

Embarrassing return to Parliament's steps

Aboriginal - militant Miss Bobbi Sykes said: "I have forecast violence many times.

"It is with some degree of pride that I say the violence has not been instigated by the people. It is with more pride that I say the people are prepared to stand up like men and defend themselves. We shall not be moved."

Miss Sykes was among more than 70 Aborigines who were threatened with arrest on the steps of Parliament House this week during a demonstration against the Labor Government.

But her remarks were not made this week. They were made in July last year after police, under the directions of a Liberal-Country Party Government, had smashed the Aborigine tent "Embassy" and arrested 18 demonstrators.

Miss Sykes was back on the steps this week and fortunately there were no arrests. But, for the Aborigines, nothing has changed and the "Embassy" is once again on the lawns opposite Parliament House.

The Embassy, the sit-in on the steps, the brief but rowdy demonstration in front of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh and meeting with Prime Minister Whitlam have all been a clear embarrassment to the Labor Government — a Government which last November promised "to ensure that Aborigines are made equal before the law."

On July 20 last year, Mr. Whitlam described the then Government's forced and furtive removal of the Embassy as "a complete disregard" of the Government's obligations to Parliament.

He said the men and women who established and for seven months manned the Embassy were to be congratulated on their initiative and discipline.

"As a result of their effort, thousands of Australians are now aware that the aspirations of a large section of the Aboriginal population can be satisfied only by recognising their right to land," he said.

The Aborigines believed a Labor Government would be the answer to their prayers. But things have gone wrong within the Government in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

Mr. Whitlam was not happy with the activities of Mr. Gordon Bryant as Aboriginal Affairs Minister. So he removed him in a Cabinet reshuffle and replaced him with Senator Cavanagh, the former Minister of Works who comes from South Australia.

Protests flooded in from Aboriginal groups and then the Aborigines themselves arrived in Canberra to add weight to the protest.

After nine of the Aborigine leaders met Mr. Whitlam in his office on Thursday, one of the leaders, Mr. Paul Coe, from the Aborigine "ghetto" of Redfern in Sydney, said the future of his people depended on the choice of the man who was to look after their affairs.

He was bitter that Mr. Whitlam refused to allow the Aborigines have any say in the choice.

He said the Labor Government was showing the same prejudice towards the Aboriginal population that the McMahon Government, particularly the then Minister for Environment, Aborigines and the Arts (Mr. Howson) had shown.

This was criticism of a Government which has been in power for only 11 months. The Liberals had 23 years to rectify the Aboriginal problem

at — to use the words of Mr. Whitlam in his policy speech — the denial for 180 years of their basic rights in the pursuit of happiness, to liberty and indeed to life itself.

The Aborigines said they had been given the brush-off by Mr. Whitlam and Senator Cavanagh but their 40-minute meeting, which was originally planned for only 15 minutes, did provide an opportunity to air grievances.

Senator Cavanagh promised to speed the process by which Government funds were given for legal aid to all Aborigines who found themselves before the courts. The funds were promised in the Budget but paper work has caused delays.

Mr. Whitlam pledged that his anti-discrimination legislation, which he promised in his election speech and on which he placed great importance, would be enacted by December 10, which will be United Nations' Human Rights Day.

Mr. Whitlam said he would consider a proposal from the Aborigines to give funds for an Aboriginal lobby group situated in Canberra, which virtually would amount to official recognition of the Aboriginal Embassy.

However, Senator Cavanagh would not have a bar of this and the proposal has slim chances of success.

The main reason for the trek to Canberra by the Aborigines was to demonstrate against what they see as the lack of action over land rights.

Mr. Whitlam last year promised to legislate to establish land in Federal territories which would be reserved for Aboriginal use under a system of Aboriginal tenure.

He also promised to establish an Aboriginal land fund to purchase or acquire land for significant, continuing Aboriginal communities.

Mr. Whitlam explained this week progress was being made in both fields, especially with the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission led by Mr. Justice Woodward who brought down an interim report to Mr. Whitlam in July.

The interim report dealt only with the NT and pointed out that the big mining companies operating on tribal lands could be expected to give the Aborigines a financial interest in their projects.

But the Aborigines say this is not enough and the enquiry is moving too slowly. It is true that Mr. Justice Woodward has not been told when to present his final report to the Government.

In the Federal Budget in August, the Treasurer (Mr. Crean) said \$117m. had been allocated for Aboriginal Affairs this year, almost double the amount of last year.

What do the Aborigines think of that? Back to Miss Bobbi Sykes:

"It is a pitiful sum. Most is going back into white pockets through Administration costs."

In the Appropriation Bill which sets out the Government's proposed expenditures, administrative costs for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs is listed at \$87,826,000. But it must be pointed out that all the expenditure in the Department except for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, is listed under this heading.

Salaries and allowances, including overtime, will cost the Government an estimated \$3.9m., compared with an actual expenditure of \$1.4m. last year.

Under the sub-heading of other services, payment to the Aboriginal Advancement Trust Account is \$70,050,000 — compared with \$32,410,000 in 1972-73