

A REMARKABLE experiment in democracy got under way in Australia this week.

And only a relative handful of people even knew about it — and appreciated its significance.

It's the nation-wide election for the 41 aboriginal delegates to the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee — the body which will advise the Federal Government on all aspects of life affecting aboriginals in Australia.

Voting at roving ballot boxes throughout Australia started last Saturday and will continue for two weeks.

The main polling day will be this Saturday.

The election is vitally important to Australia on several levels.

ABORIGINAL ELECTION

First, it is the first wholly indigenous election ever held in Australia — in other words, it's the first time the aboriginal people have had a chance to vote to elect an entirely aboriginal national body to speak for them with one voice.

But there are other fascinating aspects as well:—

● For the first time since Federation, ballot papers will carry the photographs and addresses of candidates. Brief biographies of the candidates will be included in a separate booklet.

● For the first time, polling officials have been allowed to go into jails throughout Australia, without restriction, to give ballot papers to inmates.

● Absentee voting will be allowed on a national level instead of a state level as in federal elections. Another first.

● Aboriginal polling officers managed to get 40,000 aboriginals on to the electoral rolls in the astonishingly short time of 18 days.

The Federal Government agreed to the formation of the NACC at a series of conferences earlier this year — but planning and organisation of the polling machinery did not start until June — and that's where Neville Burke comes in.

Mr Burke, 47, is a short, quietly-spoken former PMG messenger boy who became a brilliant electoral officer with the Australian Electoral Office.

He's worked in Queensland and Canberra, and in 1964 became the first full-time returning officer for the Northern Territory.

Black Australia votes

By JOHN
FRASER

Since aboriginals then had been allowed to vote for only two years, a major part of his job was educating aboriginals in what democracy was all about, and how to use their new voting power.

On the basis of this, the original 85 delegates to the early meetings that led to the NACC concept asked for him to be seconded to them to help organise the elections.

Although the aboriginals are doing most of the work for the elections themselves, Mr Burke has still flown the equivalent of five times around Australia in the past five months organising the machinery.

"On the rare occasions I get home, the dog bites me on the leg . . ." he mused yesterday.

A major problem was getting hold of enough ballot boxes.

BALLOT BOXES

The prices and incomes referendum is on December 8, and obviously it would have first priority on the Federal Government's steel ballot boxes.

"My supply just dried up and I was at my wits' end trying to find enough ballot boxes for our elections," he said.

He finally got 400 red fibreglass boxes flown by the RAAF from Port Moresby — lent by Simon Kaumi, Papua New Guinea's first indigenous chief electoral officer.

"The co-operation was immediate and total," Mr Burke said. "We explained what the problem was and Simon gave us the ballot boxes without a murmur.

"Without his help we'd have been really strapped . . ."

The co-operation from the Australian Electoral Office — which will conduct the vote

counting — has also been everything Neville Burke could have asked for.

The voting will be first-past-the-post — at the request of the aboriginals — and the result of the election should be known about December 10.

There are 195 candidates for the 41 seats on the committee.

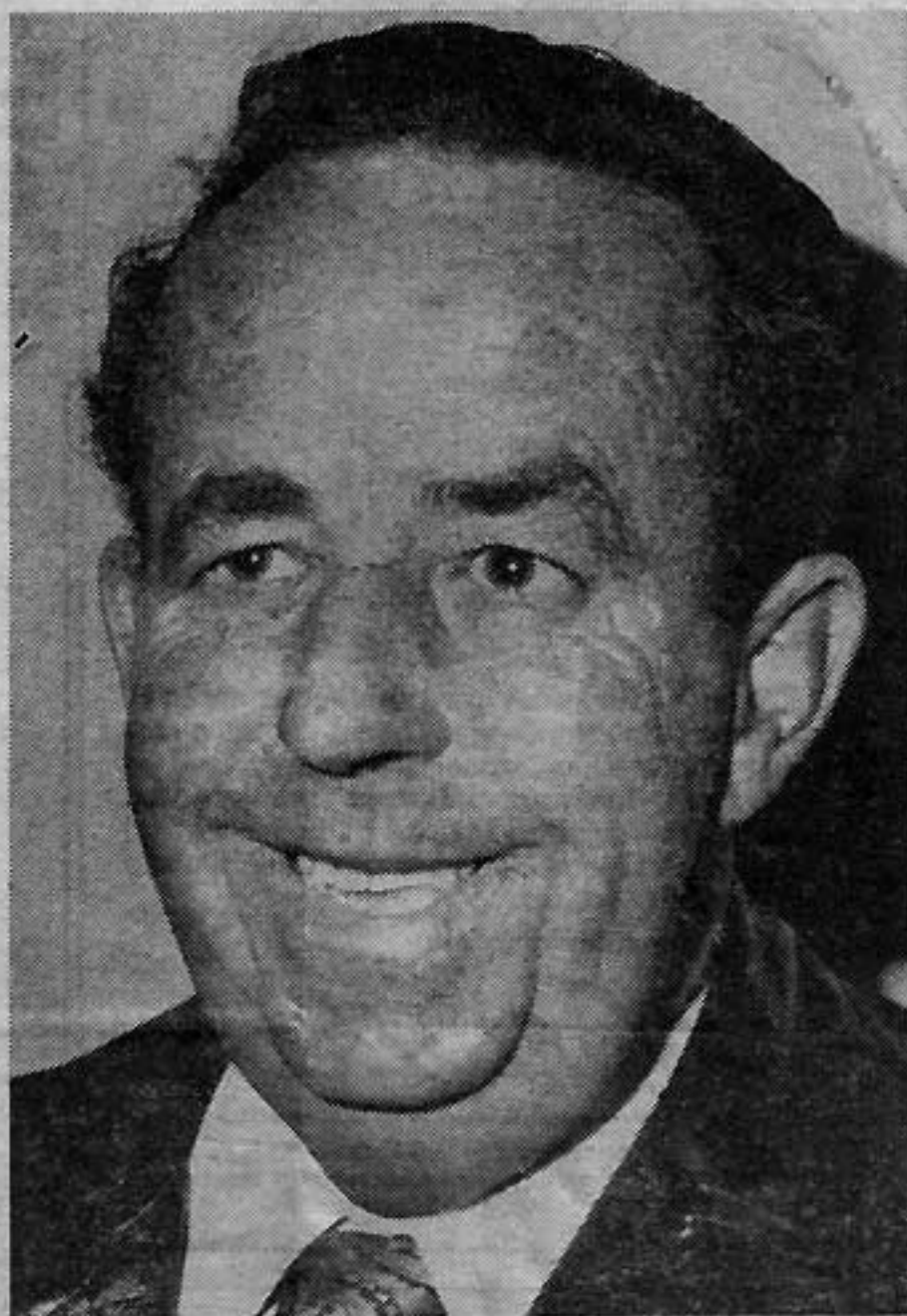
"This is an election by aboriginals for aboriginals," says Mr Burke.

"And the whole thing is being done entirely the way the aboriginal people want it."

Mr Burke — an immensely knowledgeable man at his job — now hopes to stay with the new NACC, and train aboriginals in the vastly complex task of organising their own future elections (it's planned to hold them every two years).

"I see the NACC as the start of major political awareness for aboriginals, and I want to be around to see it," he said.

The prices and incomes referendum is obviously important. But no one could possibly deny that, in the long term, Australia's first national democratic election by aboriginals for aboriginals is of vastly greater significance.



Mr Burke . . . help from Papua New Guinea.