

## **Black vs black over tent shanty**

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Canberra's Aboriginal tent embassy has called for peace and calm ahead of a showdown today with local indigenous people who want to tear the "eyesore" shanty town down.

The local Ngunnawal people last week started pulling down tents around the site, put out the sacred fire and removed caravans which housed itinerant embassy dwellers.

The clean up, led by prominent elder and ATSIC councillor Matilda House, came to a halt after the ACT Supreme Court granted a seven-day injunction preventing further damage.

The injunction ends today, and the embassy will be back in court to have it extended.

If it is unsuccessful, Ms House and her supporters could be back on site to finish what they started.

All they want to leave in place are the two long-standing and heritage listed sheds directly opposite Old Parliament House.

Most of what was torn down by the Ngunnawal last Thursday has since been rebuilt, including the burned down central humpy.

Embassy spokeswoman Isabell Coe said the tent embassy had received messages of support from around the country and would not be easily removed.

She said she was willing to compromise -- though did not say how -- and said that the embassy would not be intimidated. She blamed the Government for the confrontation, which has pitched black against black.

Federal Territories Minister Wilson Tuckey said last week the Ngunnawal action had the Government's support, and the National Capital Authority supplied two industrial bins to hold the debris.

Ms Coe yesterday rejected complaints that the Canberra tent embassy did not represent the wider Aboriginal community.

"If the tent embassy goes, where do Aboriginal people go?" she asked.

"This is our last resort ... this is our land too.

"We're here to show the world how Aboriginal people still have to live in their own country."

Despite ACT Supreme Court Justice Ken Crispin urging the parties to find a resolution, Ms Coe said the two sides had not spoken.

"At the moment we're calling for peace and calm. We hope that common sense will prevail," she said.

The Ngunnawal people have had a troubled relationship with the embassy, saying it has lost its way since it was established 30 years ago.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) has hired a consultant to negotiate a future for the embassy, with the Government's backing.

ATSIC plans to reign in the embassy's unpredictable activism, saying, while the embassy undoubtedly represented the indigenous struggle, some of its methods of protest were definitely questionable.

## Q&A

Q: When was the tent embassy first established?

A: It began as a beach umbrella outside Parliament House on Australia Day 1972 as a protest against the McMahon Government's refusal to grant land rights. It was heritage listed in 1995, three years after it became a permanent home.

Q: Who was behind it?

A: One of the original founders is Wiradjuri woman Isabell Coe. It has been home to many activists and small numbers of indigenous people also have made it their temporary home.

Q: Why then does the local Aboriginal tribe, Ngunnawal, oppose it?

A: They say the camp is an embarrassment and want it removed save for two information sheds.

Q: What is the attitude of the Government?

A: The Government considers the site an eyesore. It wants to replace it with a memorial or permanent rooms elsewhere, but people living at the tent embassy refuse to leave.

Q: How has it been funded?

A: The embassy does not get any official funding. It exists on donations.