

Australia: Howard's Aboriginal "reconciliation" pledge a cynical fraud

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Three days before declaring the date of the federal election, Australian Prime Minister John Howard delivered a major speech, promising to hold a referendum to formally recognise the Aboriginal population by including a "statement of reconciliation" in the preamble to the country's constitution.

Howard's announcement is a wretched and cynical manoeuvre on the part of a beleaguered government that faces defeat at the November 24 poll. The prime minister bears direct responsibility for the appalling level of poverty, social deprivation, and poor health afflicting Aboriginal people. Nevertheless he is once again seeking to exploit these very conditions for his own electoral purposes. Howard claimed he wanted to construct a "national consensus" for reconciliation. In fact, he has become aware of the extent of anger felt by wide layers of ordinary people at the sufferings of the indigenous population and is trying to tap it for his own sordid ends.

"I sense in the community a rare and unexpected convergence of opinion on this issue between the more conservative approach that I clearly identify with and those who traditionally have favoured more of a group rights approach," Howard declared. "It is a moment that should be seized, lest it be lost. Reconciliation can't be 51-49 project; or even a 70-30 project. We need as a nation to lock-in behind a path we can all agree on."

Even by Howard's standards, this statement is breathtaking in its hypocrisy.

Inciting racial division and prejudice has been a mainstay of the prime minister's decades-long political career and Aborigines have been a consistent target. Howard has adamantly defended the denial of the genocide that accompanied the British settlement of Australia and imposition of capitalist social relations. He derides as "black armband history" recognition of this historical truth. Howard has similarly refused to acknowledge the stolen generation—that is, the thousands of Aboriginal children who were removed from their parents and made wards of the state until 1970.

The prime minister's apparent about-face on reconciliation was met with a mixed reception from Aboriginal leaders. A number of sharp criticisms were issued. "Mr Howard's actions over 11 years belie his words," David Ross, director of the Northern Territory's Central Land Council, declared. "When a

snake sheds his skin, he has a shiny new skin, but he's still the same old snake, with the same old venom."

Howard's speech last Thursday was no doubt drafted after extensive private opinion polling. Concern over the government's record on Aboriginal issues is widespread and extends into better-off and traditionally Liberal-voting social layers.

The government's police-military intervention into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, launched earlier this year, has backfired. While focussing public attention on the catastrophic social conditions facing many indigenous people, the operation has provided no solution. Howard sent in the troops and police but refused to increase funding for health, education and other social services. Measures such as compulsory invasive medical checks for children and welfare restrictions for entire communities provoked widespread opposition within Aboriginal communities and more broadly. The entire intervention was widely understood as another pre-election ploy on the part of the Howard government.

Howard's "reconciliation" pledge was designed to neutralise much of the anti-government sentiment on the Aboriginal issue while maintaining his pro-business agenda.

"A major catalyst for the new [political] alignment is the rise of the indigenous responsibility agenda and the intellectual firepower that a new generation of indigenous leaders has brought to Australian politics," Howard declared. "At its core is the need for Aboriginal Australia to join the mainstream economy as the foundation of economic and social progress... The central goal is to address the cancer of passive welfare and to create opportunity through education, employment, and home ownership."

What is this "mainstream economy" of which Howard speaks?

For Aboriginal people living in small, remote communities with little or no basic social infrastructure, let alone industry, "joining the mainstream economy" means further impoverishment through the restriction and elimination of welfare payments. This process is designed to create a pool of low-paid Aboriginal labour for the mining and tourism industries. The proposed privatisation of communally owned Aboriginal land will open up new profit-making opportunities

for the major corporations and enrich a tiny layer of indigenous entrepreneurs and land owners.

The Howard government, working with right-wing think tanks such as the Centre for Independent Studies, has cultivated a number of Aboriginal leaders. Noel Pearson, of the Cape York Peninsula, is the most prominent of the “new generation” referred to by Howard. Seizing upon the failures of reformism and the welfare state, Pearson has declared that the only option is to implement “free market” policies.

Central to this agenda is the promotion of “individual responsibility”. Solutions would quickly present themselves, the argument goes, if only Aborigines would pull themselves up by their boot straps and stop blaming other people for their problems.

Once again the victims of the profit system are blamed for their own plight. The appalling living conditions experienced by tens of thousands of indigenous Australians have their origins in the violent dispossession of Aboriginal land by British colonialism. The establishment of capitalist property relations in Australia necessitated the destruction of Aboriginal society, based as it was on a form of primitive communism. The perpetuation of these relations has entrenched the oppression of the Aboriginal people.

Howard’s denial of these historical realities is central to his political agenda. In his speech he again refused to countenance a formal apology, saying it would “only reinforce a culture of victimhood”, and insisted that “the overwhelming balance sheet of Australian history is a positive one”. Howard rejected what he called the formerly dominant paradigm that was “based on the shame and guilty of non-indigenous Australians, on a repudiation of the Australia I grew up in.”

“We are not a federation of tribes,” Howard declared. “We are one great tribe; one Australia.”

In reality there are two “Australias”—one for the wealthy elite and one for everyone else. Talk of national unity is absurd when the country’s 200 richest individuals have a combined wealth of \$128 billion while more than 3.5 million people live in households earning a combined income of less than \$400 a week. Aboriginal people form the most oppressed layer of the working class and have long been exploited as a testing ground for right-wing policies later extended to workers of all races and cultural backgrounds. This is certainly the case today, with the Howard government extending its Northern Territory welfare restrictions to single mothers across the country.

Every faction involved in the official “reconciliation” debate seeks to obscure the reality that it is class not race that constitutes the fundamental divide in Australian society.

The differences between the Howard government and the Labor Party over issues such as whether to apologise for the stolen generation and to what extent native title “land rights” should be legally enshrined are strictly tactical. The prime minister aims to press ahead with a no-holds-barred free market program for Aboriginal communities combined with “one

Australia” rhetoric. The small “I” liberal establishment, on the other hand, prefers to secure the interests of the mining companies and pastoralists through the cultivation of a privileged Aboriginal bureaucracy. This approach also seeks to project a more progressive international image for the Australian ruling elite through an official apology and other symbolic acts of “reconciliation”.

Neither agenda has anything to do with eliminating Aboriginal poverty, ill health, and unemployment, and is in fact dedicated to sustaining the very social relations that give rise to these social ills. International experience—in New Zealand, Canada, and other countries—demonstrates that official apologies, constitutional adjustments, and formal treaties do nothing to address the root cause of indigenous disadvantage. These measures have served to deepen the class divisions within indigenous communities, while simultaneously promoting divisive race-based politics that serves to block a unified struggle of working people around their common class interests.

The Labor Party has, in any case, lined up behind Howard’s approach. Rudd and indigenous affairs spokesperson Jenny Macklin released a joint press statement immediately after Howard’s speech offering “bipartisan support” to his proposal for a referendum on the constitution. Rudd later refused to criticise any aspect of Howard’s address or even question its calculated pre-election timing.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that the shameful conditions facing Aboriginal people can only be resolved by tackling the root cause of the crisis—namely, the profit system itself. We fight for the establishment of a society in which social need and not corporate profit is the guiding principle. Under a democratically planned socialist economy, every citizen would be guaranteed decent housing, employment, and free access to high quality education, health, and other social services. Billions of dollars would be poured into remote Aboriginal communities and health, social welfare, and other professionals would be employed to assist residents devise long-term solutions to the problems they confront.

The precondition for the creation of a society in which such measures are possible is the development of a new mass party which unites workers of all races on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program. In opposition to the entire political establishment, the Socialist Equality Party is fielding candidates in the federal election to fight for this perspective.

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