

Advice 'falling on deaf ears', Indigenous Advisory Council members say

Pace of change frustratingly slow, Tony Abbott's advisers say in wake of his lifestyle choices comment



Tony Abbott with the council's deputy chair, Ngiare Brown, in 2010. Photograph: Alan Porritt/AAP

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The Guardian - Wednesday 18 March 2015 12.04 AEDT

Members of the prime minister's hand-picked Indigenous Advisory Council have expressed frustration at the slow pace of change in Indigenous affairs, saying their advice is "falling on deaf ears".

[Tony Abbott](#) set up the council shortly after winning the 2013 federal election and declared himself the prime minister for Indigenous affairs.

The council is made up of a dozen prominent Australians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and meets six times a year to discuss how best to close the gap in health, education, employment and other important policy areas.

All have signed agreements prohibiting them from speaking specifically about council business, and the members quoted by Guardian Australia were speaking in their capacity as community leaders.

“People aren’t listening, not to the IAC, but to Aboriginal people in general,” said the chair of the Cape York Land Council, Richard Ah Mat. “Things are happening but at a snail’s pace.”

He said the council’s advice was “falling on deaf ears”. “We come up with some great initiatives, the council,” Ah Mat said.

The IAC’s deputy chair and founding chief executive of the Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association, Ngiare Brown, said some of the Indigenous policies announced by the government had been “incoherent”.

“I suppose what the frustration is, is that much of the agenda is predetermined,” she said. “I just find that there’s still this desire by ministers in particular to place ideology over evidence ... We are always forced to compromise on an agenda that is not set by us.

“We’re being affected by uncertainty, disconnection, and some stuff is incoherent. Communities are in flux.”

She added: “Governments, bureaucracies, departments – they come and go. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mob, we are actually the anchor. So rather than us having to repeat the same conversations, it is actually time to start listening to what we have learnt over the preceding millennia.”

The chair of the council and an Abbott confidant, [Warren Mundine](#), acknowledged that the government’s reform agenda was taking longer than expected to implement.

“The pace of change is frustrating, it is slow,” he said. “We want a faster pace of change. The language, the conversations are the same across the board and people have got to start listening to that and acting.”

Ah Mat was reluctant to criticise individuals, saying the will to implement change was there but somewhere in policymaking the message got lost. “They should be listening to the Aboriginal people of this country,” he said. “We can see what our mob needs.”

But other council members are more circumspect. “We weren’t asked to make or oversee policy,” said Bruce Martin, an anthropologist from Aurukun in Cape York. “We’re not a council that sits around and agrees with each other and agrees with the government.”

He said the IAC’s advice had been taken on “in some instances”, adding there was a frustration of “feeling like you’re not being listened to”.

“It’s up to government ministers to take that advice on,” Martin said.

Brown said Abbott had burnt through a lot of goodwill within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with his comments that living in remote communities [amounted to a “lifestyle choice”](#).

“This prime minister has been known to throw out a few bombs in the preceding 12 to 18 months, but this really riled the community,” Brown said. “I think he made a serious tactical error, and then to back himself when he had the opportunity to rectify what was, publicly speaking, a very unpopular comment.”

She said she would “like to see him show a bit more statesmanship around how he presents himself”.

“Taking cabinet to Arnhem Land for a week does not an expert make,” she said.

The chairman of the Association of Northern Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists, Djambawa Marawili, issued Abbott with a written plea at the last IAC meeting in December, before the lifestyle choices comment.

“As homeland and community people living independently on our country, we feel confident and happy and strong,” the letter said.

“We especially want government to understand it is important not to force us to leave our countries again and instead to support us. We were already taken away once to live on missions, and we walked back to country to rebuild our knowledge and culture.

“We wish government could understand that we are much stronger and can be much more productive living on country than living elsewhere.”

Brown said the use of “lifestyle choices” implied that Indigenous people had the same opportunities as other Australians.

“Mob in remote communities ... don’t have the capacity or the opportunity to be able to make those sorts of choices.

“And I wouldn’t say that living in abject poverty is a lifestyle choice. I wouldn’t say being on the whim of government is a lifestyle choice.”