

Aborigines' 'embassy' down but their flag flying high

From MICHELLE GRATTAN

CANBERRA. — By lunchtime on Thursday the only visible sign remaining of Canberra's Aboriginal "embassy" — which started off as a curiosity and grew into a protest unique in Australia's history — was a solitary rubbish bin.

Even the mailbox, into which had flowed expressions of support from all parts of Australia, had been removed when police pulled down the tents and loaded the Aborigines' belongings on to a truck.

Three Aborigines had set up camp on January 26 to protest against the Australia Day statement by the Prime Minister (Mr. McMahon) in which the Government refused to grant land rights based on traditional association to Aborigines on reserves.

The "embassy," with its flags, "chancery" and gay tents, caught the imagination of Australians and focused attention all over the world on the plight and problems of the Aborigines.

The protest united the mass-movement techniques, used by "sophisticated" demonstrators everywhere during the past decade, with the traditional patient waiting which the Gurindjis showed in their land claims at Wattie Creek in the Northern Territory.

Just to maintain the "embassy" opposite Parliament House for six months was a feat in itself. It must have brought home to white Australians how deeply the land rights issue goes with most Aborigines, even those whose own ties with the land have long been broken — for most of the demonstrators came from the cities or country towns.

But the effects of the "embassy" were more far-reaching, especially for Aborigines themselves. It gave them a focal point, a feeling of both action and identity. Regardless of the deep divisions within the Aboriginal movement between the "Black Power" supporters on the one hand and Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls and Senator Neville Bonner's on the other, all felt some identification with that collection of tents that faced the chill Canberra winter.

Despite the support the "em-



Dr. Coombs . . . "one avenue of protest closed; there are others."

bassy" attracted, its basic claim — for land rights — still seems as far from success as ever.

The Commonwealth Council for Aboriginal Affairs, headed by the shrewd and tenacious Dr. Coombs, still goads the Government, and the Department for the Interior, on land rights.

Dr. Coombs was in there fighting soon after the removal of the "embassy". The style was cool, almost obscure: Dr. Coombs was sorry that it had been necessary to arrest Aborigines and students; he said that one form of protest was now closed but he hoped that others would continue to be used.

It was a typical Coombs' understatement, but everyone knew whose side he was on.

But the Government shows no sign of yielding.

And as the Federal election draws near, the Aborigines, and some members of the council, are wondering how much better the land rights claims would fare under a Labor Government.

The A.L.P. is committed to land and mineral rights for Aborigines on reserves. But sceptics are questioning whether it will come through on the mineral claims when the time comes.

However, one thing the "embassy" protest has done is to make

the whole Aboriginal question very much a live political issue. The Minister for the Interior (Mr. Hunt) has already foreshadowed that the coming Budget is likely to bring some additional help for Aborigines.

In addition, significant initiatives in Aboriginal policy could also come from two meetings to be held in the next few weeks.

The Ministerial Council on Aboriginal Affairs, comprising State and Federal Ministers, will hold its annual meeting in Darwin next week. It is traditionally a somewhat moribund body, but the present climate may force Ministers to sink their Commonwealth-State jealousies and come to grips with the health, education, housing, welfare and other problems facing Aborigines.

Then next month more than 70 Aborigines will come to Canberra for the first national conference of Aboriginal advisory counsellors to State and Federal Governments.

Some permanent machinery is likely to be set up at this meeting for regular consultations between the Federal Government and Aborigines to keep the Government better informed of Aboriginal thinking.

The most tangible result to come out of all the heat and fury that has surrounded the Aboriginal "embassy", though, is likely to be a permanent centre in the Australian Capital Territory for Aborigines.

Present plans, which have reached Ministerial level, are that the centre would provide accommodation for Aborigines doing courses at educational institutions Canberra and help with organising them into these courses, and if necessary put on some courses itself. However, the Department for the Interior and the Council for Aboriginal Affairs are likely to dispute hotly the actual form the centre takes.

As one public servant remarked yesterday, the centre would be the first monument to the Aboriginal people in Australia's national capital.

But on Thursday afternoon the only monument was that solitary rubbish bin.