

MPs in dilemma over land rights

A COMMITTEE of Federal Ministers is trying to find a face saving formula with which to announce that the Government has rejected the principle of land rights for Aborigines.

The Prime Minister, Mr McMahon, was expected to announce the Government's decision during the last week of Parliament but did not do so.

A statement is now not likely before Parliament resumes at the end of February.

Officials of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs are convinced that their fight to get the Government to recognise land rights based on the principle of traditional occupancy has failed.

The Commonwealth is unlikely to go much farther than granting rights to Aborigines to use land on reserves in the Northern Territory and then only when they can establish that the land will be put to economic use.

This policy was introduced by the Department of the Interior earlier this year and several applications have already been approved for cattle stations on reserves to be worked by Aborigines.

The announcement of the decision will embarrass Mr McMahon.

He appeared to favor granting land rights. The case for the Aborigines was strongly pressed by the chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr H. C. Coombs, Mr McMahon's personal adviser.

As a concession to Dr Coombs, the ministerial committee might agree to buy land outside reserves for use by Aborigines.