

The Canberra Times

Friday, July 21, 1972

A TURNING POINT

THE "Aboriginal embassy" issue cries out for clarification. It is clouded with emotion, ignorance, prejudice, party politics, and double standards. What should be understood is why the "embassy" was there, why it stayed so long, and why it was removed. The issue of the "embassy", must be separated from the issue of Aboriginal rights: they are not one and the same.

First, Australians have sympathy for the Aborigines and their plight. This was shown by their reaction to the 1967 referendum which proposed, in part, that Aborigines be counted in the census and that the Commonwealth acquire superior power in the matter of legislation for Aborigines, until then a State responsibility within the States. Electors in all States voted in favour of the proposals. But sympathy is not enough, and Australians in general have never had much more than sympathy. If they had, enough pressure would have been put on the Federal Government since 1967 to achieve the actions which would have removed the need for a protest such as that mounted by the Aborigines in their "embassy". But what has happened since 1967? There has been progress, but it has been confused, reluctant, and inadequate. The Minister for the Interior, Mr Hunt, the Minister responsible for the Northern Territory and for the ACT ordinance which made the siting of the "embassy" illegal, said last night that his Government had done more for Aborigines than any other. No doubt Mr Hunt was right, but he was comparing a little with virtually nothing: the apathy of Australians toward the Aborigine through the years of colonial government and 67 years of State and Federal Government resulted in only minute gains for them in economic, social, and political terms.

In short, Australians have done little but pay lip service to a cause which cries out for humane and determined intervention on a large scale, as this newspaper has been asking for for years. The appalling apathy of Australians led directly to the establishment of the "embassy".

Second, the "embassy" was a dignified and effective protest. It was effective partly because of the novelty of the protesters' race (Aborigines don't fight back), partly because of the public sympathy which made its presence a delicate political problem for the Government, and partly because of its dramatic position in front of Parliament House. However, it should never have been allowed to stay there. It should have been moved immediately. It is everybody's right to protest in front of the House of Parliament; it is not everybody's right to live in front of the House on land which belongs to all the people, or perhaps live on the steps, or move into King's Hall. A line must be drawn, and it would have been drawn a long time ago if the campers had been, say, Nazis, bankrupt graziers, or out-of-work fascist academics.

Third, it is legitimate for both Government and Opposition to score political points from the issue, if they can. But it ought to be remembered that the Liberal Party has never had an aggressive policy in favour of bringing Aborigines out of their miserable half-world; Mr Hunt's party, the Country Party, has consistently opposed with fine 19th century logic the concept of Aboriginal land rights; and the Labor Party, in its years in office, did not consider the Aborigine worthy of the vote.

The "embassy" made its point, and made it well. The destruction of the "embassy" will win more sympathy for the Aboriginal cause: it may even lead Australians to acquire something more than sympathy. Further, it will lead to a harder-nosed attitude among the Aborigines themselves. It may even prove to be a turning point, and that would be a good thing indeed.