

Aboriginal land fight like the Deep South

IN the early 1960s Australians were treated to newspaper photographs of State governors in the American South standing in school doorways to prevent black children entering the classrooms.

In some cases State police had been called out to support this defiance of Federal integration legislation.

Many Australians were shocked not by the display of race hatred but by the depth of division between Americans and the southern citizen's sense of alienation from the Federal Government.

The same Australians should be equally disturbed by the confrontation developing between the Queensland and Federal Governments.

The Queensland Premier, Mr. Bjelke-Petersen, and his National Party and Liberal colleagues, have flatly declared their opposition to the Federal Government's Aboriginal land rights legislation.

Using their State powers to block the transfer of leases for land bought by the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission, the Queensland politicians have totally frustrated Federal law.

Mr. Bjelke-Petersen does not have a State guard he can call out to cordon off land titles offices, but if he could we would get a better understanding of Queenslanders' sense of difference and the resentment many feel towards southerners who tell them how to run their State.

Mr. Bjelke-Petersen's recent warning to land titles officers to beware Federal agents using unofficial names to secure leases which would then be "slipped to the blacks" reflects his distrust of the Federal Government and the seriousness of the dispute.

Queensland's attitude to giving land to blacks was outlined clearly in 1972 when State Cabinet declared that sufficient land was

already available to Aborigines in the form of reserves and further transfers would be opposed.

Last December the Lands Minister, Mr. Tomkins, elaborated on State Government policy, saying "the Government does not view favorably proposals to acquire large areas of additional freehold or leasehold land for development by Aboriginal groups in isolation.

"If this policy were extended to north Queensland it would thus create a total black State across the whole of the northern part of Australia, surely apartheid in extreme, a situation which the Queensland Government will not tolerate."

The Queensland policy has completely disrupted attempts by the ALFC to buy two properties.

The first is a 1160-square-kilometre property at Archer River on Cape York Peninsula. The Archer River pastoral holding, owned by Rokeby Cattle Company, is adjacent to the Arakun Aboriginal reserve. Purchase price was \$60,000 for scrubby land on which cattle run wild.

The company owner, Mr. J. Broinowski, wanted to sell and moved equipment off the land so blacks could move on to it. Thirty have already done so.

The other property comprises three leases — one freehold and two leaseholds — at Murray Upper, near Townsville. The Queensland Government has no power to block the freehold purchase but has refused the lease transfers.

The ALFC was given every indication the transfers would be approved and it handed over \$210,000 for all three leases. At the last minute the transfer was blocked and the ALFC is faced with the problem of recovering the \$60,000 paid for the leasehold land.

Blacks have already moved on to part of the disputed property and are successfully growing bananas.



From **DAVID BROADBENT,** in Canberra

The ALFC has other Queensland properties in mind but almost all of them are leasehold, giving the State Government a permanent power to veto.

Queensland is the only State which has yet to hand responsibility for Aboriginal affairs over to the Federal Government and its stand on land rights is in stark contrast to the rest of Australia.

Since it was established under the Land Fund Act of 1974, the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission has spent \$3.2 million on 24 properties in New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. A further \$1.6 million has been spent on moveable property on land bought.

The most recent commission purchase was a 125-hectare property at Baroona, near Echuca, for which the fund paid \$200,000. Blacks in the area plan to set up an alcoholics' drying-out centre, a youth centre, recreation area and sports area on the property with money they raise themselves.

Three of the West Australian properties stretch over more than half a million hectares while the five NSW properties range from a fully operational sheep farm near the Queensland border to a tiny patch of land outside Taree for a community hall.

The commission has five members — three blacks and two whites — who are compelled by their charter to satisfy normal bargaining processes when buying land.

Priorities are not necessarily

economic because some land is bought for its tribal sacredness and other land for its agricultural viability.

The Queensland stand-off is developing as a major test of Prime Minister Fraser's Co-operative federalism policies, and his Aboriginal policies in particular.

For some time Mr. Fraser has claimed a special interest in blacks, a claim his Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Mr. Viner, and senior departmental officials are quick to declare is the truth.

Mr. Viner's approach to the never have been a Land Rights Act under this Government without Mr. Fraser's vigorous support.

Yet the Federal Government's failure to do anything except complain about Mr. Bjelke-Petersen is making these claims look thin.

Mr. Viner's approach to the issue has been to declare the matter "under review" and doggedly refuse to give any information about his plans.

According to his department, any public statements by Mr. Viner would only force Mr. Bjelke-Petersen to "dig his heels in" and fight harder. Anything but the most subtle of approaches would spell disaster.

That claim brought laughter from the Premier's office.

"When Mr. Viner says it is under review he means he has run into a brick wall," a member of Mr. Bjelke-Petersen's staff said.

"They are beaten and they know it. The Government has stated its policy and the leases will not be transferred, full stop."

Another Queensland official took the opportunity to ridicule the prices being offered by the commission for "scrubby land which is so useless not even the hippies will live there".

"Everybody down there is an expert, but not even Mr. Viner really knows what his department does up here," the official said.

Some Federal Liberal backbenchers accept the argument that money is being squandered and Mr. Bjelke-Petersen is trying to exploit differences of opinion about land rights among backbenchers.

The Minister for the Northern Territory, Mr. Adermann, is known for little else but his opposition to land rights and is known to support the Queensland position.

With Mr. Bjelke-Petersen applying pressure on the National Country Party leader, Mr. Anthony, to soften the Federal attitude, Mr. Fraser and Mr. Viner may feel it is easier to let the whole thing drift until moods change.

Such an attitude could be seen only as defeat for Mr. Fraser's co-operative federalism programme.