

# The Canberra Times

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## Clean-up provokes ugly scenes at tent embassy

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The Aboriginal Tent Embassy was the scene of a dramatic confrontation yesterday after a rival Aboriginal group burned down a humpy and extinguished the ceremonial fire.

Later, police used a metal detector in an attempt to locate a coat of arms taken from Old Parliament House in January and said to be buried under the ceremonial fire. But Detective-Sergeant Peter Budworth said a thorough search had failed to unearth the missing coat of arms.

The confrontation came as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission said it was considering a national conference to settle the embassy's future. Police and the fire brigade were called to the scene early yesterday after local Aboriginal leader Matilda House and supporters went to the site to 'clean up', with the intention of removing all structures except the two sheds that comprised the original embassy.

The group burned down a central humpy, extinguished the ceremonial fire and began dismantling tents before police negotiators arrived and, late in the day, persuaded them to leave.

This morning, the Supreme Court will hear an application from tent embassy representative Jannette Phillips for an injunction to stop Ms House and others damaging the embassy. Yesterday's was the latest in a series of confrontations at the embassy as the Government has hardened its attitude to what it insists is illegal camping there.

The National Capital Authority said it was not involved yesterday, but admitted it had provided large bins and a tow truck requested by Ms House to help her clean-up. Ms House said the site was shocking and the local Ngunawal people were asserting their rights to the land and restoring respect to the site. 'It's lost its way because of the people who have been coming in,' she said. 'They have turned it into a come-what-may camping, caravan place . . . 'We're cleaning up the site and making it respectable, so that when visitors do come here we can be proud.'

But the head of the National Sorry Day Committee, Audrey Kinnear, said it was a sad day. 'It just broke my heart,' she said. 'I think it's a shame on the Ngunawal people for people so brutal, disrespectful and not doing it according to the cultural law. 'The embassy site has got wonderful historical focus.

Many of our activists worked hard raising awareness of the plight of indigenous people, but today we see people who are making fools of themselves.' Embassy resident Darren Bloomfield said he was 'bemused' and shocked at the divisiveness of the Ngunawal action.

Detective-Sergeant Budworth said police had attended only to keep the peace, and by the end of the day the Matilda House group had agreed to leave, with their differences expected to be resolved in the courts.

Meanwhile, ATSIC has been working to settle differences about the embassy's future. Queanbeyan regional manager Rod Little said ATSIC was engaging a consultant probably this week to negotiate with all concerned about 'putting something there that's more appropriate'.

'Hopefully it will depict the indigenous history and significance of the site,' he said. '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.'

ATSIC was considering a national conference, opportunities for people to make comments online, and was consulting people involved in the original embassy 30 years ago. It would report to its national board and the Government within about four months, he said.