



## Flag burning took authorities by surprise, inquiry told

**Dylan Welch**

THE fire lit by angry indigenous Australian activists at the front entrance to Parliament House following the Australia Day protest was authorised by one of Parliament's most senior officers, but even he was taken by surprise when an Australian flag was set alight.

The burning of the flag – by a small group of protesters who had come to Parliament House to return a shoe lost by the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, during the fracas the day before – was raised during a Senate inquiry.

The inquiry heard that the Usher of the Black Rod, Brian Hallett, had given permission for the protesters to light a small, ceremonial fire while there.

It came the day after the

tumultuous scenes at the Lobby Restaurant, a venue several hundred metres from Parliament, where Ms Gillard and the Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, had been verbally abused by a group of about 100 people attending the nearby 40th anniversary celebrations for the tent embassy.

The pair were forced to stay inside for 30 minutes while the protesters surrounded the restaurant, banging on its glass walls and chanting slogans such as “shame”.

As Ms Gillard was dramatically rushed away from the restaurant by her federal police protection team, she lost one of her shoes.

The next day, a group of protesters offered to formally return the shoe at the entrance to Parliament House, and asked police for permission to burn a small,

ceremonial fire while there.

But when they arrived, they were a much larger group than officials expected, and police had to form a barrier to stop them entering Parliament.

“Discussions had to be made quickly due to the available police and the atmosphere that was in existence,” the President of the Senate, John Hogg, said.

“Following a request from the Australian Federal Police, the Black Rod authorised that a ceremonial fire be taken on to the forecourt by a small group of protesters in ceremonial dress.”

Liberal Senator Scott Ryan said he was offended by what happened subsequently, and that many Australians would have found it highly offensive.



**Heat of the moment ... the Australian flag is burnt by Aboriginal protesters at the front of Parliament House.** Photo: Andrew Meares