

We lost Wik war: Fischer

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THE acting Prime Minister, Mr Fischer, yesterday admitted the Government had lost the public relations war over native title. But Mr Fischer, who is running the country while Mr Howard is on holidays, predicted the Government would "turn the tide" on the Wik debate.

In a bid to regain the initiative, he yesterday announced he would release a "major" fact sheet on the Wik 10-point plan during a visit to Cairns later in the month.

The guide would explain the legislation in "plain English" to people living in the "leafy suburbs".

"In 1997 some elements and elites decided to move the goalposts out to make it a particularly difficult year on these issues," he said. He named the elites as the academia, the churches and the ABC public broadcaster.

Mr Fischer said there remained "a chance" the legislation could still be passed in the Senate when it was reintroduced in March. He said Labor could still end up supporting the bill because it was split, with the "pragmatic" arm "very angry" with the tough line taken by its Aboriginal affairs spokesman, Mr Daryl Melham.

In a broad-ranging interview from the family homestead at Boree Creek in New South Wales, Mr Fischer also said there would not be a snap poll before the Federal Budget on May 12, despite the threat of a double-dissolution election over Wik.

His comments coincided with concerns by former National Party leader Mr Doug Anthony that a poll on Wik would further polarise the debate and incite anger.

"You have hot heads on both sides who would create divisions, would polarise sections of the community, in a way which I wouldn't like to see," he said.

Mr Anthony made the comments after receiving an honorary doctorate from Sydney University.

He was the minister responsible for the 1967 referendum which granted Aborigines equal rights.

Meanwhile, the Northern Territory Government accused Aboriginal activist Marcia Langton of lying at a Paris media conference when she claimed farmers were threatening to shoot her people.

Ms Langton's claim that the Prime Minister was leading Australia back into apartheid was also totally dishonest, acting NT Chief Minister Mr Mike Reed said.

Ms Langton, the chairwoman of Aboriginal Studies at Northern Territory University, said in Paris on Tuesday that farmers were "threatening to shoot us".