



Refusal to accommodate indigenous youth leaders exposes deeper issues in the territory

# Hostel eviction of Aborigines 'not isolated'

By **SARAH SMILES**  
CANBERRA

THE refusal by an Alice Springs hostel to accommodate a group of young Aboriginal women last weekend is not an isolated case, the Northern Territory's Anti-Discrimination Commissioner said yesterday.

Tony Fitzgerald said he had heard other complaints about racism involving territory hotels, including a 2002 incident where a Darwin hotel demanded a group of Arnhem Land women pay a premium because Aboriginal people were "dirty" and left rooms "in a mess".

"We've had quite a few of these complaints ... There's a few people in the (hospitality) industry that just don't get it," Mr Fitzgerald said. "They seem to have a view that because people are Aboriginal they are going to behave inappropriately (so) they can treat them unlawfully."

Mr Fitzgerald said the women from the remote community of Yuendumu who were refused accommodation at the Haven Backpackers Resort appeared to have a strong case for redress.

The youth leaders travelled 300 kilometres to Alice Springs last weekend to be trained by the Royal Life Saving Society before the opening of their local pool. After booking into the hostel on Saturday, the manager, English-woman Shelly Ball, asked them to leave.

"The manager told us to leave the hotel because there was Asian backpackers complaining about us just because we were

black. Because they are afraid of Aboriginal people," said Sherelle Young, 16, who was in the group.

Ms Ball allegedly offered the group a bribe after she was threatened with media coverage.

Bethany Langdon, 19, said she was worried her three-year-old daughter might one day be subjected to the same bigotry.

"I don't want that for her. I want her to grow up in a society where everyone respects everyone else for where they come from ... treats them the same, treats them in a good manner," Ms Langdon said.

The hostel, which is owned by the award-winning Adventure Tourism Australia, claims on its website that its tours place an emphasis on "the unique scenery, wildlife and Aboriginal culture of each area".

The territory's Chief Minister, Paul Henderson, called the treatment "appalling".

"It's absolutely unacceptable. We're a multicultural community," he said in Darwin. "These were a bunch of young women, a group of role models ... It was a big trip for them, they were obviously very excited.

"It is absolutely appalling that these women and kids have been discriminated against."

Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin said she was "extremely concerned" about the incident. Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner Tom Calma said he was worried the incident reflected a "systemic problem" with Aborigines accessing accommodation and

other services. He had heard of Aborigines "being denied accommodation, paying higher rates for hotel/motel rooms, being provided with substandard rooms and being unfairly asked to vacate premises".

Mr Henderson said he hoped it was an "isolated incident".

But Mr Fitzgerald said he had unsuccessfully lobbied the territory Government since 2003 to fund an Anti-Discrimination Commission branch in Alice Springs to combat racist attitudes. "There's some attitudes that are inappropriate. This is not the first complaint that we've had about a hotel that's behaved badly."

Greg Zammit, joint-owner of the Haven Backpackers Resort, said in a statement that he was "disappointed and sorry for the upset and embarrassment this situation has caused the young Aborigines". But he said the group was the subject of a complaint from other "international" guests. "The manager was told that other backpackers were also complaining," he said.

He denied Ms Ball tried to bribe the group, saying she had offered to pay for the group's alternative accommodation.

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"Appalling": Bethany Langdon (above) and (below, left to right) Sherelle Young, Gina Spencer, Michaeline Wilson, Langdon and Enid Gallagher at Yuendumu community. PICTURE: LIAM CAMPBELL

