
Tensions flare between Coalition and National Congress over indigenous support

Reporter: Stephanie Corsetti
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KIM LANDERS: A peak indigenous advocacy group, that's often criticised the Federal Government, is set to lose its funding.

The Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion has told the National Congress for Australia's First Peoples it will need to stand on its own without federal support.

The move's been condemned by Reconciliation Australia and the Federal Opposition.

Stephanie Corsetti reports.

STEPHANIE CORSETTI: After months of trying to arrange a meeting with the Prime Minister, the co-chairs of the National Congress for Australia's First Peoples finally met Malcolm Turnbull in Sydney last month.

But after these positive talks, funding for Congress looks set to be cut.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion told the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, the Congress is not representative and it doesn't deserve federal funding.

NIGEL SCULLION: Thirty million dollars to support Aboriginal people on the basis that becomes sustainable funding.

Well the money ran out and I can't find someone apart from those people who head Congress that say that was money well spent.

I talked to Aboriginal people right across this country and all the time I spend my life with Aboriginal people.

The vast majority say we just don't even hear from them. We don't know who Congress is.

STEPHANIE CORSETTI: The congress was established in 2010 to provide a national voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Members elect the co-chairs to lead the organisation.

In a statement, one co-chair Rod Little says he finds it alarming the Prime Minister wants to maintain a relationship, while Senator Scullion is unsupportive.

He disputes Minister Scullion's claim membership is low, stating it represents more than 8,000 Indigenous Australians.

The chief executive of Congress Geoff Scott told CAAMA congress isn't allowed to invest its government funding towards long term sustainability.

GEOFF SCOTT: People are scared of this Government, they are scared of bully boy tactics, they'll do and say whatever is required to keep funding, so the services can continue and ensure that their people do not go without.

The other comment that he made was about the other representative bodies, we are a representative group and a lobby group.

STEPHANIE CORSETTI: The Opposition's Indigenous affairs spokesman Shayne Neumann says there is a place for the peak body, which has suffered funding setbacks since 2014.

SHAYNE NEUMANN: They have a central voice and a central role in efforts to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage and should be partnering with Government and cannot and should not be treated in this way by the Minister.

STEPHANIE CORSETTI: He's called on the Prime Minister to intervene, and to override Senator Scullion.

SHAYNE NEUMANN: A strong Congress will really strengthen the leadership governance and capacities of Indigenous organisation and Nigel Scullion is completely wrong.

STEPHANIE CORSETTI: Reconciliation Australia is also defending Congress, saying its membership is growing.

The chief executive is Justin Mohamed.

JUSTIN MOHAMED: It's membership is made up of most disadvantaged population of Australia and to say they can become more self-sustainable, it's a great aspiration and in time that possibly can happen but it's very hard to do that.

KIM LANDERS: The chief executive of Reconciliation Australia, Justin Mohamed, ending that report by Stephanie Corsetti.

And the Minister's office was contacted for a response to this story. A spokesman says the Congress represents a little more than one per cent of the Indigenous population.