



Flag-burning fire 'authorised'

THE fire that was used by indigenous protesters to burn the Australian flag on the forecourt of Parliament House was approved by one of the building's most senior officials.

A Senate estimates hearing was told yesterday that the Usher of the Black Rod, Brien Hallett, authorised a "ceremonial fire" request by protesters just 24 hours after the Australia Day tent embassy riot that led to the evacuation of Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott.

But the Finance and Public Administration committee heard Mr Hallett had never expected the ceremonial fire would be later used to burn the nation's flag.

Senate president John Hogg said Mr Hallett had discussed the presentation of the petition with Australian Federal Police officers who were liaising with the protesters.

"Decisions had to be made quickly due to the available police and the atmosphere that was in existence," Senator Hogg

said. "Following a request from the Australian Federal Police, the Black Rod authorised that a ceremonial fire be taken onto the forecourt by a small group of protesters in ceremonial dress."

Liberal senator Scott Ryan — who quizzed Senator Hogg on the appropriateness of the Black Rod's approval of the ceremonial fire — said it was a "tense environment" to allow such an act, and the eventual burning of the flag was "profoundly offensive" to all Australians.

Senator Ryan later said he was amazed a particular interest group could get special treatment, especially after the events on Australia Day.

"You or I could not just waltz up to parliament and demand to be allowed to light a fire, which we then use to burn the Australian flag outside the national parliament, and these demonstrators should not have been either," he said outside the Senate hearing.

MILANDA ROUNT