



The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (Mr. Bryant) talking with Gurindji men at Wattie Creek, Northern Territory, early this year.

A parliament for blacks

From MICHELLE GRATTAN, in Canberra

AUSTRALIAN Aborigines are to get their own national voice — for the first time.

Preparations are under way for the election of a fully democratic "Black Parliament", which will hold its first meeting in Canberra late this year or early in 1974.

More than 240 Aborigines employed by the Commonwealth Government are now working throughout the continent — from the Torres Strait islands to Tasmania, from outback Kalgoorlie to Redfern in the heart of Sydney to enrol Aboriginal voters.

Everyone 18 years old and over who classes him or herself as an Aborigine — and is accepted as such by their community — is eligible to vote on polling day which, if all goes according to plan, will be November 10.

The "Black Parliament" — officially called the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee — will have 41 members. Queensland will have nine seats, West Australia, the Northern Territory and NSW eight each, South Australia four, Victoria three and Tasmania one.

Although their salaries have not yet been determined, it is expected members will be paid about \$6000 to \$7000 — enough to allow them to become full-time politicians.

The national committee's official role will be to advise the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (Mr. Bryant) on policy and administration. But potentially its importance is much greater.

It will have the prestige of being the one elected body which can speak on behalf of the whole Aboriginal community—a powerful lever in pressurising the Government.

The November elections were initiated by an interim consultative committee which Mr. Bryant



The beginning of the "Aboriginal Embassy" in front of Parliament House, Canberra, early last year.

appointed soon after taking office. This committee met twice, and organised a steering group to plan the elections and a series of State and regional meetings to work out and publicise the details.

The elections are likely to cost about \$250,000.

The enrolling of voters which is taking two to three weeks and is now well under way in all States, is an enormous physical and publicity exercise.

Even determining the number of Aborigines eligible to vote is difficult. The last census puts the Australian Aboriginal population at 106,000 — nearly half of them over 18—but it is generally conceded that this figure is too low.

Aborigines do not have to enrol for Federal parliamentary elec-

tions, so many have little idea of the electoral process. A New South Wales co-ordinator, Mr. Chieka Dixon, says: "Eighty per cent of the people we have approached are willing to go on the roll. But a few are wary or frightened—they are reluctant to sign anything."

The enrolling has run into sheer physical problems. In WA, vehicles were not available on time to get the enrollers out on to the field, while in western Queensland and Central Australia enrollers were bogged by heavy rains.

Most of the organising for the election has been done by Aborigines—with advice from a Commonwealth electoral officer and the electoral pundit Malcolm Mackerras — a fact which in itself testifies to the increasing responsibility Aborigines are starting to take for their own affairs.

Nomination of candidates will begin in the next few weeks when the rolls have been completed.

One of the national co-ordinators, John Moriarty, has found keen interest from potential candidates, especially in city areas.

"We'll have a ballot two miles long in some places," he says.

For many of the urban radicals the election will be a crucial test to see to what extent they represent grass-roots Aboriginal opinion.

Mr. Moriarty sees the national committee becoming a unifying force among Aborigines.

"I think it will be one of the

"Aborigines have been split into tribal and non-tribal people. The committee will have representatives of both. The non-tribal people will learn much from their tribal counterparts in regard to Aboriginal identity. And tribal people can also learn from urban Aborigines."

Chieka Dixon — an activist in the last year's "Aboriginal embassy" which harassed the former Government and stirred the conscience of Australians—describes the new body as "forty-one points of communication between blacks".

"This is the seed for some unity we've never had. Now we'll know what our brothers and sisters need in different parts of the Commonwealth."

"You'll have grass-roots representatives instead of a few elitist blacks speaking for all Aborigines," Mr. Dixon said.

Under its provisional constitution, the Consultative Committee, which will be backed by a secretariat, must meet at least twice a year in full conference.

Mr. Bryant envisages that as individuals, the committee members will "perform the same sort of roles as Federal parliamentarians do for their constituents — the ombudsman role."

They will act as mediator between the Aboriginal community and Government and bureaucracy, making representations, handling complaints — a general "expediter" role.

"They will help get the system running better for Aborigines," Mr. Bryant said.

"Collectively, I see the committee as a very important part of the decision-making role. In the end I hope they will be part of a statutory authority to handle Aboriginal affairs. But that's in the long term — it would take at least three or four years."

"However, I would hope that we could hand over housing and similar programmes to them before too long."

One of the "too hard" questions which Mr. Bryant throws to the newly elected body will be whether they want eventual direct representation in the Federal Parliament in "black electorates". This is the system which the Maori people have used with success in New Zealand.

"If they do, it's their job to persuade the Parliament that direct Aboriginal representation would be a good thing," Mr. Bryant says.

If the committee lives up to its potential, its advice could be hard to ignore.

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12 SEP 1973