

Aboriginal Bill rushed through

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The Government used the guillotine last night to rush through the House of Representatives its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Queensland Reserves and Communities Self-management) Bill.

It ignored considerable criticism about the provisions in the Bill and its omissions, particularly over land rights, and also several pleas to delay and amend the legislation.

The National Aboriginal Conference, meeting in Canberra, asked for a week's delay to enable it and the two missions immediately concerned at Aurukun and Mornington Island to be consulted.

The Opposition moved unsuccessfully, first for normal passage of the Bill, then for deferment for more consultation, redrafting, and effective provision for people living on reserves to control the reserves.

They were joined by the NCP Member for Leichhardt (Qld), Mr Thomson, who called on the Government to delay proclamation to allow further discussion with the State Government and the people involved.

In committee stages last night the Opposition put up more than a dozen amendments, but none were accepted by the Government.

The Bill was passed through all stages shortly afterward.

In his second reading speech Mr Viner said that all the provisions of the Bill were directed to ensuring that, if communities chose not to be administered by officials of the Queensland Departments of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement, they would not have official management foisted upon them.

"The Commonwealth is not enlarging its own powers", Mr Viner said. "It is not in any sense taking over the reserves itself, but is only allowing the communities themselves to exercise local responsibility"

"There is no reason why [ordinary community services] and other State Government services should be affected if reserve communities in Queensland choose self-management under this legislation".

He said the means by which the legislation achieved its purpose included:

Declaration by the Minister that it applied to a reserve or communi-

ty, on request from a council, or if he was satisfied that a substantial majority of adult residents wished it.

An existing council, or body declared to be one, would have the function of managing community affairs and the necessary powers for that.

Any declared council would be an elected body or a properly incorporated body, with power to make by-laws and authorise entry to reserves.

Councils and individual Aborigines and Islanders would not be bound to obey directions given by officials under Queensland legislation, and councils would be responsible only to their communities.

The Commonwealth might, if it became necessary to give effect to the purposes of the legislation, make available to councils land acquired by the Commonwealth.

Mr Viner said he intended to proceed without delay, after the Bill was passed, to declare Aurukun and Mornington Island reserves to be reserves under the legislation. The Government would watch the situation in the two reserves closely, and if further action was necessary it would be taken.

In response to questions outside the House, Mr Viner said that the Government could, if necessary, acquire the land.

The chairman of the North Queensland Land Council, Mr Mick Miller, said that he was not very satisfied with the Minister's assurances, nor were his executive, nor the members of the National Aboriginal Conference.

"We're not satisfied, not confident, that this Bill does give that amount of freedom on reserves that Mr Viner says", he said.

The Queensland chairman of the NAC, Mr John Newfong, called the legislation "a cop-out, a piece of window-dressing". He said it merely took the heat off the Government.

"It's not all bad, but it's not strong enough", he said. There was presently public sympathy for real reform, and what was being put up was only concessional reform.

Specific criticisms the two spokesmen raised were:

The Government was not committed to acquiring any land for Aboriginal use.

The Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement was not denied the right to establish a parallel admini-

stration on reserves, as suggested in last week's initial compromise.

The legislation accepted the definitions of Queensland legislation for Aboriginal community and reserve, suggesting there would be no hindrance to the Queensland Government's resuming that land.

Throughout the legislation the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs was given the power to exercise his discretion, and not the Aboriginal councils — "The Minister may grant self-management. He might not, too. We want legislation to say that he will if he's requested to by the Aboriginal council".

The Bill did not specifically give power to an Aboriginal council to exclude people or prevent their entry on reserves.