

A price on our guilt

WHAT we celebrate as Australia Day is for the Aboriginal race the anniversary of history's enormous calamity 184 years ago. To choose that day as the occasion to announce a Government decision on the intensely felt issue of Aboriginal land rights is to invite the full judgment of historical perspective on the decision. If the decision should fall seriously short of the Aboriginals' deepest desires, January 26 is only reinforced as the day of defeat in their calendar, and the announcement would take its place for them as another part of the white man's voluminous gasbagging for the edification of white men on this anniversary day.

The Prime Minister obviously believes he has avoided that kind of offensiveness, and some will agree with him. If fair words, fine sentiments and vaguely large financial allocations were what the occasion needed, they would be right. What is missing is the guts of a historic act. Once again, everything has been decided in terms of what white men regard as reasonable, not what the recipients feel. No amount of fringe improvements on paper in the new programme changes the fact that the central issue was and remains the specific one of Yirrkala land, whether occupation rights would pass irrevocably from white men to black — either by outright transfer of ownership or perpetual lease — for the first time since Phillip's landing. It is unnecessary to reiterate why this is profoundly different from telling the present Yirrkala people they can go on using the area. The whole weight of advice from the Government's appointed Council of Aboriginal Affairs was that the transfer could and should be made out of respect for that people's sense of identification with the land. Until this is done, Australia can be pointed to as the only country which offers no land rights to its native people.

Mr McMahon's reason for refusal is studded with conditionals and subjunctives: the transfer "would introduce a new and probably confusing component, the implications of which could not clearly be foreseen and which could lead to uncertainty and possible challenge in relation to land titles elsewhere in Australia which are at present unquestioned and secure." He means the question of precedent could bother some pastoralists, including overseas groups who have been leased enormous areas without a qualm. In fact, it has been pointed out repeatedly that the risks of such a precedent are infinitesimal when Yirrkala is in Crown reserve land and not on lease to anybody. Right now, Australia is paying great sums to support sections of the pastoral industry, and this newspaper has argued that these people in their difficulties deserve to be treated as an integral part of the nation. It would be a small price to ask Country Party leaders to pay in return that they do not impede the national expression of understanding to the small and materially poorest group among us.

The alternative set of fringe proposals outlined in Mr McMahon's statement are not very remarkable when considered as the fruit and culmination of the massive expression of public opinion in the 1967 referendum. How much they will be converted from paper to real improvements depends on the driving purpose of the present minister in charge of Aboriginal affairs and his administrators. About that, we can join Dr Coombs in expressing earnest, agnostic hope.