

The tents go up again

MONEY alone is not the solution to the problems of Aborigines. Nor is white good will. Labor parliamentarians learnt these lessons last week when an Aboriginal delegation came to Canberra and stayed to re-establish an "embassy" and demonstrate in front of the Queen. The Government was embarrassed and hurt. Hadn't the Labor Opposition attacked Liberal-Country Party shortcomings in dealing with the health, social and economic plight of Aborigines? Hadn't Mr. Whitlam visited the "embassy", made promises and been photographed? Didn't Labor backbenchers watch with dismay and decry with fervor the police dismantling of the embassy?

Yet the tents were up again, this time protesting at Whitlam Government action. There was ugliness and irony in the air as Labor men tried to placate those they had previously championed, and Opposition members, once targets of Aboriginal criticism, now collected ammunition for an attack on the Government. The week, with its climax of black power salutes as the Queen walked by, was the product of many disparate events and factors: Labor Party infighting, conflict between a department and its Minister, the continued existence of that anomalous (but possibly necessary) body, the Council of Aboriginal Affairs. Above all, it was the product of the past and continuing plight of Aborigines.

Such demonstrations can easily be labelled senseless and counter-productive — and so they are, in white Australia's eyes. They annoy the public, they harden politicians, they encourage

a backlash. But to dismiss them with warranted disapproval is to fail to see their significance and the danger signals they give off. The Aboriginal demand that Mr. Whitlam reinstate Mr. Eryant was a request for the politically impossible but while, on the one hand, the Aborigines in Canberra were politically naive and not sure of what they really wanted, on the other hand they were in part deliberately playing at the politics of confrontation.

Political naivete is understandable and so is the desire for confrontation. Both are rooted in the situation of Aborigines: in economic and educational disadvantage, in cultural deprivation, in a shocking, shameful infant mortality rate. This last matter — the death of black babies and toddlers — is seen as the major index of the failure of white society and its policies on Aborigines. But the greater failure has been the inability of past administrations to see that better Aboriginal health could not be achieved in isolation. It could only come along with greater educational and employment opportunities and the motivation to take advantage of them. It could only come with a regaining of dignity and pride, a discovery of identity.

Such regaining and such discovery is only possible in a climate of white understanding. It is absurd for predominantly affluent and middle-class Australia to expect the children of Redfern or Fitzroy, or station-camps or abysmal Government reserves to conform to polite middle-class patterns of behavior. These are the children of dispossession and deprivation. But it is foolish of the militant urban Aborigines to ignore what is being done by the Government and the damage they do to their own cause.

The Government's policy is based on the concept of community development, with

Aborigines making decisions on the pace and direction of progress. It is a sane policy, one which recognises the rights of Aborigines. But it can only be properly implemented if there is consultation, not confrontation, and if there is trust on both sides. For trust there must be understanding and education — and this applies both to whites and Aborigines. For a start there must be a clearing-up of the administrative and advisory tangle Federally and between the Commonwealth and the States. There must be an investigation of claims of misspending. There must also be a realisation that not all Aboriginal projects can be — or should have to be — economically viable. There will inevitably be losses as Aborigines find their way in strange territory and there will be projects which deserve subsidy because of their social benefits.

Aborigines should have a say in their future and the National Aborigines Consultative Council will give them a voice. But because of the range of their present experience — urban to semi-tribal — we should not expect to hear a united chorus. Because of their past experience with white men and their present grave problems, we should not expect them to say what we would like to hear.