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Reconciliation Place decision helped reignite tent rage

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Everyone has an opinion on what to do about the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, but we're no closer to a solution, writes Kirsten Lawson.

The current round of disruption and protest at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy has its roots in the Government's decision last year to build an alternative Aboriginal site nearby called Reconciliation Place.

It was the announcement of Reconciliation Place and the suggestion by Aboriginal Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock that it could replace the embassy that reignited the militancy of the current residents and got their antics back in the public gaze, with each round of publicity encouraging the next. The issue is of course more complicated, also drawing in the messiness that is Aboriginal politics with few, if any, national Aboriginal leaders categorical in their support for the embassy's current inhabitants and the local Ngunnawal people having for some time felt left out of the protest site.

This week, trouble came again, when Matilda House and her band of supporters moved in with the intention of 'cleaning up' the site in front of old Parliament House and moving its growing array of tents, cars, humpies and other structures. The National Capital Authority denies any complicity in this, but did admit that it provided Matilda House with a tow truck and large bins to help in the clean-up.

And why would the government agency provide a tow truck for an outsider to start moving someone else's property? Because, it says, the residents are camping illegally. The authority and the Government are keen to see the residents moved out, and an embassy they describe as an eyesore vastly reduced in scope. To this end, Territories Minister Wilson Tuckey is looking for a permanent replacement along the lines of a smaller interpretive centre, overseen by a management committee and run according to protocols.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission has appointed a consultant to negotiate on the embassy's future and plans consultations that will stretch to Aboriginal groups around the country, people involved in establishing the original embassy 30 years ago, and the wider community.

ATSIC Queanbeyan regional manager Rod Little said the proposal was for a centre to 'depict the indigenous history and significance of the site'. 'It's probably more of trying to put something there that will project something that's more positive, but also not losing sight of what the purpose of the embassy was and still is,' he said.

Residents are keen on a more formal centre, where they could work, and seem likely to agree in that case to move other structures so long as the site is not simply reduced to a historical interpretive centre, a kind of mini-museum celebrating the heyday of Aboriginal protest and the push for land rights, without recognising that the Aboriginal struggle is still very much alive.

It is unclear what is driving Matilda House in her confrontational move against the embassy. Her actions are, conveniently for the Government, turning Aborigine against Aborigine and, as such, doing nothing to revive the embassy's standing in the eyes of the Aboriginal or wider community. House argues that the Ngunnawal people have been excluded from the embassy, and that the antics of the residents stealing the coat of arms, disrupting the building of Reconciliation Place and allowing the site to descend into mess and dust are doing nothing for the Aboriginal cause.

'Nobody knows what's going on,' she says. 'There's no agenda, there's no mandates going on here and Ngunnawal people feel that if you're not part of this mandate with us, you've got no cause to be here. 'It's up to us, the traditional owners of this country, to make sure that we bring it back into the perspective of what it was in the first place.'

House, a Queanbeyan ATSIC commissioner who looks set this week to win back her seat, was part of the committee that oversaw the design of Reconciliation Place, and, as a high-profile leader locally she has the ear of government and its agencies. She says the embassy protesters have degraded the embassy to the point where it has lost respect and meaning; the protesters say she has been seduced by the authorities.

They justify the ramshackle nature of the embassy as a reflection of the third-world conditions in which Aboriginal people live in Australia, arguing that a smarted-up white-picket-fence embassy would do nothing to showcase the cause. 'This is Australia's backyard,' Darren Bloomfield, a militant young man who has spearheaded protests in recent years, says.

ATSIC chairman Geoff Clark, who has been trying to steer a middle course, will not comment on the rights and wrongs of the conflict, but says the dispute has clearly shifted to local 'Aboriginal business'.

'For the last 12 months I've been attempting to mediate between all parties including Matilda, the tent embassy, Tuckey, the territory Government there. I've been running a line of mediation between all of them and hoping to settle this thing in some sort of a reasonable fashion given the history of the place, the historical setting, the tensions that may exist,' he said yesterday.

'It seems to be an issue between Aboriginal groups, traditional owners on the one hand and the other group. It seems to me to be Aboriginal business.'