

Red faces over black embassy

From MICHELLE GRATTAN, in Canberra

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THE Aboriginal land rights protesters camped on the lawns opposite Parliament House are producing a lot of official red faces and a major exercise in bureaucratic buck passing.

The Aborigines now have 11 brightly colored tents in their "city" on the lawns. Their "embassy" has been visited by the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Whitlam) and their "Cabinet" includes a "Minister for the Arts, Environment and Caucasian Affairs."

Quite clearly, the Government has no intention of moving the protesters — unless health or similar reasons make it unavoidable — because of the political outcry which would follow.

In the same way the Indonesian-born writer Mr. Paul Poeromo was allowed to fast last year outside Parliament House in support of a campaign urging

the Government to increase aid to East Pakistani refugees.

But a man who protested outside the Israeli Embassy recently against the "persecution of draft resisters" in Israel was moved on under the loitering provisions of the Betting and Gaming Ordinance.

Which raises the general question of who is allowed to protest, and where, in Canberra.

And that's where the buck-passing begins.

The logical starting place for the query seems the police. Did they make the decision to take no action against the Aborigines, and if so, on whose orders, and what criteria were used?

However, the police spokesman refers the question to Department of Interior officials, saying, "There are more than just the police involved in this situation from the point of view of responsibility."

A Department of the Interior official says the department has no intention of taking any action at the moment, but he would not

elaborate on how the decision was made.

A check with the office of the Prime Minister (Mr. McMahon), who made the original statement on the controversial land rights question, is no more successful. A member of Mr. McMahon's staff says the responsibility lies with the Minister for the Interior (Mr. Hunt).

But Mr. Hunt says he has given no instructions to the police. His comment is, "This is a matter for the law and the police. I am receiving regular reports from the police commissioner, who informs me that they (the Aborigines) are being kept under surveillance."

Only addicts of snakes and ladders and similar games would

want to go back to square one—the police.

Privately, the Government and officials are hoping the land rights protest will fade away before the "tent city" expands into a metropolis and somebody not only has to formally take a decision (perhaps officially spelling out the rights of protesters to use this area), but also admit responsibility for that decision.