

## Aboriginal Tent Embassy activists distance themselves from Old Parliament House fire



*Firefighters responding at the fire-damaged front entrance of Old Parliament House following a protest in Canberra on Thursday.*

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Aboriginal Tent Embassy activists have moved to distance themselves from a fire that damaged the 100-year-old front doors of Old Parliament House in Canberra on Thursday and drew strong criticism from federal politicians of all stripes.

Five fire crews and about 50 police officers were called to the historic building on Thursday morning after the doors and portico caught alight, with flames burning above the roof height.

Protesters have been occupying the steps of Old Parliament House, which houses the Museum of Australian Democracy, over the past fortnight. They include well-known influencers from the “freedom movement” who oppose vaccine mandates and lockdowns, as well as people claiming to be sovereign citizens who believe federal and state governments are invalid.

Although many appeared to be staying at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, which has swelled in size in recent days, the embassy condemned the actions of protesters on Thursday.

“Although we support the concept of non-violent direct action, we do not condone the destruction of public and private property,” it said in a statement.

“The actions of such protesters conducting a ‘smoking ceremony’ was done so without the knowledge, consent or mandate of the Embassy Council and Traditional Owners responsible for the regulation of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy.”

Indigenous activist Albert Hartnett, who has a long association with the Tent Embassy, said he was worried it would be blamed for the fire damage.

“All we do here is provide an action space where we take these actions to the front doors of this Parliament House,” he said in a video posted on Facebook.

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“Our aim is to get through those doors and to make sure that we create the foundations of our own sovereign governments. That’s always going to be an aim for us as sovereign nations to deal with a lot of the disadvantage and injustice that we suffer.”

January marks the 50th anniversary of the Tent Embassy. Its council has planned a three-day event towards the end of the month.

Minister for Indigenous Australians Ken Wyatt condemned the fire as a “deplorable act” and said those responsible must be held accountable.

“When I think of Old Parliament House, I’m reminded of our first Indigenous parliamentarian Neville Bonner on those front steps and other historical moments in our democracy,” he wrote on Twitter.

“That’s how I choose to remember those front steps. Not the scenes that unfolded today.”

However, Greens senator Lidia Thorpe, the party’s first Indigenous representative, tweeted in support, writing: “Seems like the colonial system is burning down. Happy New Year everyone. #AlwayswasAlwayswillBeAboriginalLand.”



*The fire-damaged front entrance of Old Parliament House following a protest.*

She later deleted the tweet and the party's leader, Adam Bandt, said if the fire was deliberately lit it was unacceptable.

The smoking ceremony that appeared to spark Thursday's incident was similar to those that have taken place during other protests over the past fortnight. The Old Parliament House doors were damaged slightly during one action last week.

"That [smoking ceremony] is something that we had agreed with, with a lot of the members who were attending each day as part of a peaceful protest," ACT Police operations commander Linda Champion told reporters. "It then became a little bit out of hand, and then ACT Police went to respond and that's when it was greatly exacerbated."

Protesters livestreamed the incident, with vision showing some obscuring security cameras with paint before the fire broke out.

One livestreamed video shows protesters celebrating the fire afterwards, shouting "bring it down", "burn you evil corporation", "what we are witnessing is a lawful response to 273 years of oppression, of genocide and occupation" and "this is a lawful response to their criminality".

Another shows two chairs and a couch on the fire, with the man filming it saying off-camera, "Let it burn, let it burn."

A number of protesters claimed the smoking ceremony got out of control when police used pepper spray.

Protester Luke Simpson said the group was used to working with fire under control and that "we don't f---ing blaze things up; we keep it just at a smoke level".

"[Police] were using pepper spray, spraying pepper onto the fire," he said.

However, footage posted on social media shows the fire was well alight before police reached the steps.

Police confirmed pepper spray was used to disperse protesters but said it was not directed at the fire and the product they used was water-based and did not contain an accelerant.

Commander Champion said the investigation would examine why Thursday's protest escalated.

"If there is peaceful demonstrations, we fully support that. If there's any criminal activity, we'll be taking action," Commander Champion said.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said authorities should act swiftly and people should face consequences for their actions.

"I'm disgusted and appalled by the behaviour that would see Australians come and set fire to such a symbol of democracy in this country," he said.

"Their cause doesn't justify that sort of violence. That's not how Australia works. We have a rule of law in this country and people should obey it."

Protesters shared photos this week of a "trespass" letter posted on the door of the building earlier in the week, similar to those affixed to Government House in Melbourne during recent protests.