

Jacinta Nampijinpa Price security alarm interrupts defamation trial

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Northern Territory senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price left a Darwin courtroom midway through her defamation trial on Tuesday after a man took a seat near her in the public gallery, triggering what her barrister, Peter Gray SC, described as a security issue.

Federal Court judge Michael Whelan paused evidence on the second day of the Federal Court trial – including by switching off a livestream – in order to hear details about what caused Senator Nampijinpa Price to leave.

Police were called to the Darwin court precinct shortly before the lunch break. The man's past behaviour is regarded by Senator Nampijinpa Price's staff as harassing and threatening, The Australian understands.

"Certainly, he did approach her, in the sense that he sat within a couple seats of her in the court," Mr Gray was reported by the NT News to have said to Judge Whelan. "She is concerned that this is contrary to what the AFP have provided to this person."

The Liberal senator is being sued by Central Land Council chief executive Lesley Turner. She is accused of defaming Mr Turner in a press release last July asserting he was unfit for his role.

The first day and a half of the trial included evidence from longtime Territorian John Boffa, chief medical officer at the Central Australian Aboriginal Health Congress, who claimed Senator Nampijinpa Price's press release made the CLC "the talk of the town" because she was calling for a federal intervention to deal with the land council.

The court has heard from Mr Turner's barrister, Sue Chrysanthou SC, that, in the middle of last year, CLC chairman Matthew Palmer wanted Mr Turner gone.

A planned coup was under way after Mr Turner called Mr Palmer to a meeting to discuss his conduct on a land rights matter. Mr Palmer had prepared a draft motion of no confidence in Mr Turner for the CLC's annual meeting of delegates in July. However, delegates instead reprimanded Mr Palmer, and voted to reprimand Mr Palmer over his conduct on the same lands right issue Mr Turner had raised with him the month before.

A senior staffer in Senator Nampijinpa Price's office subsequently helped Mr Palmer write a press release of his own that was critical of Mr Turner and claimed there was "majority support for change of direction and leadership in the CLC".

Mr Turner is not suing over that Palmer press release. He is suing over Senator Nampijinpa Price's separate press release in which she accused Mr Turner of "gaslighting" the community.

Dr Boffa told the court he took the senator's statement to mean Mr Turner was not listening to the community. "She was saying ... as the CEO he's just gaslighting them, just paying lip service to the fact the community made a decision, they want him out, and he's hanging around like a bad smell. That's how I interpreted the word gaslighting," he said.

The trial is expected to continue until next week.

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