. We are not going to have new funds. We have to live with the reality that we are not going to have new funds. So it is about re-allocation. Its not only about the coal face jobs. It's also about the education system failing us. It's also about all the economic development plans that we have worked on for the past forty years that have failed us. I don't want to be caught in the situation of doing the same thing over and over again – as Einstein said it's the first sign of madness. We have to make major changes in this area. You go back to the Miller Report. People forget about the Miller Report. That was a massive research effort using a mass of empirical evidence about moving forward and I have gone back to that report.

[PB] That was a serious report wasn't it – a solid piece of scholarship.

[NWM] That's right and people forget about these things. Because I have the luxury of my age I am going back to them and having another look asking where did we fail in this report. Lets pick up on what in those reports that can help us. The Black Deaths in Custody report is yet another report that we need to go back and look at. Where did we fail. Where didn't we listen. What didn't we do. So I am looking at a number of these older reviews and putting them into the context of 2014 and thinking about the future. An obvious thing about the Miller Report is IT that didn't exist. Personal computers were only just starting. We've jumped so far ahead. So we need to look at those things put them in a modern context and go back to my original comments about culture and language and history. We need all that stuff coming into play to help us. And this is going to sound complex but I want to keep focused on education, jobs and stable safe and strong communities. We look at those areas and a lot falls out of those areas: accommodation, juvenile justice, justice, health,

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**drug and alcohol issues and a wide range of other issues as well.**

[PB] One of the things the Miller Report did – I guess that means I am as old as you are – is that it uncovered a sphere of Aboriginal life.. I guess analogous to say a Rotary Club – there was this unpaid work that was done in every community and there was a recognition that there was an older group of aunties and uncles lets say – who were looking out for the kids if they were sick in the same way carers for people with disabilities do – we’ve recognized that now but in the Aboriginal world part of this is about saying what is it that is legitimate for you to be doing which might seem outside the mainstream but which is nevertheless holding our community together? I notice work for the dole is coming back. Is there come prospect of recognizing the aunties and uncles who are doing the work. For example I see Auntie Lyn who works for Habitat in Canberra who comes out of North Queensland with a magnificent attitude to go beyond the call of duty and so she holds the hand of someone from a remote community and that person is now in the Australian Public Service. Auntie Lyn is not funded for half the thing that she did. I guess that is charity. But I see so many Aboriginal people doing this work without an inheritance or a middle class background to support them in their work. They are doing it on the smell of an oily rag and yet you see job services providers who are funded magnificently well by comparison and are not doing any of this work?

[NWM] It is a really tough balancing act. Yes you do have to have volunteer work in your community. You need the local footy coach and meals on wheels and things like this. But at the same time how do we start rewarding people for work. So you have to get the right balance. I saw some of the criticisms of work for the dole. Some are legitimate. It does keep people out of the mainstream economy. I am talking here of all walks of life. So what we have to do is learn the lessons of what does and doesn’t work. We’ve got forty years of learning in this space now. So lets learn those lessons and not get caught up in the politics of it. Of course there will be politics but don’t get caught too much in that. Start focusing on what does and doesn’t work. How do we get those things operating together. So that’s our challenge. So we need to take the opportunities and our people and organisations should be sending submissions into that review of the dole. We should be sending in applications to the education review. People have questioned why Christopher Pyne has created this inquiry – and there is a lot of politics, philosophy, ideology around it – but it’s an opportunity for us to get our language, our cul-

**“...I saw some of the criticisms of work for the dole. Some are legitimate. It does keep people out of the mainstream economy. I am talking here of all walks of life. So what we have to do is learn the lessons of what does and doesn’t work. We’ve got forty years of learning in this space now. So lets learn those lessons and not get caught up in the politics of it.”**

ture and our history. We've got to get our people submitting into that review. We also want to go back to the womb with regard to health. I was talking to a number of knowledgeable Professors in this field. They were telling me about that there are many concerns that start with the womb. So we have got to deal with that. We have got to deal with smoking. I am a bloke who believes in simple things. Australia has been very successful in reducing smoking except in the Aboriginal community. That is one of the reasons why we have such a short life span. I find this interesting. You go to Aboriginal meetings and everyone is smoking and then you go to another meeting and no-one is smoking. So we really have to get a successful Aboriginal anti-smoking campaign happening. Diabetes which is now mainly Type 2 in our community is about diet and exercise and so we need to be working more with those areas. I want people to be challenged and to put up ideas. We are toying with this idea at the moment about how we get the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to us and the government. I went to IBM and they had the need for massive cultural change in their organization. Every four years there would have to be change and they would have to create a new culture of the company. So they got rid of international business machines and all that they started their business around and went into different areas. I had a conversation with their senior executives about how they did that. They created this idea of a jam. Jamming is where they talked to 280,000 of their customers and 200,000 of their staff. Over a 72 hour period they picked a subject and they didn't want it to be tightly facilitated they wanted it to be about ideas. Over the 72 hours you can come in to the conversation, drop out and come back in if you like. From that they collated the information and gathered ideas. So we're looking at this idea of five different areas, for example in the constitutional arena, what is the appropriate wording we have to come up with to change the constitution to recognize Aboriginal Australians. Then its about how we talk to the leadership. Well we can do this any day of the week. But how do we talk to Aboriginal people directly at the grass roots. Aboriginal people have really taken to mobile phones. So we are going to look at this idea of how we jam through the mobile phone system.

[PB] Well that sounds like a great concept and idea. We will have to get the word out about it. But I have to ask you about an issue. If I can pick out Shepparton. The Minister visited Shepparton two weeks ago to visit the Kaila Institute which needs to renew its funding. The Minister came with the local member to speak with the local Aboriginal leaders and as I understand it and I hope I am not

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**[NWM] verbalizing anyone here..**

**[PB] Yes.. I want to be fair to all sides. But the local member said that philanthropic agencies have come into Shepparton and said that effectively no progress was being made and that the organisations are not performing as well as they should be. The Aboriginal leaders would say - I think - you have to be kidding. No-one has really done a study of how many people we have gotten a job and kept out of jail or so many of the things that are invisible to people outside the community. From the Aboriginal side it's like we will fund a band-aid but we won't fund the brains of the organisation. Now Shepparton is the heart of the Liberal National party power base in Australia, its one of the safest seats in the country, and from my understanding Shepparton and parts of Victoria are explosive in terms of Aboriginal culture. People are so tired and we get this situation. Whats the message to tired leaders now who find it very difficult to get the spear head organisations funded?**

**[NWM] One thing I can't get away from is that it is going to be a tough year. The thing for us, and I am having a number of conversations with people to get them on side in relation to the 5.4 billion dollars. We want to keep that money so there are no budgetary cuts there and funding can be re-allocated to priority areas. I have had talks with Tony Shepherd and the Commission of Audit and they will have a massive influence in this area. We had a great conversation about these subjects. I have talked to a number of other reviews and organisations including ILC and IBA.**

**[PB] Is it true that they are going to be amalgamated?**

**[NWM] I don't know I can't talk about those things. That's an announcement for the government – whether it happens or not. At this stage I can't say it will or not. But is about how we focus on these areas. For Indigenous people I know its going to be tough for programs.. some programs because when you are talking about re-allocation you are talking about re-allocation. So its going to be tough. The big challenge for us are what are the thirty year targets and measurements. Measurements will be an interesting challenge. We don't want to create extra compliance because it is dreadful now. A quarter of my staff were just doing compliance stuff rather than getting out there and doing real work.**

**[PB] Well that's the Job Services Australia problem as well...**

**[NWM] So we need to simplify things and get the results that**

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we need. We have to face the fact that we are talking about an eco-system. You pull the plug in one area and it affects another area. You put a plug in one area it affects another area. So we have to focus on the eco system. That's the approach we have. Education affects a number of areas. Health affects a number of areas. I am trying to get my head around mental health and suicide in Aboriginal communities. It is a disaster area. But I don't pretend I am expert. So I sat down with a number of psychologists and psychiatric people and they say the big challenge for us is that there is no one pill, it is a community problem in that when you have a community on the fringe of society and social norms collapse and dysfunctionality occurs and education fails that's when you get the slide to suicide and mental health issues. So the biggest thing we need to do is get jobs and economic development and education in those areas. We need to create opportunities in those areas and that will help us reduce mental health problems and suicide rates. Then we can start to identify the people who do need specialized help with depression. That sounds simple and I do want to keep it simple. But if we start talking about the complexity it will be over whelming. That is the history of this space. It has become overwhelming. So if I choose education. If we get the kids to school there is two things that happen, one is we get a culture of going to school and two is we start to identify resources and infrastructure and teaching issues within those schools. So if after the first two weeks of getting those kids to school we are able to identify a number of problems one was that a school built for one hundred kids four hundred turned up. Well that's obvious that the school has been built because kids weren't coming there. So we now need to place infrastructure and resources so we can educate 400 kids not 100 kids. So some people ask us what is the logic of that? Well the logic is that when we get the kids to school we identify a number of deficiencies in the system. So we are doing these simple things to make changes.

[PB] Well you have given us a hell of a lot to chew on there. So I will look forward to the next conversation. Thanks very much for your time today.

[NWM] Thank you.

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