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THE NATION 3

Funds for Aboriginal body are safe: Libs

Tony Abbott has reined in his policy director

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TONY Abbott has declared government funding for the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation will be safe if the Coalition wins the next election.

The Opposition Leader made the pledge after he demoted his former policy director Mark Roberts over a late-night incident at a Qantas function last Thursday, where Dr Roberts was overheard threatening the organisation's chief, Andrew Penfold, with a public funding cut.

Mr Abbott said yesterday: "We've got no intention of cutting their funding.

"The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation has done outstanding work and the government's funding has been more than matched by funding from the private sector.

"Obviously getting young Aboriginal people into a good education with appropriate mentoring is an important way to ensure that we enable more Aboriginal people to become leaders of society."

Mr Abbott said "everyone speaks very highly" of Mr Penfold.

Speaking on Sky News's *Australian Agenda* yesterday, Mr Abbott said Dr Roberts had had a "brain snap, there's no doubt about that", and had acted in a way that was completely unacceptable.

He said Dr Roberts had lost the title of director of policy and the Opposition Leader's office was in talks with the Department of Finance about a salary cut.

On Friday, Mr Abbott said Dr Roberts had apologised to Mr Penfold. "The contact last evening was initiated by Dr Roberts and in no way reflects on the individual concerned or the organisation he represented.

"While the incident is out of character, Coalition staff are expected to maintain high professional standards at all times."

Mr Abbott, who spoke with Mr Penfold yesterday, described him as an "outstanding individual" who was the unfortunate recipient of verbal over the top behaviour by the staffer "and he entirely accepts the apology".

"He believes the matter is at an end, and he wants to just get on with the job of doing the right thing by indigenous Australians."

The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation is a private sector-led, non-profit organisation focused on educating indigenous children in financial need, through scholarships.