

The grassroots protest

By ROBERT MILLIKEN in Canberra

"THIS PIECE of land was vacant and I liked the look of it." In the succinct words of Michael Anderson, aged 20, that is how Canberra came to get its first "Embassy" for Aborigines.

Mr Anderson is the self-proclaimed leader of 15 young Sydney Aborigines camped for more than two weeks on what is probably the choicest piece of land in Australia—the green lawns opposite Parliament House itself.

Their protest —against the Federal Government's non-recognition of traditional native land rights — is the first of its kind in Canberra by Aborigines and undoubtedly signals the emergence of Australia's black minority as their own pressure group.

They have vowed to stay encamped indefinitely, or until they secure a guarantee of Government action on the issue.

The protest is clearly causing embarrassment to the Federal Government because of both its duration and size. In the past few days it has grown into a mini-shanty town of 11 tents right on the Government's doorstep. It has been conspicuously in the vision of two visiting VIPs, Indonesia's President Soeharto and the US Armed Forces Chief of Staff, General Westmoreland.

The Government, probably wary of the political consequences of a confrontation between police and Aborigines, has made no moves to disband the embassy, even though it has power to do so under the loitering provisions of an Act ordinance. The Department of the Interior says only that there is no plan to invoke the provision "at present."

And still the embassy grows. Each day hundreds of Parliament House tourists flock



Michael Anderson: "My people need spokesmen."

across the road to photograph and talk to the Aborigines.

This week, the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Whitlam, held talks with Mr Anderson and a colleague, Mr John Newfong, and declared afterwards a Labor Government would immediately reverse the present Government's policy on land rights.

The protesters have also received calls from three other Federal Labor MPs, Mr K. E. Enderby, Mr G. M. Bryant and Dr D. N. Everingham.

The Aborigines' possessions are modest: sleeping bags, blankets and a table. Sydney

most of their food and drink.

They have received 40 telegrams and letters from unionists, academics and citizens supporting their cause and have collected 644 signatures on a petition to be presented to Parliament later this month.

When I visited the embassy, it was a hive of activity. Mr Anderson and his colleagues were in heated argument about land rights with a passing British tourist.

There was a lull as a well-dressed, middle-aged lady with a corgi drove up and carried over her contribution — a basket full of fruit, vegetables and soft drink. Michael Anderson, the

Aborigines' "ambassador," comes from Walgett, NSW, has curly black hair and always wears a black shirt. He began an electrical engineering course at a Sydney technical college, but has since been fully devoted to Aboriginal causes "because I saw the need for my people to have spokesmen."

Why is he protesting? "We are not happy with the Prime Minister's recent statement offering Aborigines special purpose leases on our traditional land. We want to own it," he says.

"We regard this land in front of Parliament House as ours. Our people own no land in Australia, not even the reserves they have been pushed on to. If need be, I will stay here all year."

The group is demanding that the Government grant Aborigines mineral rights to all traditional land, provide compensation for the loss of land and recognise all Aboriginal sacred sites.

Mr Anderson calls the Canberra protest the Young Aboriginal Movement because he wants it to appeal to black youth, without having overtones of violence associated with the Queensland-based Black Power movement.

Over the next two weeks, the protest will be joined by more Aborigines from Sydney and the Queensland movement, culminating in a rally on the lawn when Parliament resumes on February 22.

Mr Anderson insists the protest will remain peaceful: any Aboriginal who provokes violence will be dismissed from the camp.

But he does not care to predict how long his moderate stand will last. "I don't want to get involved with violence — at this stage," he says.

"We will submit our policy to the Government on land rights, and if they don't take it up we will stay here until they do."

But if we don't get what we want eventually...