

Australia: The political fraud of constitutional “recognition” for Aborigines

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A hand-picked group of 40 indigenous officials and academics joined Prime Minister Tony Abbott and opposition Labor Party leader Bill Shorten in Sydney on Monday for what was billed by the establishment media as an “historic summit” to discuss a proposed referendum to “recognise” indigenous people in the Australian Constitution.

The contrived event, staged at Kirribilli on Sydney Harbour, one of the city’s most affluent neighbourhoods, exposed the widening social and economic gulf between these privileged layers and the vast majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who live in poverty-stricken working class suburbs, rural towns and remote settlements.

In a joint media release, Abbott and Shorten declared: “Our country has moved closer to recognising the First Australians in our constitution and ending the great silence about indigenous people in our founding document. There will be more steps in this journey but for the first time in our country’s history, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition have sat down with Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to consider the path ahead.”

The very conception of “recognising” indigenous people in the constitution is a reactionary fraud. The Australian Constitution itself is a British colonial-era instrument that upholds capitalist property rights but contains no bill of rights or any other protection of basic social or democratic rights, not even the right to vote. It was adopted in 1901 to legitimise and enforce the establishment of Australian capitalism, at the expense of the emergent working class and its most vulnerable members, the dispossessed and decimated Aboriginal population.

A political law of proportionality has been at work since the “recognise” project was first launched by the previous Howard Liberal government in 2007 and then boosted by the Gillard Labor government in 2012. The greater the assault by the corporate and political establishment on the jobs, social conditions and basic democratic rights of the working class and indigenous people, the greater the effort to introduce racial and other forms of identity politics to bury and suppress the fundamental class issues at stake.

Aboriginal people, like the rest of the working class, are facing a wholesale onslaught on essential public services,

welfare entitlements, jobs, wages and working conditions amid the worsening fallout from the post-2008 global financial breakdown. While Abbott and Shorten were taking photo opportunities with their invited guests, the offensive against indigenous people was being intensified.

On July 1, just days before the Kirribilli gathering, the Abbott government cut off funding for the Aboriginal Medical Service at Mount Druitt in western Sydney, cutting adrift its 11,000 active patients and 96 doctors, nurses and other staff. The over-worked medical service had tried to meet the many health needs of Australia’s largest single Aboriginal community—the more than 32,000 indigenous people living throughout the working class suburbs of western Sydney.

This closure was just one of many social crimes being committed. Since the 2014 federal budget, the Abbott government has stripped \$600 million in funding from indigenous community organisations, including health, legal and language support services. It has also driven, via funding cuts, moves to shut down hundreds of remote settlements in Western Australia and elsewhere, forcing their residents off traditional lands.

Under the government’s Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), all spending on Aboriginal programs has been reallocated to grants to organisations that contract to deliver “outcomes” that will cut people off welfare and coerce them into low-paid work, including at the hands of indigenous business operators, especially in the mining, pastoral and tourism industries.

One of the principal guidelines for IAS funding is: “To get Indigenous Australians into work, foster Indigenous business and assist Indigenous people to generate economic and social benefits from the use of their land and native title rights.” Another is “to positively impact Indigenous participation and acceptance, such as positive and respectful forms of engagement,” in order to “progress towards a referendum on constitutional recognition, participation in society and organisational capacity.”

In other words, securing funding depends on supporting the “recognise” agenda itself. The IAS directly serves the interests of the business entrepreneurs and upper middle class elements represented at the Kirribilli summit. Those selected to attend

included the CEOs of land councils that run extensive regional businesses, highly-paid government advisers and prominent university professors.

Among them were prime ministerial adviser and former Labor Party president Warren Mundine, Cape York program director Noel Pearson and Professor Marcia Langton. These three have been the most vociferous advocates for years of “quarantining” or cutting off so-called “passive welfare” to indigenous people, facilitating projects by mining conglomerates on “native title” land in return for the establishment of investment funds for Aboriginal business owners, and punitive interventions in Aboriginal communities in the name of combating alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence and other endemic social problems.

The entire “recognise” project is based on deepening the program of “reconciliation,” adopted over the past 40 years to incorporate this thin social layer into the political and corporate establishment. Their perspective is built on blaming “white society,” instead of the capitalist system, for the oppression of Aborigines, and seeking to divert from the ever-widening social divide between the financial elite and the working class as a whole.

The first “principle” guiding a parliamentary committee report on “Constitutional Recognition,” issued last week, was to “contribute to a more unified and reconciled nation.” This is under conditions where social inequality in Australia is growing at one of the fastest rates in the industrialised world, producing mounting social and class tensions.

All factions of the ruling class have come together to peddle this agenda. Although the Greens leader, Senator Richard di Natale, was excluded from the Kirribilli meeting, the Greens are totally committed to what the parliamentary report called “building a secure strong multi-partisan parliamentary consensus” around the referendum proposals. The Greens were represented on the tripartite parliamentary committee, having propped up the minority Labor government that commissioned the initial “recognise” report by an “Expert Panel” of business and indigenous leaders in 2012.

Despite the hype, no concrete proposals emerged from Monday’s gathering. Tactical differences continue to exist on exactly how to try to hoodwink Aboriginal people, and the working class more broadly, into voting for this political swindle.

Pearson was clearly nervous about opposition among indigenous people. Having sat through the summit, he tried to distance himself from it, complaining that it was politically orchestrated. “I had a grin across my face for most of the morning but ... having been manoeuvred through the morning towards a pre-determined outcome started to taste a bit bitter in my mouth,” he claimed.

Pearson, together with Langton, who recently gave a magazine interview expressing admiration for the money-making “gift” and “skill” of the super-rich, advocates the

establishment, via the constitution, of an indigenous council to advise governments on all parliamentary legislation—a potentially lucrative source of employment for aspiring Aboriginal politicians.

In order to drum up support, the “recognise” plan revolves around finalising a referendum question by mid-2016, for a vote in May 2017. That is the 50th anniversary of a 1967 referendum in which the overwhelming majority of the electorate voted for two constitutional changes. These were to count indigenous people in the census, for the first time, and give the federal parliament powers to legislate for “the people of any race,” including to override state laws barring Aboriginal people from voting, as occurred in Queensland until 1965.

That referendum, like today’s sham, was falsely presented as a means to redress historic injustices, appealing to widespread sentiments of revulsion toward the 200 years of massacres, epidemics, removals and separation of children that were used to devastate the indigenous people and clear the continent for capitalist exploitation.

In reality, the 1967 vote paved the way for measures, such as the recognition of “native title” and other “land rights,” that have only enriched an Aboriginal elite at the expense of ordinary Aboriginal people. This layer is now working hand-in-glove with the Abbott government, and the parliamentary establishment, to take that social polarisation even further.

As Karl Marx explained in *Capital*, capitalism came into being around the world, including in Australia, enslaving and extirpating aboriginal people and “dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.” The historic crimes of this social order can be rectified and overcome only through the unified struggle of the working class, indigenous and non-indigenous, in Australia and internationally, to overthrow the capitalist profit system as a whole, and replace it with a socialist society, based on genuine equality and democracy.



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