The Minister for the Interior, Mr Ralph Hunt, commented today on his discussions on Wednesday last with seven Aboriginal people concerning the Government's decision to remove the tents on the lawns in front of Parliament House in Canberra.

Mr Hunt said the sincere objective of all present at the discussions was to avoid a violent demonstration on Sunday. The great majority of the Australian people including the Aborigines would deplore a further violent demonstration in Canberra.

Mr Hunt said the Government had a genuine sympathy for the Aboriginal people. However, the establishment of tents by any pressure group on the lawns in front of Parliament House was a separate issue and an infringement of the law. "I made it clear that the Government would not allow any unlawful camping on unleased Commonwealth land in the city area".

In the discussions, Mr Hunt said it had been stressed that a sensible approach by the Aboriginal people would be for a national representative group to be formed in order to establish a more dignified presence in Canberra if this was desired or some other centre chosen by them. Any such proposal aimed at achieving positive objectives in the advancement of Aborigines and in promoting a wider understanding of the Aboriginal situation as well as reflecting the special position of the Australian Aborigines in the history and culture of Australian society could be put to the Government for consideration.

As Minister for the Interior, he had always been prepared to consult with a properly-constituted group and with the Minister for the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, Mr Howson, with a view to setting aside such a facility adequate to the Aborigines' needs.
Quite obviously it was not physically possible to provide such a facility immediately. Indeed, there was not any such nationally representative group in existence at the present time. Any approach by a properly-constituted national Aboriginal group would be consistent with other commercial, benevolent and representative national organisations already represented in Canberra. Leases could be granted to organisations complying with the normal requirements and conditions in Canberra.

In relation to the "Tent Embassy", however, it was impossible to grant a lease until a proper proposal had been refined and, if it was to be a presence relating to Aboriginal interests generally, until a National representative body had been set up.

In any event, such a matter could not be hastily settled by the Government under the threat of a violent situation. The Government required specific well-considered proposals which could be considered along the normal lines. Any proposal for such a centre needed to be clear and definite.

He said the question of an Aboriginal presence in Canberra and the question of re-erecting the tents that had been removed were two quite separate issues. In respect of an Aboriginal presence, the normal well-established procedures were available. On the other hand, those who might seek to re-erect the tents would be acting illegally and would deliberately be creating a risk of violence. The views and attitudes of the responsible Aborigines in different parts of Australia had to be taken into account.

The Minister had received a statement by Mr Appoo, of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney, indicating concern that the rational Aborigines should also have a voice, the voice of achievement in the advancement of Aborigines. Mr Appoo had said in part that Aboriginal leaders who wanted equality in society must be prepared to accept equal laws and that the foundation for Aboriginal Affairs would request a meeting with the Minister. The Minister said that at various times he had talked with various spokesmen for those who were associated with the "Tent Embassy" in an endeavour to find a sensible solution to the problem.
Mr Howson, the Minister for the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, had called a national conference of Aborigines from all parts of Australia, in Canberra for 10 and 11 August. The outcome of these discussions would need to be taken into account before any final decisions were made by the Aboriginal people and the Government.

Mr Hunt said that he was fully prepared to talk further with spokesmen for the campers. He also stood ready to talk with representatives of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs or other Aboriginal organisations concerned about the situation in Canberra.

Mr Hunt appealed to all Aborigines and their supporters to avoid a further violent protest on Sunday. Only in a calm and rational atmosphere would a sensible outcome be achieved that would be to the long-term advantage of the Aboriginal people.

28 July 1972