

# Aborigines standing firm at 'embassy'



At the "embassy" yesterday: John Newfong, Vickie Marshall, and her husband, Brian.

From  
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CANBERRA, Monday.—The sleeping bags were airing in the sun, the blankets were being taken to the laundry and the usual tourists were taking the usual photos.

It was business as usual at the "Aboriginal embassy", the shanty town across the road from Parliament House.

Not that there was much activity. Four of the nine "embassy" members had gone to work.

Six tents still stand, the Aboriginal flag and the red, green and black international Black Unity flag still fly, but the numbers have changed and dwindled.

The Quakers no longer deliver breakfast.

The green grass of summer has turned to brown and "embassy-land" is not as picturesque as it used to be.

Garbage and empties outside the kitchen tent await removal. The postman calls but the garbage collector does not.

The days of the three-and-a-half-month-old "embassy" may be numbered.

Last week, the Minister for the Interior, Mr Hunt, proposed a new ordinance making it an offence to camp on unleased Commonwealth land in Canberra.

The change of law would apply to areas around Parliament House, he said.

The Aborigines have no intention of folding their tents.

Mr John Newfong, a former journalist, and spokesman for the group does not think they are in danger.

"If they do try to get rid of us it will probably be early on a Sunday morning when the press is not around," he said.

"But I don't think they will try to. It would be too politically dangerous. Why not wait until after the elections?"

If the Government does try to evict them, he says, protests can be organised by telephone in Sydney and Melbourne.

Dr J. F. Cairns and 25 other Labour MPs and senators have pledged to protect them — physically if necessary.

Mr Newfong, a striking figure in a cloak made out of a bright checked blanket, has replaced the original "high commissioner," Mr Michael Anderson, 20, who with Mr Billy Craigie, 19, and Mr Kevin Johnston, 21, established the camp on Australia Day, this year.

There has been plenty of in-fighting and Mr Anderson is no longer a member of the group.

Mr Craigie and Mr Johnston have returned to their technical college studies.

Twenty other "embassy" members have come and gone.

Titles such as "high commissioner" and "minister for defence" are no longer used. "They are too gimmicky and detract from the seriousness of the protest," Mr Newfong said.

He denies that the "embassy" has outlived its usefulness.

He agrees that it is continuing to win support for Aboriginal land rights claims and that it continues to embarrass the Government.

A good deal of his time seems to be spent giving interviews to French, English, Canadian and American journalists.

A Japanese television crew has just completed an hour-long documentary.

Letters regularly arrive from Black America and Black Africa. Gifts have included Polynesian carvings and a fly swat from Kenya.

Mr Newfong talks of the possibility of prefabricated wooden huts replacing the tents and of plans for a corroboree on July 14 — National Aboriginal Day as well as Bastille Day.

"If people think this is an eyesore, well it is the way it is on Government settlements.

"The place is beginning to look as tired as we are. We are all bored. We all wish we were in other places doing other things. But we know we have to stay here until we get what we want.

"So far we've only had promises. We want to see what happens after the election.

"They ask us how are we going to survive the Canberra winter and we point out that it is cold here but Aborigines at a reserve not far from here live under corrugated iron in worse conditions—and nobody brings them blankets and hot coffee."

Mr Newfong says that Canberra's attitude towards the "Embassy" has been mostly one of goodwill.

"There is the offensive small minority who drive past shouting things like 'Get back to your flagons' or 'Go home, you boongs' but we just shout back 'We're home, baby, you go home'."

Last week, a grazier told them that all they were after was a handout.

Never slow with the rejoinder, Mr Newfong said: "Don't talk to us about handouts. You lot get more than \$400 million a year; we only get \$14-million."

Mr Hunt had the final word for the day on the future of the "Embassy."

He said the Government would proceed to introduce an Act on the ordinance and would not be influenced by the grandstanding of the Labor politicians.

"The Government is not bluffing," he said. "Government lands would be protected—and they would get a fair go."