

A symbol goes; a new symbol

THE Aboriginal tent embassy on the lawns of Parliament House, Canberra, was dismantled and carried away by police yesterday amid scenes of ugly violence. The violence was a tragedy, the more so in this case because it may set a course in Australian race relationships which will neither dignify the nation nor advance the Aboriginal cause. To argue that the Aborigines had legitimate and continuing rights to occupy the parliamentary lawns is a contradiction, and inferentially insulting to Aborigines. They should be equal before the law; why, then, permit them to occupy public land in a manner denied to any other Australian?

The answer to that question has for six months past been obliterated by widespread sympathy for Aboriginal rights, by admiration for the peaceful and constructive behavior of the embassy's residents, by well-deserved guilt for a century of indignities and insensitivity. Though the principle remains, the fact is that the embassy's tents did very little harm. Perhaps, as some Aboriginal leaders thought, the tents were beginning to outlive their usefulness; the time seemed to be coming when they would be quietly folded. This prospect, after six months of patience and tolerance from the Government, makes yesterday's drama all the more puzzling. Why was it necessary? The Minister for the Interior (Mr. Hunt) called it a tightening of a loophole in the A.C.T. ordinances. Yet where were the signs that battalions of demonstrators for less wholesome causes were about to pitch a tent city in the national capital?

The embassy had been there for six months as a symbol. It seems it was pulled down because it was an embarrassment to the Government. After 200 years, in which treatment of Aborigines has been mostly shameful, the Government and the Australian people have a lot to be embarrassed about. Surely the Government could have put up with its discomfort for a little longer and found a better solution which would have avoided confrontation and violence. The risk is that in demolishing one symbol, the Government might have established violence as a new symbol of black-white relationships.

Whether or not the tent embassy was effective, the indications are that Government policy has become more sensitive and responsive to the needs of a people whose land has been usurped, whose culture has been shattered and whose children still die in intolerable numbers. Yet Aborigines need more in their search for dignity in their own country. Such things as motivation to overcome pressing and destructive socio-economic problems; such things as pride and a sense of identity; such things as symbols to help their quest for land rights. They do not need, and will not profit from, such things as the bitterness generated by yesterday's events.