

# Tough man of the Old Left

guards firmness as a political virtue. Thus he says: "Perkins and the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee now know Cavanagh is determined. There is some admiration for a strong position" — a stance his critics would see as disastrous.

The tough style was epitomised in his threat to cut off the NACC funds when he felt it exceeded its brief, and his call in January for Charles Perkins to be charged with a breach of the Public Service Act for his attack on the Government in general and Cavanagh and the Minister for the Northern Territory (Dr. Patterson) in particular.

However, a certain flexibility also comes through Cavanagh's dealing with the NACC, to which he is willing to give some, but not much power. Cavanagh's relations with this body are very much a test of strength for both sides. Cavanagh knows this. The tragedy of the situation is that for the Aborigines the battle symbolises a great deal, and any rebuff they receive appears to them as a white slap in the face rather than a short-term political reversal.

Senator Cavanagh, who this year will be standing for re-election for what will be his last Senate term, knows that his portfolio is considered a sure way to political suicide. He is also aware he faces hostility from many Aborigines, although he would argue that support for him is growing.

At present he has only two things going in his favor. One is his basic sense of justice, his feeling for the underdog. The other is that in spite of his age and his background he is a quick learner, a man with a keen mind.

He came into office with no knowledge to speak of about Aboriginal problems. He has already learned a good deal. The big test is whether he can emerge from the limits of his past and his experience to come to grips with the more demanding and elusive problems of Aboriginal Affairs.

"JIM CAVANAGH'S granite face reflects the fact that he has gone through pretty traumatic experiences in his youth and in his industrial life — and they've made him tougher all the way. They've also made him determined to do the Aboriginal Affairs job in his own way."

This summing up comes from a young South Australian Labor Party activist who has observed and debated with Senator Cavanagh in Labor Party conferences for several years. It contains some clues to the character of the man who is now responsible for the politically sensitive Aboriginal Affairs portfolio.

Despite being thrown to the centre of the national stage since he was lifted out of the obscurity of the Works Ministry, Senator James Luke Cavanagh is among the least known of the 27 Labor Ministers. Yet, to understand his handling of Aboriginal Affairs, it is essential to know his background, which has determined both his attitudes and his political style.

Cavanagh, 60, is one of the last of the "Old Left" members of the Labor Party — a man moulded in the union tradition, a product of the conscription era and the Depression, of the days when the Labor Movement was battling for bread and butter gains in wages and working conditions.

His father was a boiler maker and a Labor Party activist who led the anti-conscription campaign in South Australia during the first world war.

When he finished school at 14 (a Catholic parish school — although Cavanagh long ago dropped Catholicism). He became a plasterer and a union activist.

As secretary of the South Australian Plasterers' Union from 1946 to 1962 (when he was elected to the Senate), he was regarded as a tough and militant unionist who won many advances for his members. He was an effective advocate (colleagues point

out he is a "good bush lawyer") and his "Left-wing" credentials were good enough to have the Chifley Government ban him from a visit to the Woomera rocket range as a "security risk".

His early experiences, and particularly his union career, have made Cavanagh able to grasp the material problems of Aborigines much more easily than their psychological needs. He can come to terms with the tribal Aborigines who have pressing problems but retain at least some of their cultural security, but flounders when trying to understand the urban blacks, who are struggling with the question of what is and should be their relationship with white society. Cavanagh's thinking usually tends to settle where possible on the tangible, rather than on the more elusive problems of identity.

**T**he most important things the Government can do for Aborigines, he says, are to give them land rights and to get them involved in their own affairs.

Senator Cavanagh separates tribal and urban Aborigines in his approach to policy. For Aborigines in the cities, the problem is "assimilation into secondary industry," while "the tribal policy must centre around the development of farming".

Talking of the city blacks, he retreats to the tangible. "They have elected to have become part of the white community when

they come to the cities. The whole complaint of the urban Aborigine is that they are not given the same opportunities to compete in the white man's society as are given to the European. The Government must help them compete more effectively."

Here is the old socialist ethic — Cavanagh well understands this fight for survival and decent employment which accords with all his personal experience and instincts.

Despite his own militant record — in union affairs and during the anti-Vietnam-war campaign of the 1960s — Cavanagh has little rapport with the Aboriginal militants. Questioned on the seeming contradiction, he says. "I support their right to protest. They have done a job and brought their ideas before the public. I am only critical of the use of violence, which I don't think is to the character of the Aboriginal people, but is a product of the big white man's cities."

At the same time, he points to "many undesirable happenings," for example "self-seeking advancement" that have occurred in some urban Aboriginal groups.

Here Cavanagh the party activist seems to be translating his own experience to a situation it fits only partly, if at all.

In the South Australian Labor Party, Cavanagh was the man always anxious to expose the behind-the-scenes deals and manoeuvres. His interpretations of the politics of Aboriginal groups appear to be in much the same terms. He fails to recognise fully

the cry of protest, the inevitable, emotional lashing out at white society that is coming from many of the black militants — a call for recognition that can never be quieted by material solutions.

Cavanagh's political associates describe him as tough, "the man of principle", who always stood for doctrinaire purity in the party councils. Cavanagh himself claims he won his Cabinet position because of "recognition of honesty" and certainly he got it without the support of the Prime Minister (Mr. Whitlam).

**H**OWEVER, when Mr. Whitlam was looking for someone to replace the hapless Gordon Bryant in the portfolio, it was Cavanagh to whom he turned. No one could have been more unlike the warm, emotional Mr. Bryant, a man with a deep attachment to the Aboriginal cause and a belief that funds and good will would solve most problems.

Whitlam chose Cavanagh partly because of his administrative ability — as a union secretary he is remembered as the methodical type who kept an eye on the stamp money — an ability vital in a department in the grips of an administrative shambles. The other main attraction of Cavanagh was his toughness, which was to counterbalance and answer the growing white backlash in the Labor Party itself.

While Bryant was easygoing, with great faith in talk and communication, Cavanagh openly re-