

A BOLD, BLACK EXPERIMENT

Canberra talks plant seeds of success

From TONY HILL

CANBERRA. — Given the explosive nature of aboriginal politics over the past couple of months, there was every possibility that the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee would have fallen apart by the time its third meeting finished in Canberra on Friday. It did not do so.

Indeed, there are even some hopeful indications that the NACC — this brave experiment in aboriginal participation — planted the seeds of some lasting success.

There is always the chance of future conflict with the Government over its draft constitution.

But it is significant that the NACC, while it agreed "in principle" with the amended constitution, avoided voting this week to force a showdown, and further meetings will be held with the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Cavanagh.

There are two reasons for belief that the NACC has some prospect of success.

In the first place, a fairly healthy respect for each other has emerged from the confrontation last month between Senator Cavanagh, and the 41 elected members of the NACC.

And in retrospect, the tough line adopted by Senator Cavanagh, when he threatened to withhold delegates' salaries in the dispute over the future role of the NACC, can be seen to have had some advantages on both sides.

It is a point taken by Senator Cavanagh himself: "Possibly as a result of previous confrontation, we both realise we have a common aim in the progress and improvement of the aboriginals," he said.

"With such unity of purpose, we must be in agreement."

For the NACC, this has meant that the aboriginals are no longer demanding Senator Cavanagh's immediate resignation, and they feel he is now more prepared to listen to them and talk to them.

One delegate, known as something of a militant, said privately and with some astonishment this week, that it was a

"different Cavanagh" from the one he previously knew, at the conference table.

And the NACC's most vocal spokesman, Mr Bruce McGuinness, from Victoria, admitted that he no longer believed Senator Cavanagh was "ignorant" on aboriginal affairs, that he had a "better insight" into aboriginals, and that some of his statements on aboriginal drinking were now "almost acceptable."

Senator Cavanagh has himself made considerable concessions to the NACC.

He said he was not opposed to the NACC controlling the expenditure of its own \$1.5 million annual budget.

He has raised no opposition to the proposal to change the body's name to the National Aboriginal Congress, or to the statement of power, contained in its draft constitution, which claims a far wider role for the NACC than a mere advisory capacity.

Certainly he regards such claims as "aspirations" at this stage, and he has pointed to some serious defects in the present moves to set up an executive body of nine "ministers" — a proposal which he believes could lead the 41 delegates to sign their power away to a "junta".

The NACC has accepted some of Cavanagh's arguments (although they say they will not be "dictated to") and have agreed in principle to some amendments.

For example, the council of ministers is likely to be increased from nine



Mr McGuinness



Sen. Cavanagh

to 11 members, cheques will have to be signed by three members of the NACC, instead of only one, and some other safeguards have been proposed.

That this is so is a sign of the second important development at this week's NACC conference.

Despite the obvious difficulties of comprehension by some of the tribal delegates, and after the opening bombast, the NACC is beginning to grapple with the complexities of working within a political framework.

As a result, the statements in the public session this week have been significantly moderate in tone and conciliatory in their implications.

And the recommendations put forward by the nine sub-committees to the minister have for the most part been well received as modest and achievable ambitions.

They were proposals, for example, that newspapers and radios should publish one aboriginal word a day; that an aboriginal co-operative building society be established; that social workers should be appointed at all aboriginal missions and settlements, and that a research program be held into the effects of alcohol on aboriginal society.

Recommendations call-

ing for full compensation in both rural and city areas for loss of land rights will probably be seen as largely rhetorical, and so will the resolution calling for a national aboriginal congress cultural centre and headquarters on Canberra's Capitol Hill.

At the same time, however, Senator Cavanagh will probably agree to recommend to Cabinet that a secretariat be set up to service the NACC, though perhaps not with quite the elaborate bureaucratic structure envisaged by the delegates.

Yet he has agreed that the 41 delegates should have office space in their electorates, with some part-time staff, and he will press for a better deal from Treasury to help the delegates buy transport.

These have been genuine and pressing complaints with the NACC, and their resolution will ease some of the tensions between the movement and the Labor Government.

But for most observers, the most heartening development this week was the fact that more of the 41 members of the NACC are now beginning to play some part in the discussions of the conference.

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