

Australian Labor government prioritises indigenous “Voice” in bid to divert mounting class tensions

Mike Head
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This week’s resumption of the Australian parliament for 2023 was preceded on Sunday by two revealing keynote speeches by Labor government leaders, outlining their agenda.

One, by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, dedicated much of the year to legislating for, then conducting, a referendum to amend the 1901 Constitution to “establish a body, to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.” This, Albanese declared, was a “national priority” and would be “a great Australian moment.”

In the other speech, Treasurer Jim Chalmers told the same Chifley Research Centre conference in Canberra that no one should expect increases in social or welfare spending in the government’s May budget. A discipline of “restraint” had to apply, despite surging inflation and soaring home loan interest rates placing “extreme price pressures” on stressed household budgets.

Taken together, the speeches are a warning of the duplicitous role of the “Voice” referendum proposal. It is, first and foremost, a gigantic diversion from the Labor government’s imposition on the working class—including the indigenous workers and poor—of an historic and deepening cut to living standards, fuelled by the intensifying cost-of-living crisis.

The “Voice” is an attempt to put a supposedly progressive gloss on Labor’s reactionary, pro-business agenda, which includes keeping workers’ wage “rises” far below inflation, continuing to let rip the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic while cutting health spending, and intensifying preparations to join a catastrophic US-led war against China, featuring a huge, rapid expansion of military spending and the AUKUS nuclear submarine program.

The same government that claims to be addressing the historic injustices done to indigenous people is seeking to make the working class as a whole pay for the crisis of global capitalism, which has been deepened by the pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

At the same time, the “Voice” is itself a thoroughly right-wing corporate-backed project. It will do absolutely nothing to reverse the appalling conditions of most indigenous people under capitalism—those living in working-class suburbs, outskirt settlements or remote communities deprived of basic facilities.

As even the government’s latest own annual “Closing the Gap” report admitted, critical targets are “worsening”—adults in prison,

suicides, the number of children in out-of-home care, separated from their families, and children who start school while not being “developmentally on track.”

The “Voice” would perpetuate this terrible social crisis, just as the “Closing the Gap” program itself has done since it was launched in 2008 by then Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd following his government’s parliamentary apology to the “stolen generations”—the many thousands of Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970.

Despite the political establishment’s rhetoric that Rudd’s apology constituted a historic turning point—just like the claims being made for the “Voice”—the horrendous conditions endured by the vast majority of Aboriginal people have only deteriorated.

According to a 2020 report from the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Childcare, more than 20,000 indigenous children were living in “out-of-home care,” more than double the number of about 9,000 a decade earlier. Another “stolen generation” is being created, as a result of the oppressive social conditions and ongoing trauma.

Under these conditions, the purpose of the “Voice” is to further integrate a privileged and increasingly wealthy indigenous elite of agency CEOs, business entrepreneurs and academics, who have been groomed and prospered alongside this social misery, into the ruling capitalist class.

The “Voice” would become part of the very same capitalist state apparatus, now headed by the parliament and government, that was responsible for the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society, through massacres, dispossession and “assimilation,” and for the ongoing impoverishment of the indigenous population, along with the entire working class.

The basic rights of indigenous people, and the working class as a whole, cannot be defended through the 1901 Constitution, which itself is based on and enshrines the profit system. It defends the interests of the capitalist class, enforced by the state apparatus of “armed men” and “material appendages, prisons and coercive institutions of all kinds,” as described by Frederick Engels.

The Albanese government’s proposal is to modify this Constitution to say that the “Voice” “may make representations to Parliament and the Executive Government on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.” That is, this body would become a new institutionalised arm of the state apparatus,

working in collaboration with the national, state and territory and local governments.

The exact form and membership of the “Voice” is being kept deliberately vague to hide this reality. If the referendum were passed, the federal parliament itself would have the power to decide, by legislation, its “composition, functions, powers and procedures.”

Big business backing

Backed by the business establishment and the corporate media, Albanese is presenting the “Voice” as “an opportunity to build national unity,” precisely when class tensions and political discontent are mounting. He has specifically appealed to the Liberal-National Coalition, as well as the Greens—which have now signed up—for a common front across the parliamentary order.

During the Q&A session following his speech on Sunday, Albanese again emphasised the support of big business, alongside the churches and trade unions. He said the Business Council of Australia, Australian Industry Group, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Minerals Council of Australia and individual corporations were “all out there campaigning.”

These ruling circles calculate that further entrenching their already lucrative partnerships with indigenous business operators and other elites, such as the executives of land councils and native title holders, will be to their financial benefit. They are also acutely aware of the need to try to window dress the widening gulf between themselves, the wealthiest layers of society, and the vast majority of ordinary working people, as documented by this year’s Oxfam inequality report.

A social explosion is brewing as prices and interest rates rise, and millions of working-class households face immense financial stress. Increasingly, this will threaten the stability of the parliamentary order and the Labor government, which barely scraped into office last May after a record low vote for both Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition.

Notably the right-wing Murdoch media outlets have largely swung behind the “Voice” plan. In fact, one of Murdoch’s most frothing mouthpieces, *Australian* associate editor and Sky News host Chris Kenny, was appointed to the government’s “Indigenous Voice Co-design” advisory group, along with Jeff Kennett, the hated former Victorian state Liberal premier.

Yesterday, the *Australian* published an editorial promoting the prospects of Albanese delivering a successful referendum, accompanied by a Newspan showing that 56 percent of respondents supported the “Voice” proposal—mostly on the basis it would ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had a say in policies that affect them.

As that result indicates, the ruling class, via the Labor government, is cynically appealing to widespread sentiments among working people of revulsion toward the more than two centuries of mass murders, epidemics, removals and separation of children by British imperialism and Australian capitalism.

Like so many similar measures over the past five decades—from the establishment of land rights in the 1970s and the creation of “native title” in the 1990s to the “stolen generations” apology—Labor is seeking to channel the deeply-felt hostility to that brutal history into the elevation of an indigenous elite as a

direct agency of capitalist rule.

More than 200 years of Australian capitalism has demonstrated the unwillingness, incapacity and opposition of the ruling class to put an end to the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, any more than it would stop the ruthless exploitation of the working class as a whole.

Rather, indigenous working-class people have become, together with immigrant and refugee communities, some of the worst victims of the growing imposition of poorly-paid and casualised employment, while corporate profits and wealth have climbed to record heights.

Under conditions of rising working-class struggles in Australia and globally, the “Voice” is another effort to divide workers along racial lines. The purpose is to block a unified fight against the social disaster being created by the same private profit system that has devastated indigenous people.

It is not “whites” and “white society” that is responsible for the history of oppression of indigenous people, as self-appointed “black” spokespeople proclaim, but the capitalist profit system.

Working people should reject this toxic ideology of racial identity politics, which arbitrarily seeks to split them into racial categories, and fight instead for the unity of the working class, including by coming to the defence of indigenous people and other oppressed layers. The only way forward for indigenous workers and youth lies in a common working-class struggle against the program of austerity, ever-widening social inequality and war being implemented by Labor and every other capitalist government.

Decades of false and broken promises have proven that ending the atrocious situation confronting indigenous people requires a fight by the entire working class to abolish the socio-economic order that has produced it. That means overturning the capitalist profit system as a whole, and replacing it with a socialist society, based on genuine social equality and democracy.



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