

Tony Abbott's Indigenous 'lifestyle choices' remark smacks of racism, says UN rapporteur

UN special rapporteur on indigenous rights criticises the PM's comments and says Australia has 'regressed' in its treatment of Indigenous communities



Tony Abbott's comments on 'lifestyle choices' don't speak well of the government, says the UN's indigenous expert. Photograph: Alan Porritt/AAP Image

[Tom McCarthy](#) in New York

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The UN's special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people said Australia had "regressed" in its treatment of Indigenous communities and that a remark by the prime minister, [Tony Abbott](#), about remote communities "smacks of racism".

Up to 150 remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia are threatened with closure after an announcement last November that federal funding for them would be allowed to lapse.

"What we can't do is endlessly subsidise lifestyle choices," [Abbott said in March in support of the decision](#), "if those lifestyle choices are not conducive to the kind of full participation in Australian society that everyone should have."

The UN rapporteur, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, took issue with Abbott's characterisation of the desire of Indigenous communities to inhabit ancestral grounds as "lifestyle choices".

Speaking to the Guardian in New York, she said: "This whole issue of racist kinds of pronouncements doesn't really speak well of how governments are supposed to be complying with their human rights obligations.

“At least don’t be saying these kinds of pronouncements. Because it really just complicates the whole issue, and it really shows how uncommitted some governments are in relation to their compliance to human rights instruments.”

Tauli-Corpuz said representatives of the Kimberley Land Council, in Western Australia, had met her at the UN to seek her help. Tauli-Corpuz said she had written to the Australian government to ask for more support for remote communities.

“The cutting back of the federal funding for these communities is really worrisome,” Tauli-Corpuz said. “If they would like to continue staying there, then they should be given that choice. Because it’s their life. To say it’s a lifestyle choice, and they don’t deserve any support from the government ... they are still citizens of Australia.”

Tauli-Corpuz, who was appointed last June after five years as chair of the UN permanent forum on indigenous issues, acknowledged that Australia was dealing with a tight budget. But she said the decision to defund remote communities, and Abbott’s characterisation of that decision, were misguided.

“I was surprised to hear it,” Tauli-Corpuz said. “I really think that saying that kind of thing and then linking it, and using it as a justification to reduce any federal funding is really an issue ... It also smacks of racism, of course.”

Upon taking office in 2013, Abbott declared himself a “prime minister for Aboriginal affairs”, taking on the portfolio directly.

Tauli-Corpuz, who as a member of the Kankana-ey Igorot people from the northern Philippines is the first indigenous woman to hold the rapporteur post, said the Australian government had “regressed” in extending aid to Indigenous communities.

“From what I heard they have really turned – they have regressed,” she said. “The funds are being cut very drastically. So any kind of support that goes to Aboriginal people has really been decreased, according to the leaders I spoke with.

“They said it has really deteriorated more than what it has been in previous years. That’s what they claim.”