

# Aboriginals in 'appalling conditions'

By ROBERT DREWE

A dusty Aboriginal settlement without a water supply seems an unlikely place for a Queen's Counsel and law faculty dean to spend his holiday weekend.

But Professor J. H. Wootton (right), dean of the law faculty at the University of New South Wales, is glad he spent last weekend at the Toomelah settlement, near Bogabilla, on the NSW-Queensland border.

"It was certainly an eye-opener," he said yesterday.

"This was my first experience of an Aboriginal settlement.

"I will visit others and see as many Aboriginal problems first-hand as I can."

Professor Wootton visited the settlement with a group of Sydney Aboriginals and students "to extend my knowledge" with a view to setting up a legal aid service for Aboriginals.

In Sydney yesterday, Professor Wootton described "the deplorable state in which Toomelah has been allowed to exist."

One problem he said, called for immediate public protest.

"A community of 250 people, including many young children, has been left for two weeks already without a water supply and the situation is continuing.

"The houses, which the Aboriginals rent from the NSW Government, are seriously overcrowded.

## WAIT FOR TANKS

"They average 10 people to each two-roomed house and there are no rainwater tanks.

"The houses don't even have guttering or downpipes.

"Their only water is pumped from the Macintyre River and reticulated from an overhead tank.

"The supply is controlled by the landlord — the NSW Government.

"For two weeks the pump has been out of action and the houses have no water supply at all.

"The black residents carry bottles to fill at rainwater tanks behind a wired-up gate at the welfare office, climbing through a wire fence and uncertain of their reception."

The local schoolmaster had let them draw on the school's specially purchased supplies during limited hours.

Professor Wootton said he would not criticise the delay in restoring the pump because "no one would want to inflict the muddy floodwaters on anyone."

"What is appalling is the failure to purchase readily available good quality bore water to maintain the supply," he said.

"This simple solution was



Department when the school supply was cut off, but apparently the Welfare Department doesn't consider the maintenance of home supplies worth the trouble or expense.

"Apparently the Aboriginals were promised rainwater tanks long ago but they have never arrived.

"One would think it would be elementary in that sort of country to have these tanks."

Toomelah was "a very unhappy community" because of many factors.

Severe overcrowding, unemployment and lack of facilities were "dragging down" the Aboriginals' spirits even more than the lack of water.

Mr F. M. Hewitt, MLC, the NSW Minister for Social Welfare and Child Welfare, whose portfolio includes Aboriginal affairs, said last night that floods had caused the water shortage.

"Normally, the water supply at Toomelah is quite adequate, with reticulation to all houses through a filtration plant," he said.

A Public Works Department engineer had been sent from Tamworth to fix the pump and the Welfare Department had been instructed to buy water from nearby residents with bores and carry it to the settlement in tankers.

"This system will continue until the pump is working," Mr Hewitt said.

"The NSW Government concedes that these settlements are a problem. We have 40 of them altogether — practically all sub-standard."

The Government was trying to phase them out and would rehouse about 200 families this year.

The Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Wentworth, declined to comment on the Toomelah situ-