

An issue not to be ignored much longer

THE ABORIGINALS have been "camping" in their "embassy" on the lawns opposite Parliament House for just over a month.

It has already become an institution, with garden parties and speeches, and something of a tourist attraction. Mr Whitlam has not been the only visitor of importance, though I for one have some difficulty in deciding just what precise promises he has made on behalf of a potential Labor Government and just what these might mean in terms of concrete action.

Those who attended the recent conference on racism and education in Queensland brought back conflicting reports, but at least my informants all agreed on some points.

The first is that developments among Aborigines are now much faster than they were even a few months ago. There is a good deal of advanced debate and a relatively large group of vocal Aborigines, each, in their own way, expressing their interests as they see them and having to rely less and less on advice and assistance from whites.

The second is that the growing number of Aborigines who are vocal are suspicious of any kind of manipulation - including manipulation by radicals. Many of them in Brisbane criticised a number of rival radical "stars" for trying to fashion a white man's version of what Aboriginal identity really means. They thus rejected radical paternalism in the same breath as they attacked the paternalism of the Government.

Finally, it seems also clear that no one can as yet say with any confidence that this or such-and-such an organisation represents or speaks for the Aborigines. While there is beginning to be a growing solidarity against whiteness, this, as yet, does not mean much agreement among Aborigines on anything else.

They are still divided and still vent a good deal of aggression not on the white man but on fellow Aborigines. Of course, it is a quite different question just what these divisions are based on, to what extent (if any) they are fostered and encouraged by the Government, and how far, on the contrary, they are endogenous.

On this rather crucial issue I do not have sufficient reliable information to form any worthwhile opinion and, for the present, can only suspend judgment. It is perhaps worth noting that the small band of Australian radicals are also split into endless sects and sectlets.

I don't just refer to the three parties now all claiming to be the true Communist Party. The Trots (Trotskyists to the uninitiated) are split into at least four little groups, and in Melbourne, if nowhere else, the Maoists are also deeply divided. The ASIO chaps must be having some trouble keeping up with it all.

Not are divisions confined to blacks or sections of the left. I've forgotten just now how many feuding organisations Menzies finally

managed to bring together as the Liberal Party of Australia, but rather fancy it was 14 or 15.

In spite of the divisions and the absence of a national leader, a number of developments related to Aborigines seem predictable.

First, the whole issue of violence is bound to get increased attention. We will have to go, on a minor scale, through the debate which has taken place for years now in other advanced industrialised societies.

It is not hard to state the major issue: To what extent is violence to be seen as something involving physical force and practised illegally, by those at the bottom of the social pyramid against the people on top of them?

How far, on the contrary, does it make sense to think of a whole social system as embodying institutionalised violence in such a way that law and order become agents and supporters of it?

While the key issue can be stated thus, and stated briefly, any kind of rational discussion of it has not even started in Australia. So far we have mostly had mere foaming at the mouth.

It would probably be true to say that most Australians cannot even see that law and order might be supporting rather than opposing "violence." The very way I've stated one key problem would strike them as nutty. To them, there can be only one definition and conception of violence - that given by the authorities.

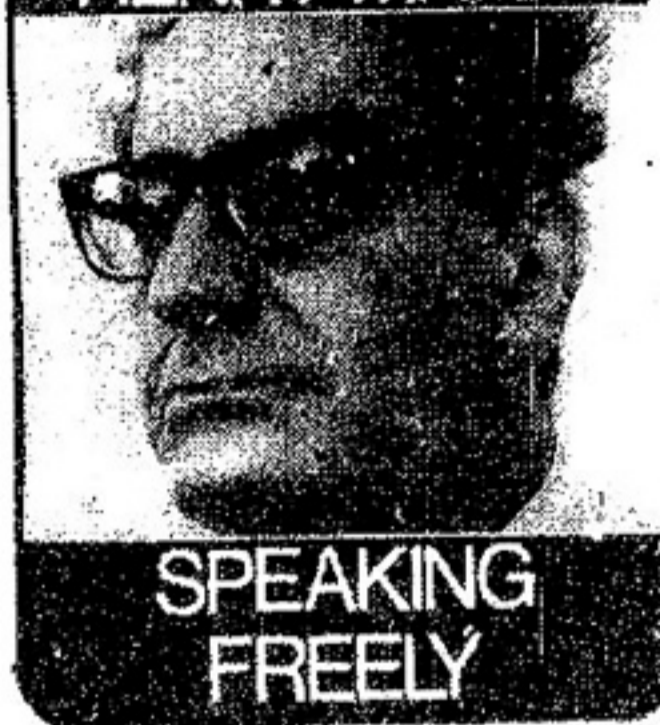
Second, a lot of people will feel, to put it very mildly, highly uncomfortable when they have to think openly in terms of color. It is, for a kind-hearted, soft-standard progressive, not too hard to say that color is irrelevant.

It will be quite a different thing when the very same people get rejected by blacks just because they are white. They will be torn between saying they understand why this is happening, even saying (some of them) that they feel it is necessary and also feeling that it is hurtful, unjustified, irrational, and, in the Australian context where there are few Aborigines, disastrous from the angle of the very group which goes in for the rejection.

Not is this the end of it - the next step is to feel guilty for feeling resentful, wondering whether this is "disguised racism" and being utterly perplexed about how they should feel let alone think and act.

At the moment, this may seem a minor issue. Not, I think tomorrow, the whole issue of solidarity in terms of color will arise in a much wider context, one which links the position of Aborigines here with that of the indigenous people of Papua New Guinea. You are bound to get some New Guineans differing sharply - to put it at the most

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SPEAKING FREELY

conservative assumption level -- with others.

I don't want to go on and on with imaginary scenarios and work out possible clashes between some Aborigines and some New Guineans and so on. It would be easy.

Having no desire whatever to offer any neat and slick "solutions" to such extremely complex problems I will end with what seems to me an uninspiring but serious point: most Australians, even among the well-read and well-educated elite, have not even started to think about such issues in a theoretical way, let alone to work out what might happen here.

The comfortable assumption has been that it's marginal; that we can, when it comes to the crunch, go on being ostriches or, at worst, make it an issue in school debates and newspaper columns.

A lot of people are going to find out pretty soon how long they have been asleep. They will have an extremely painful awakening.

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