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The Aboriginal Embassy: Its purpose and aims
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A group of young Aborigines erected tents on the lawns in front of Parliament House on January 26, 1972 - Australia Day - and declared themselves an "Aboriginal Embassy".

The editorial committee of the Aboriginal Publications Foundation feels that this was an important move in Aboriginal affairs and therefore invited Mr. John Newfong to explain the purpose and aims of the Embassy. However, his article does not necessarily represent the views of the editorial committee or the Aboriginal Publications Foundation.

With its flags fluttering proudly in the breeze, the Aboriginal Embassy on the lawns opposite the Federal Parliament has been one of the most successful press and parliamentary lobbies in Australian political history.

The tent conference with Federal Opposition Leader, Mr. Whitlam, turned out to be one of the greatest coups ever of the Aboriginal advancement movement. Very much to the Embassy' credit is the fact that it managed to such a heavy commitment from a party seemingly so close to power.

Discussion with the Federal Opposition Leader centred on the Embassy's five-point plan for land rights:

1. Control of the Northern Territory as a State within the Commonwealth of Australia; the parliament in the NT to be predominantly Aboriginal with title and mining right to all land within the Territory.
2. Legal title and mining rights to all other presently existing reserve lands and settlements throughout Australia.
3. The preservation of all sacred sites throughout Australia.
4. Legal title and mining rights to areas in and around all Australian capital cities.
5. Compensation monies for lands not returnable to take the form of a down-payment of six billion and an annual percentage of the gross national income.

While the front lawn conference fell far short of gaining everything the Embassy had asked, it nevertheless went a great deal further than most people had expected.

At a press conference immediately after the discussion, Mr. Whitlam said that a Labor Government would be committed to a "properly representative body in the Northern Territory with full legislative powers"; to a "complete reversal of the present Governments' land rights policy where it denies corporate title to reserve lands"; and to the "protection fo all those areas of spiritual significance to the original inhabitants of this country".

A "properly representative body in the NT" must ultimately mean one with a predominance of Aborigines or, at least, one where Aborigines in the NT is 33% of the total population but this was only an estimate for the 1966 census of what the Government chose to call "full-bloods". In 1967, Aborigines became Australians and were eligible, for the first time, to be counted in the census. The only census taken since then was last year but the figures from that are not yet available. Even when they are, they will probably not indicate much of an increase in the Aboriginal population in the NT: the 1971 census gave people a choice to refer to themselves as Aborigines or otherwise but the NT Administration has for so long been deciding who is not Aboriginal, the figure are likely to show only the "full-blood" population when,

in fact, black people in the NT are probably three times as many. Earlier this year, however, the Department of the Interior admitted to the Senate Committee on Social Environment that “full-bloods” alone were in a 62% majority in all rural areas of the Territory.

Even without a change in government, with the grass roots political awareness presently developing among Aboriginal people in the outback and with electoral distribution favouring the Aboriginal vote even more than it does the pastoral interests, Black Australians are as likely as the Country Party to have the balance of power, not just in the NT as a State, but in Federal politics also.

The Aboriginal Embassy’s claim for full State rights for the NT has been misunderstood in many quarters and its likelihood widely questioned. Mr. Whitlam’s promise of “full legislative power” seems vague enough to bring to mind his party’s desire for a centralised government in Canberra.

However, nobody imagines for one moment that the NT can continue as at present, with the Minister for the Interior in Canberra able to veto all legislation from the Legislative Council in Darwin.

Whenever the NT does become a State - and, like New Guinea, it cannot remain a trusteeship territory forever - it must have the same rather extensive constitutional powers as the other States.

“A properly representative body in the NT with full legislative powers” would be in a position to ensure that mining developments benefit the people living there; to float loans overseas; to improve educational facilities and, above all, to arrest the spiralling infant mortality rate.

Furthermore, as a State the NT would have a greater say in Federal Government in Australia. A full voting population there would warrant more than the one member from the NT in the House of Representatives as at present and there would also be the six senators to which every other State is entitled. Most of these politicians, like those of the State Parliament in the NT, would be Aboriginal.

There has never been any suggestion that the NT should be or could be an all-black apartheid State - while Black Australia can boast of far better politicians than many of those already in parliament and, in the NT, of many very sophisticated politicians for whom it is not even necessary to articulate in English, there are a few trained in senior civil service. For a long time senior administration in the NT will be predominantly white. Moreover, voting patterns in some parts, especially around Darwin, may be similar to those in many parts of Kenya, where some white parts of Nairobi return black members to the National congress and black parts sometimes return white members.

It would be quite unrealistic for Black Australians to think that black politicians are no more corruptible than white politicians but, with a parliament in the NT that will not only be answerable to urban blacks and urban whites but also to a tribal society, such corruption is apt to be more easily uncovered. And, like black men in Africa who fought so hard for the right to decide their own destiny, black men here will be quick to reject those of their own who fail them.