



Federal Opposition Leader, Mr Gough Whitlam, addresses the crowd which assembled at the Aboriginal Embassy at the opening of Parliament.

The Aboriginal Embassy

Its purpose and aims

JOHN NEWFONG

A group of young Aborigines erected tents on the lawns in front of Parliament House on January 26, 1972 — Australia Day — and declared themselves an "Aboriginal Embassy".

The editorial committee of the Aboriginal Publications Foundation feels that this was an important move in Aboriginal affairs and therefore invited Mr John Newfong to explain the purpose and aims of the Embassy. However, his article does not necessarily represent the views of the editorial committee or the Aboriginal Publications Foundation.

With its flags fluttering proudly in the breeze, the Aboriginal Embassy on the lawns opposite the Federal Parliament has been one of the most successful press and parliamentary lobbies in Australian political history.

The tent conference with Federal Opposition Leader, Mr Whitlam, turned out to be one of the greatest coups ever for the Aboriginal advancement movement. Very much to the Embassy's credit is the fact that it managed to get

such a heavy commitment from a party seemingly so close to power.

Discussion with the Federal Opposition Leader centred on the Embassy's five-point plan for land rights:

1. Control of the Northern Territory as a State within the Commonwealth of Australia; the parliament in the NT to be predominantly Aboriginal with title and mining rights to all land within the Territory.
2. Legal title and mining rights to all other presently existing reserve lands and settlements throughout Australia.
3. The preservation of all sacred sites throughout Australia.
4. Legal title and mining rights to areas in and around all Australian capital cities.
5. Compensation monies for lands not returnable to

take the form of a down-payment of six billion dollars and an annual percentage of the gross national income.

While the front lawn conference fell far short of gaining everything the Embassy had asked, it nevertheless went a great deal further than most people had expected.

At a press conference immediately after the discussion, Mr Whitlam said that a Labor Government would be committed to a "properly representative body in the Northern Territory with full legislative powers"; to a "complete reversal of the present Government's land rights policy where it denies corporate title to reserve lands"; and to the "protection of all those areas of spiritual significance to the original inhabitants of this country".

A "properly representative body in the NT" must ultimately mean one with a predominance of Aborigines or, at least, one where Aborigines have the balance of power. The figure usually quoted for Aborigines in the NT is 33% of the total population but this was only an estimate for the 1966 census of what the Government chose to call "full-bloods". In 1967, Aborigines became Australians and were eligible, for the first time, to be counted in the census. The only census taken since then was last year but the figures from that are not yet available. Even when they are, they will probably not indicate much of an increase in the Aboriginal population in the NT: the 1971 census gave people a choice to refer to themselves as Aborigines or otherwise but the NT Administration has for so long been deciding who is and who is not Aboriginal, the figures are likely to show only the "full-blood" population when, in fact, black people in the NT are probably three times as many. Earlier this year, however, the Department of the Interior admitted to the Senate Committee on Social Environment that "full-bloods" alone were in a 62% majority in all rural areas of the Territory.

Even without a change in government, with the grass roots political awareness presently developing among Aboriginal people in the outback and with electoral distribution favouring the Aboriginal vote even more than it does the pastoral interests, Black Australians are as likely as the Country Party to have the balance of power, not just in the NT as a State, but in Federal politics also.

The Aboriginal Embassy's claim for full State rights for the NT has been misunderstood in many quarters and its likelihood widely questioned. Mr Whitlam's promise of "full legislative power" seems vague enough to bring to mind his party's desire for a centralised government in Canberra.

However, nobody imagines for one moment that the NT can continue as at present, with the Minister for the Interior in Canberra able to veto all legislation from the Legislative Council in Darwin.

Whenever the NT does become a State — and, like New Guinea, it cannot remain a trusteeship territory forever — it must have the same rather extensive constitutional powers as the other States.

"A properly representative body in the NT with full legislative powers" would be in a position to ensure that



The solidity and gracious lines of Parliament House contrast with the tents of the embassy.

mining developments benefit the people living there; to float loans overseas; to improve educational facilities and, above all, to arrest the spiralling infant mortality rate.

Furthermore, as a State the NT would have a greater say in Federal Government in Australia. A full voting population there would warrant more than the one member for the NT in the House of Representatives as at present and there would also be the six senators to which every other State is entitled. Most of these politicians, like those of the State Parliament in the NT, would be Aboriginal.

There has never been any suggestion that the NT should be or could be an all-black apartheid State — while Black Australia can boast of far better politicians than many of those already in parliament and, in the NT, of many very sophisticated politicians for whom it is not even necessary to articulate in English, there are few trained in senior civil service. For a long time senior administration in the NT will be predominantly white. Moreover, voting patterns in some parts, especially around Darwin, may be similar to those in many parts of Kenya, where some white parts of Nairobi return black members to the National Congress and black parts sometimes return white members.

It would be quite unrealistic for Black Australians to think that black politicians are no more corruptible than white politicians but, with a parliament in the NT that will not only be answerable to urban blacks and urban whites but also to a tribal society, such corruption is apt to be more easily uncovered. And, like black men in Africa who fought so hard for the right to decide their own destiny, black men here will be quick to reject those of their own who fail them.

Outside of the Northern Territory, Aboriginal reserve lands seem even more threatened. Except in South Australia, various State Governments have been fast resuming reserve lands in recent years — no doubt in anticipation of having to grant corporate title to the Aboriginal inhabitants.

Mr Whitlam's promise of a "complete reversal of the present government's land rights policy where it denies corporate title to reserve lands" is more than welcome and in many ways very urgent. However, it makes no provision for mining rights to these areas. In Canada, corporate title and many of the Indian treaties have been superseded by acts of parliament. Without mining rights, one would wish to be certain that the corporate title of which the Federal Opposition Leader speaks will guarantee Aborigines sole rights of access because, otherwise, that corporate title means nothing.

The preservation of all sacred sites throughout Australia is a much simpler matter and should need no further qualification. How would white Australians feel if a black man went into one of their cathedrals and scribbled his name across the altar?

The fourth of the Embassy's demands — title and mining rights to various metropolitan areas — has caused some dismay among white Australians who envisage us digging up their nondescript sprawls of suburbia. However, since the mining rights to most of suburban Brisbane are already owned by major oil companies and it is much the same in other capitals, the whole idea is not as outrageous as it may at first sound.

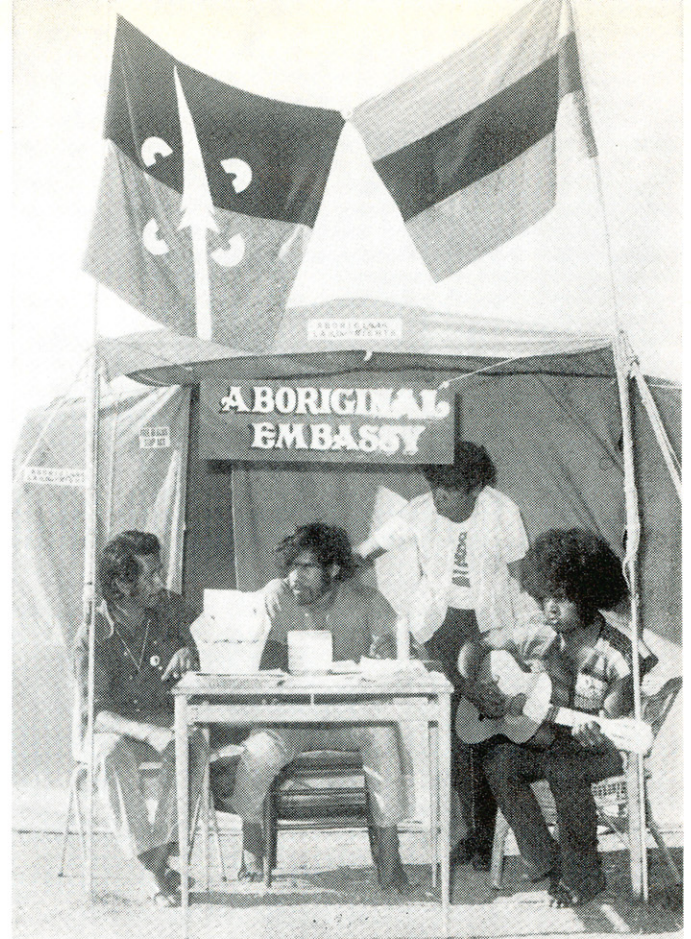
It is a well-known fact that a certain member of the British peerage is enormously wealthy today because one of his ancestors demanded a penny for every ton of coal that went across a small plot of land. Since we are this country's only true aristocrats, it is surely not too much to expect that we should be in a position to do something similar!

The last of the Embassy's demands has been the hardest of all to explain to most people, but this is only because the community at large has been completely conditioned against the fact that there are people in this land whose roots go back 30,000 years and that these people just might have some claim to it.

There is hardly a black man in Australia who would disagree with the Embassy's stand on land rights. Even Senator Bonner, usually very critical of people advocating radical change, said earlier this year, "Until the Government of the day is prepared to recognise our right of prior ownership, everything else is charity."

The figure of six billion dollars was chosen in order to establish in the minds of the white men and their governments not only this right of prior ownership but also our right to compensation.

Compensation in some form has been paid to every other indigenous population in the world. For example, it was from compensation monies of this kind and from dairy and forestry co-operatives on tribal lands that the Maoris of New Zealand were able to finance the Maori Education Foundation — generally acknowledged as one of the finest



Since its inception, the embassy has been staffed by volunteers from all parts of the country.

scholarship schemes in the world today.

Historically, a down-payment of six billion dollars is more than justifiable and, although it might not seem practicable in terms of the annual gross national income, there is no reason why it could not be spread over a set number of years.

The percentage of the annual gross national income mentioned in the last of the five points is also something that any government should consider at least negotiable. For those who think this is far too much to ask for such a small percentage of the population, perhaps it should be pointed out that certain other minorities have fared very well from government handouts over the years. The pastoral interests of this country, so long the black man's burden and so well looked after by the Country Party, get more than \$400 million annually from the Federal purse. Last year, Black Australians, with no land, no education, and the highest infant mortality rate in the world, got \$14 million.

But what everyone wants to know is whether things will be any better under a Labor Government. There are those who believe the benefits will be marginal and those who believe everything will automatically be well. There is one thing of which we are all sure and that is that nobody is going to look after us as well as we can ourselves — and our only problem is finding somewhere to do it.