

IN DUSTY Regent Street, Redfern, election posters are stuck to the walls of St Luke's Church, where Aborigines will vote today in this country's most unusual election.

The election is nationwide. About 40,000 Aborigines and Torres Straits Islanders have registered to vote for 195 Aboriginal candidates in 41 seats.

Chosen candidates will represent their districts in the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC), which will have its headquarters in Canberra.

The task of these Aboriginal representatives will be to provide the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Cavanagh, with information about what Aborigines need and want. Acting as a political lobby, NACC will voice the wishes of Aborigines, "putting the minister on the right track" as one Aboriginal said.

Was there pre-election fever in Redfern? Far from it. St Luke's Church, which is being turned into a centre for South Sydney Community Aid, was very quiet.

Upstairs, where the ceiling is polished timber, and beams have been painted Chinese lacquer red, I found three Aborigines sitting at a table. They were Gary Williams and the Belleair brothers, Bob and Solomon.

Gary Williams was "neutral" about the election. He hadn't registered, had no intention of voting. The Belleair brothers, however, opposed it. They were writing out anti-election pamphlets, which read:

"Boycott the NACC. Do not vote in the best interests of all Blacks. We don't need any elected leaders in this community."

Or: "Don't vote. Why? People standing have never worried about us before. Blacks in Redfern weren't told they could stand until too late. Decisions will be made without our knowledge."

The brothers said Aborigines were "in the dark." They felt also that NACC would be a "puppet" for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

Across the road, at the Aboriginal Medical Service, Sister Jennifer Bush, originally from Darwin, was checking in patients.

She had registered to vote, she said, but didn't know the candidates in her area. She wanted to read more literature about the election, for she had "no idea of what NACC was aiming at."

In the waiting room was Mrs Mildred Butt, of Fairfield. She, too, had registered to vote. Like Sister Bush, she criticised "lack of advertising" about NACC and the election. However, Mrs Butt thought that NACC

was a "good idea." It had two years to run before the next election she said. In that time, she hoped there would be improved housing for young Aboriginal couples, and help with finance for housing.

Outside in Regent Street, "Ted" (not his real name) walked by. He came from Cunnamulla, Queensland, and



Senator Bonner



Bobbi Sykes



Kevin Gilbert

Aborigines get a foot in Canberra's door

was "a country kid" as he put it. Ted had registered to vote, but said most of his friends weren't really "clued up" about the election. Some were frightened of putting their names down.

He thought the election was a good thing. It would stop a lot of people getting up, forming cliques and running the show. The election would be fair. It would help country people and "give them a go." The little clique in Sydney wouldn't be doing all the talking.

Ted is one of 6,000 Aborigines who have registered to vote in NSW. Elected members will receive \$6,000 annually, plus \$2,000 travelling allowance (for city), \$3,000 (for country).

Voters in this State include about 200 prisoners in jail. This is the first time prisoners have been given a vote.

Mr Neville Bourke, seconded from the Australian Electoral Office to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs "at the request of the Aboriginal people," is acting as chief returning officer in an "advisory consultative capacity."

He has travelled "the equivalent" of five times around Australia in four months — informing voters from Cape Barren Island to Port Hedland about the election. Rolls closed on September 29.

At the insistence of the Aborigines, he said, white officials of the Australian Electoral Office will count votes.

In this new system of election, ballot papers will bear photographs and addresses of candidates. Separate folders will give their biographies.

Voting will be "first past the post," not preferential. Those eligible to vote are 18 and over.

In NSW, Michael Anderson, 22, a Brewarrina-born, Walgett-reared Aborigine, is State co-ordinator for the election. In a large, yellow-carpeted, still almost unfurnished North Sydney office, he sat answering telephones, and in an interval, said:

"How effective will NACC be? Who can say? You can't prejudice. It will be as strong as it makes itself. Any Government that neglects the

recommendations of NACC would commit political suicide. "Aborigines who oppose NACC are frightened of losing their little power base. Let the Aboriginal people elect who they want to speak out for them. The fault in Redfern is that self-appointed leaders are not speaking for the people."

Because the Prices and Incomes referendum on December 8 had first claim to the normal steel ballot boxes, 400 red fibreglass boxes have been flown in from Port Moresby for use in this election.

There will be "roving ballots" and fixed ballots today. There are eight seats in

NSW including two for Sydney — an "Inner City" seat and an "Outer City" seat. Redfern — where Sydney's Aboriginal population and problems are thickest — is "Inner City."

Strangely, no Redfern Aboriginal has put up for election. Candidates here are Sidney Cunningham, 47, a welfare officer with the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, and Phillip Hall, 25, an executive member of that organisation.

Mr Hall, originally from Walgett, has lived in Sydney since 1966. He works with "Identity," the Aboriginal magazine.

Mr Cunningham, who bills himself as a "Labor" man, has a rival who also votes for that party. Mr Cunningham comes from Alexandria, but was born at La Perouse. His aim in standing is "to start our people off from the grass roots, and to try and bring a bit of justice for the Aboriginal race." He seeks improvement in Aboriginal housing and education, and wants greater assistance for unmarried mothers.

He thinks that NACC is a "great idea," that elected representatives will be able to

speak up for Aboriginal rights.

Mr Hall also thinks that NACC is democratic, that everyone has the right to vote, that it is a "great step forward." He talks of housing improvement for Aborigines, and of "police brutality" at Redfern and in the country. He wants better treatment and conditions for Aborigines.

In the "Outer City" electorate, candidates are Tom Williams, from La Perouse, and William Glover, from Mount Druitt.

Aboriginal politics can be just as bitter as white politics — perhaps more so. Those who do not agree with the election, or with the planned NACC, include Senator N. Bonner (Lib, Qld), who called the committee a "farce."

Faith Bandler, Bobbi Sykes and Kevin Gilbert also oppose it. But many go along with it. They feel that the vote is democratic, that from this election will come true spokesmen for Aborigines, that NACC will be able to bring pressure upon Government so that Aborigines, at last, will get their rights.