

Indigenous leaders urge Malcolm Turnbull to show 'real leadership'

National Congress of Australia's First Peoples praises Tony Abbott's commitment but say Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be allowed to design and deliver the policies they need



Activists outside Parliament House protest against the planned closures of remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AAP

[Shalailah Medhora](#)

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The Abbott government was on a path to failure in its quest to improve the lives of [Indigenous Australians](#) but the new prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, has the opportunity to turn that around, the national representative body for Australia's first peoples has said.

Representatives from the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples met in Canberra on Thursday to discuss issues close to Indigenous Australians, including meeting crucial [close the gap targets](#) and working towards constitutional recognition.

The two co-chairs of the congress said the ascension of Turnbull, who [rolled his predecessor, Tony Abbott](#) for the Liberal party leadership late on Monday night, represented an "opportunity" to turn the tide.

"The government is essentially in a process to failure with everything it's doing in Aboriginal affairs unless there is a real, genuine commitment to let Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people design and deliver policies that our people need," one co-chair, Les Malezer, told reporters.

The other, Kirstie Parker, said: "We think it's important that the prime minister gets off on the right foot in terms of his relationship with our peoples and organisations."

Both thanked Abbott for his genuine commitment to Indigenous affairs but noted there was plenty of "unfinished business" in making progress on close the gap targets, reforming federal funding programs and fixing deteriorating rates of incarceration.

The congress had invited Turnbull to attend the meeting but he declined. "The prime minister has expressed his very earnest commitment to meet with the representatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples as soon as possible," a spokesman for the prime minister told Guardian Australia.

Abbott declared himself the prime minister for Indigenous affairs and as part of that commitment pledged to spend a week a year in a remote community. He moved the Indigenous portfolio in to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Malezer labelled the decision to centralise Indigenous affairs in Canberra “a disaster”.

He said the congress was “not hostile” to the idea of the [prime minister’s Indigenous advisory council](#) but said Turnbull should not make that his sole decision-making body.

The organisation also wants Turnbull to place “adequate attention” on the issue of recognising Indigenous Australians in the constitution. “With every week that goes by, the momentum slips,” Parker warned, calling the [2017 timeframe for the referendum](#) “ambitious” and saying the processes need to be bedded down.

“The conservative elements who have been here for 200 years should not be allowed to dictate or decide how Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples in this country are going to survive into the future,” Malezer said. “For the prime minister, [Tony Abbott](#) – he may have been too careful to try and please everybody when in fact we’re calling for real leadership.”

Speculation is mounting that the staunch Turnbull supporter Mal Brough may be reinstated as Indigenous affairs minister in the upcoming cabinet reshuffle, expected within days.

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Brough held the Indigenous portfolio for just under two years until he lost his Queensland seat in 2007. He was the minister who presided over the Northern Territory intervention, a policy widely panned by Aboriginal communities.

“It would be a controversial choice,” Parker said. “Having said that, it is less about the people and more about the policies and approach that is taken, and this is where the leadership of the prime minister will come into play.”

Malezer agreed: “We need a minister of state who is prepared to represent in the parliament the interests and views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples,” he said. “We don’t need a chief protector. So regardless of who the minister is, who the minister might be, we want a standard for the portfolio.

“This is not the whitefellas looking after the blackfellas. This is about having leadership and representation in a more democratic parliament.”

The relationship between the commonwealth and Indigenous communities soured considerably after Abbott said living in a remote outstation was a [“lifestyle choice” that taxpayers should not be expected to fund](#).

His Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, later raised the ire of community groups by saying many Aboriginal people lived in cave-like conditions.