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Tent embassy showdown; Stanhope takes on Tuckey as residents vow to stay put

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Federal Territories Minister Wilson Tuckey escalated his move against the Aboriginal tent embassy late yesterday, sparking a war of words with ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope who has vowed to defend the site.

Mr Tuckey has ordered the removal of electricity, toilet and other camping facilities in a bid to force people from living there. His action also angered embassy spokesman Darren Bloomfield who said he and several other people living on the site would stay put no matter what the Commonwealth did.

Mr Stanhope accused Mr Tuckey of using Tuesday's fire as an excuse to implement a 'secret and long-held agenda' to remove the embassy, which he described as Australia's most powerful symbol of the fight for Aboriginal justice. 'The tent embassy is the pre-eminent, the No 1 symbol in Australia of the struggle by Aboriginal people for justice in this country, and I will defend it,' he said, describing as ironic the Commonwealth's determination to 'kick them off, to dispossess them' from a protest site marking 200 years of dispossession.

But Mr Tuckey hit back, accusing Mr Stanhope of ignoring his responsibility to protect public health and child welfare in the territory, and leaving the problem in the hands of the Commonwealth. 'Does he suggest if there was paedophilia going on at Canberra Airport [also Commonwealth land] that he would not be involved?' Mr Tuckey said. '. . . For how much longer is the responsible health and child-welfare agency going to tolerate children living in those circumstances?' Power was disconnected after a fire on Tuesday and late yesterday the National Capital Authority removed electrical cables, poles and the portable toilet. Spokesman Jeremy Lasek said the authority was trying to find emergency accommodation for the residents and had asked the police indigenous liaison unit to help.

Mr Tuckey said he would not physically force residents off the site but had ordered the removal of 'any facility that might encourage people to stay there'. Mr Tuckey said the site was an eyesore, populated by itinerants under conditions that would not be permitted for anyone else. 'We've clearly got to remove the electrical arrangements because they don't conform with Actew standards and we've had one near-death event [the fire].

The portaloos should go also as they are adding to the incentive for people to camp there in Third World conditions.' But Mr Bloomfield, who lives at the site in front of Old Parliament House with about six others, said the group would simply live without power. 'If they're going to kick us out, bring it on,' he said, describing the 30-year protest as a 'hard-core, in-your-face protest' that would continue. 'Let's see what Australia's got to say. I can tell you right now Australia's not going to be very happy about this. 'They've got no right to take the only platform away from the Aboriginal

people of Australia.' He had earlier told ABC Radio that the first night without electricity was cold and dark.

'... any other thoughts of moving us on, no, we are not going anywhere, not now, not ever, not until the issues have been properly addressed.

'Electricity is comfort. Us blackfellas, we have been doing it hard for 214 years. But we will make do. We always do and we always have and always will.'

Embassy residents lost a tent used as a kitchen and a living area in Tuesday's fire - which they say began in a wood-fire drum and had nothing to do with electricity connections. They have a television, stereo and computer, with no power to run them now, rubbish bins provided by the National Capital Authority and a cold shower they have rigged up using public taps. Mr Tuckey won some cautious support from the nation's top indigenous leader, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission chairman Geoff Clark, who said Mr Tuckey had been reasonable in negotiations and ATSIC shared safety concerns. But Mr Clark had not heard about power and toilets being removed yesterday.

While he did not want to comment on whether residents should stay, he said the embassy itself should stay while 'unfinished business' remained. ACT Liberal Leader Gary Humphries called for the embassy to be replaced by a permanent building elsewhere. He said the Old Parliament House site was an eyesore and was sending a negative message. The site is on the Register of the National Estate, which highlights its role as the only national site representing the Aboriginal political struggle, but Australian Heritage Commission director Bruce Leaver said the listing offered only very minor protection. Mr Tuckey said he remained sympathetic to proposals to replace the embassy with a permanent monument, recognising the historical significance of what happened there 30 years ago. The tent embassy site was set up on Australia Day 1972 and became a permanent fixture in 1992.