

Politics puts cloud over housing cash

■ Taylor Amonini

Pilbara Aboriginal organisations nervously await the future of remote housing, clouded by Federal and State governments squabbling over funding commitments.

Debate was sparked late last year when the Federal Government announced funding through the National Partnership on Remote Housing would change on June 30.

For the past 10 years, the Federal Government has awarded \$5.4 billion to lift living standards in remote indigenous communities.

Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion said the funding was always going to run out this year.

"This was a one-off national partnership agreement to assist States to undertake their own responsibilities for the delivery of housing to reduce overcrowding and increase housing amenity," he said. "It's important to note that public housing remains a State and Territory responsibility."

Mr Scullion said Canberra would still commit funding but the amount would depend on negotiations, which are now under way.

WA Housing Minister Peter Tinley said State Government invested almost \$86 million a year for housing and related infrastructure and services in remote communities and being saddled with a shortfall of \$100 million would amount to leaving WA with "an impossible financial burden into the future".

"It is not acceptable for the Turnbull Government to simply provide a token short-term extension to the current funding agreement and then walk away from its longstanding responsibility in this area of acute need," he said.

As negotiations go on behind closed doors, Pilbara organisations said if the funding was cut significantly it would have a drastic effect on remote communities.

Bloodwood Tree Association chief executive Kelly Howlett said a funding black hole would be the beginning of the end for remote Aboriginal communities.

"It is a real missed opportunity and disappointing, despite a commitment to Closing The Gap, that when it comes to housing, at a Federal level, that there has not been a show of leadership towards this pressing issue," she said.