

ALLEGATIONS OF POLICE BRUTALITY

What really happened at Skull Creek?

From *ATHOL THOMAS, in Perth*

THE West Australian Premier, Sir Charles Court, has belatedly decided that there will be a Royal Commission into alleged incidents between police and Aborigines at Laverton in January.

The public will at last be given an opportunity of hearing the facts — or at least what all parties involved have to say on the matter.

Sir Charles is obviously acting under pressure and with reluctance. He said when he announced the inquiry that he was convinced it would achieve nothing.

"The Government has decided to set up a Royal Commission because some people will not accept anything short of somebody's head on a plate", he said.

He added that the police had no reason to be concerned about an inquiry.

The controversy centres on allegations that the police assaulted members of a group of about 50 Aborigines at Skull Creek, near Laverton, on January 5.

The Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Cavanagh, has accepted the

Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Cavanagh, has accepted the State's proposal — after suggestions that the Federal Govern-



Sir Charles Court . . . reports kept secret.

ment might override the State and conduct an inquiry without Western Australian support.

Clearly this possibility would rankle with Sir Charles, the country's most vigorous advocate of States' rights.

Senator Cavanagh has already indicated that the commission will look at the incident at Skull Creek that resulted in the arrest and overnight deten-

at Skull Creek that resulted in the arrest and overnight detention of 28 Aborigines, and the agreement next day between the prosecutor and the Aboriginal Legal Service for the charges to be withdrawn.

It will, he said, also investigate the behaviour of

Aborigines and the resultant action by the police at Laverton some weeks before the Skull Creek incident.

The three-member Royal Commission will be headed by a judge, or a retired judge. The Federal Government is expected to appoint a judge to the commission, and the third member will be a layman.

The Federal representative is likely to be the same man who will head another Royal Commission inquiring into incidents at Alice Springs.

Because it announced that it would hold an inquiry itself, the Commonwealth is expected to


contribute up to half the cost of the commission.

The Laverton fracas has already been the subject of deep investigation on several levels. But only on one level have findings been made public.

The WA Police Union conducted an inquiry of its own, and clearly was satisfied that its Laverton members acted responsibly. It published its findings in a lengthy newspaper advertisement.

The State Government asked a magistrate, Mr T. Syddall, to report to it on the Laverton incidents. The report was completed quickly, but the State Government has kept it secret





Senator Cavanagh . . .
fuel on the flames.

— suggesting, in the minds of many, that there is something to hide.

Senator Cavanagh threw fuel on the flames when, after reading the report, he said: "I think the results of the investigation have surprised Sir Charles".

His answers to questions indicated that he believed the report did not contradict allegations of police brutality.

He said, "Mr Syddall's report does not contradict the Aboriginal Legal Service report". (The ALS report alleged police brutality). "We have strong evidence that there was police brutality".

Sir Charles said the Syddall

It can be said that the State Government has arrived at its decision for a Royal Commission after a long and tortuous journey. It is unfortunate that so much time has elapsed since the occurrence of the incidents that have been the subject of so much soul-searching and recrimination. Some witnesses may not have total recall.

But there is no doubt that such an inquiry is necessary. It will have implications far beyond the happenings at Laverton.

The problems of the mining town are reflected, to a greater or lesser degree, in towns throughout the State that have an Aboriginal population.

They cover a broad spectrum — jobs, housing, the attitude to work, education, acceptance of blacks by whites and whites by blacks, communication and, inevitably, alcohol.

report would not be made public because the magistrate did not have the protection of a Royal Commissioner and it would have been a breach of the terms under which the inquiry was made.

The State Government's public reaction to the report was to appoint a special study group headed by Mr Syddall. The aim of the group is to look at ways of improving communication and co-operation in the Laverton area.

Its work is still going on.

Sir Charles emphasised that the Government had always intended to discuss with the Commonwealth the possibility of a wider inquiry when the study group work had been evaluated.

He also wanted to be taken into consideration a report on the role of the police in the Laverton incidents prepared, at the request of the State Government, by the Assistant Commissioner of Police, Mr A. J. Parker.

This has been regarded as an "internal" report, and therefore not for public consumption.

The report recommended that no disciplinary action be taken against policemen, but it has been widely regarded as the police force reporting on its own and possibly not entirely objective.

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