

Australia's 1967 referendum, fifty years on

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This year marks five decades since the 1967 national referendum, when Australian voters overwhelmingly endorsed amendments to sections 51 and 127 of the country's constitution.

Promoted by the political elites and their handpicked indigenous leaderships as a means of redressing the historic crimes perpetrated against the Aboriginal population, the May 27 ballot won an extraordinary 91.7 percent "Yes" vote. This was the highest-ever affirmative response in an Australian referendum; it was celebrated by workers, students and youth across the country as a "landmark achievement."

Poet and author Rodney Hall described the immediate reaction of Aborigines in Brisbane, the capital of Queensland—a state with some of the country's most repressive laws. The indigenous population still faced curfews in parts of the city and, under Queensland's 1897 Aboriginal Protection Act, needed permits to work, to marry or to travel anywhere in the state.

"There were black people on the streets in a way that we had never seen them," Hall wrote. "People were up, had washed their children, combed their hair and got themselves up in their very best gear and walked out in the streets of Brisbane, down Queens Street where they never went."

While the mammoth vote made clear that broad layers of Australians wanted an end to decades of political and social discrimination, the ballot changed little for ordinary Aborigines.

The hopes of those who had been involved in the years of petitioning to secure the ballot, and campaigning for a "Yes" vote, were soon to be dashed.

The 1967 referendum, contrary to popular mythology, then and now, did not win Aborigines the right to vote. This right had been previously legislated under state laws. Western Australia and Queensland were the last two states to grant it, in 1962 and 1965 respectively.

The constitutional amendment had two components. The first was to ensure that indigenous people were counted in the national census. When Australia was formally established as a federated nation state in 1901, the ruling elite, having driven much of the indigenous population from tribal lands, argued that Aborigines should not be counted because they were members of an "inferior race" that was "dying out."

The second amendment was to give the federal parliament the power to legislate for "the people of any race." Prior to the referendum, the states had been responsible for laws relating to indigenous people, not the federal government.

The Holt Liberal-Country coalition government, the Labor Party opposition and Aboriginal leaders all claimed that if given the power to make laws for indigenous people, the federal parliament would act in their best interests. The myriad discriminatory and anti-democratic state laws against Aborigines would be overridden by Canberra, meaning that basic rights could be enjoyed by all.

Prior to the vote, Labor Party leader, and future prime minister, Gough Whitlam declared: "The members of this Parliament will be able for the first time to do something for Aborigines—Aborigines representing the greatest pockets of poverty and disease in this country. ... The commonwealth can at least bring the resources of the whole nation to bear in favour of the Aborigines where they live."

Whitlam's promises were never kept. The key concern of the ruling elite, in modifying sections 51 and 127 of the Constitution, was to refurbish Australia's political image on the global stage. Post-World War II, the country had been a signatory to various international human rights conventions, but its racist "White Australia" immigration policies, and the ongoing oppression of the vast majority of the Aboriginal population, clearly violated these agreements. It was being compared with South Africa's system of apartheid.

As *The 1967 Referendum: Race, Power and the Australian Constitution*, a detailed examination of the event by Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, points out: "The referendum was initiated by a government keenly aware of the likely impact on Australia's image overseas of a successful deletion of the discriminatory clauses in the constitution" (pp. 35–36).

In the lead-up to the vote, South Australian Labor politician and future state premier Don Dunstan declared: "If we don't change, we will be lumped as the enemy. And we cannot afford to be lumped by the majority of nations of the world with South Africa..."

These appeals were repeated by numerous other political figures, Liberal and Labor alike, along with the mainstream media, which had also called for a "Yes" vote. On the day of the referendum, a *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial warned about "the damage a 'No' vote would do to Australia's image abroad."

In contrast to the ruling elite's concerns about Australia's international image, the mass "Yes" vote was an expression of the genuinely democratic and socially progressive outlook of hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens. These sentiments were part of a growing politicisation of the working class internationally, which was beginning to challenge the existing political set-up, reaching its peak between the mid-1960s and 1975.

Australian workers began to fight increasingly determined battles over wages, working conditions, health, education and other basic social rights. They were joined by the most oppressed layers, including Aboriginal workers.

In August 1966, almost a year before the referendum, indigenous stockmen from the Wave Hill cattle station in the Northern Territory (NT) had walked out in protest against their slave-like conditions, and demanded equal pay. The nine-year Wave Hill strike was sustained by financial support from workers, students and youth across the country.

This historic struggle and the mass "Yes" vote pointed to both the possibility and necessity for unified action by all workers—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike—not just for equal pay, but for all the social rights of the working class and against the capitalist profit system itself, the source of the exploitation and oppression of the working class.

The Liberal-Country government failed to initiate any fundamental social changes following the referendum. It was the more politically astute elements of the ruling elite and the Whitlam-led Labor Party opposition, in particular, who decided to cultivate a layer of Aboriginal leaders in order to divert the growing demands of indigenous workers back into safe parliamentary channels.

Labor, with the backing of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, played a key role in transforming the elemental class struggle at Wave

Hill away from a socialist orientation and into bourgeois demands for “property” rights, promising to legislate “land rights” and recognition of “native title.”

Elected to power in 1972, the Whitlam government quickly organised to legislate in favour of these new capitalist property relations, allocating significant resources to promoting “indigenous self-determination” and a layer of privileged Aboriginal leaders, who had a huge financial stake in the new “native title” industry.

In the five decades since the referendum, “Aboriginal” or “black” politics, along with that of other so-called “identities”—feminism, multiculturalism, sexual preference, etc. has been thoroughly integrated into the official establishment and the entire education system, as a means of creating divisions within the working class and suppressing the class struggle.

The enrichment of indigenous bureaucrats, academics and entrepreneurs, whose interests lie in insisting that “race,” not class, is the fundamental division in society, has developed apace. They make handsome livings out of the lie that racial oppression is the product of “whites,” not the profit system.

According to Nigel Scullion, the federal minister for indigenous affairs, the growth of indigenous companies in Australia is “the envy of the business world.” Australia’s Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP), he recently claimed, “has been a game-changer” with government contracts expanding from \$6.2 million in 2012–13 to \$284 million at end of 2015–16 financial year.

Each month the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper publishes, “The Deal,” a 48-page magazine supplement. Its May edition, entitled “The New Agenda—Celebrating indigenous success,” was sponsored by the Business Council of Australia, the Commonwealth Bank of Australia and Price Waterhouse Coopers’ indigenous consulting services. And what a celebration!

The publication was peppered with articles glorifying “First Nation” capitalism, including “When the Dreaming meets the market,” “Dreamtime boomtime,” and “Money’s not a dirty word.” These were interspersed with advertisements for Aston Martin sports cars, Swiss wrist watches and other luxury items.

One story referenced prominent ABC-TV indigenous news anchor Stan Grant’s speech to the “Supply Nation” annual dinner for indigenous business chiefs. Grant denounced pioneering Australian anthropologist W.H. Stanner, who had once said that the “Dreaming” (Aboriginal religious and cultural practices) and the market were mutually exclusive.

“I can tell you here that none of us here believe that. We are proof that we can walk in the Dreaming and walk in the market,” Grant declared. “We have to tell a story of success, to embrace success, to move beyond the darkness of our history even while not forgetting the struggle of those who continue to languish.”

While Grant and other members of this economically privileged milieu pontificate about “empowerment” and “individual achievement,” insisting that capitalism is “the only game in town,” life for the overwhelming majority of ordinary Aborigines remains catastrophic. This is confirmed, again and again each year by the federal government’s own annual “Closing the Gap” report.

The most recent data shows that six of the seven critical “Closing the Gap” measures—life expectancy, child mortality, employment, reading and writing, school attendance and early education—had either failed to improve or were going backwards.

For tens of thousands of remote-area Aborigines and other sections of the indigenous working class, conditions of life are as bad or worse than those before the 1967 referendum. Community and family dysfunction, overcrowded and run-down housing, alcoholism and other substance abuse, as well as physical and mental health problems, have reached calamitous levels.

Last year, the official infant mortality rate for indigenous children was almost double that for their non-indigenous counterparts—6.2 indigenous infant deaths per 1,000 live births, compared with 3.7 per 1,000 live births; death from diabetes was seven times higher than for other Australians; and while the indigenous population is growing, life expectancy for Aborigines is around 10 years less than for the rest of the population.

Social problems, such as suicide and petrol-sniffing, unheard of in Aboriginal communities prior to 1967, have reared their ugly heads. The indigenous suicide rate is now double the national rate and, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2014 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15–24 were four times more likely to die by suicide than their non-indigenous counterparts. In some remote communities, youth suicide is being described as an epidemic, with children as young as 11 deciding to kill themselves.

Indigenous imprisonment rates are amongst the worst in world. Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders constitute about 3 percent of Australia’s overall population, they comprise 27 percent of the prison population. In the Northern Territory over 85 percent of all prisoners, and 95 percent of youth prisoners are Aboriginal.

Last April, the UN’s special rapporteur on indigenous rights, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, visited Australia. Her interim report revealed that endemic poverty and Australia’s child protection policies, under which indigenous children are removed from their families at 10 times the rate of non-indigenous families, were the principal factors in the high incarceration rates.

Two weeks later, an Oxfam Report declared that successive Australian governments had “failed to achieve meaningful change” for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As well as being the 50th year since of the referendum 2017 is the 10th anniversary of the federal government’s so-called “intervention” into remote Aboriginal communities. Initiated by the Howard Liberal-National government in 2007 and rebadged as “Stronger Futures” by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, it fraudulently claimed to be protecting indigenous children from sexual abuse in Australia’s Northern Territory.

This lie was used to justify the suspension of Australia’s racial discrimination act in order to “quarantine” pension and social welfare to all indigenous people in the Territory. Indigenous programs were also cut or closed, along with other social supports to so-called “unviable” communities.

The “intervention’s” hated quarantine card, which forces indigenous welfare recipients to spend up to 70 percent of their income at government-approved stores, was a brutal reminder to older Aboriginal workers and their families of the slave-like conditions and ration cards imposed on them prior to the 1967 referendum.

According to recent census data from Papunya and Maningrida, two remote Northern Territory communities, income, housing and overall poverty have worsened in the ten years since the intervention.

Overcrowding affects 79.1 percent of indigenous homes in Papunya and 82 percent in Maningrida, while income inequality between indigenous and non-indigenous residents has increased from 4.8 to 5.9 times at Papunya and 3.1 to 6.9 times at Maningrida. The median weekly personal income for Aborigines in Papunya is currently between \$215 and \$219 in Maningrida compared to between \$1,271 and \$1,506 for non-indigenous residents in the two communities.

The enrichment of a small Aboriginal elite that extols entrepreneurship, wealth accumulation and the “free market” at one pole, and the ongoing impoverishment of the vast majority of ordinary Aborigines at the other, is the real social and political legacy of the 1967 referendum.



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