

Australian Greens split over indigenous “Voice” to parliament

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12 February 2023

The Australian Greens have split following differences over the Labor government’s proposal to establish an indigenous Voice to parliament. Greens Senator Lidia Thorpe, an outspoken opponent of the Voice, announced on February 6 that she was leaving the party and would sit as an independent MP after a two-day party retreat of federal MPs failed to resolve the issue.

Thorpe is suggesting that she may form her own party to campaign against the Labor government’s policy and take forward the fight for “black sovereignty.”

In the dispute, neither faction represents the interests of working people, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. Both are oriented to a narrow privileged and well-off indigenous elite, whose interests rest upon the maintenance of the capitalist system and the continuation of the exploitation of the working class, including indigenous workers who form one of its most oppressed layers.

The majority of the Greens leadership supports Labor’s proposal for a Voice, which would function as an indigenous advisory body to parliament. It is to be established on the basis of a referendum, which would also provide for an acknowledgment of Aboriginal people in the 1901 Australian Constitution. Such an acknowledgement is to promote the fraud that this will make amends for the two centuries of crimes carried out against Aboriginal people by British and Australian capitalism. It will not.

Following Thorpe’s defection, Greens leader Adam Bandt declared: “The Greens will support the Voice referendum... We want the referendum to succeed. I will join my fellow Greens MPs in campaigning for Yes.”

This is a bid to further shore-up the Greens’ credentials as a “responsible” party of the political establishment. The support for the Voice aligns the Greens with the right-wing Labor government, the largest businesses and financial firms and the corporate press, all of which are backing the Voice.

As the WSWs has explained, Labor’s policy serves several interrelated purposes, all of them reactionary.

In the first instance, the Voice is a massive diversion. The Labor government is carrying out a rapid military build-up, placing Australia on the frontlines of US plans for a disastrous war against China. In office for just eight months, Labor has presided over more COVID deaths than in the entire preceding years of the pandemic and has abolished more safety measures than its Liberal-National predecessor. And amid an unprecedented inflation crisis, Labor is insisting that working people must “sacrifice” and wages must be suppressed while corporate profits are at record levels.

The Voice is aimed at burying these essential class questions, and putting a false progressive gloss on the Labor government. The

Greens support all Labor’s right-wing policies, from militarism and war, to profits before lives in the pandemic and an escalating assault on the working class.

The Voice, moreover, will do nothing to address the social disaster confronting the majority of Aborigines. As with previous initiatives, such as Labor’s apology to the stolen generation in 2009, the Voice will in fact be used to justify a stepped-up onslaught on welfare and other social rights of working people as a whole, all with the blessing of an Aboriginal body.

In reality, there will be nothing representative or democratic about the Voice. It will be comprised of a layer of the Aboriginal elite that is ever-more integrated into the business and political establishment, while the social crisis afflicting indigenous people has worsened for decades under both Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments.

Thorpe has criticised the Voice, noting that it will not improve the lot of ordinary Aborigines, who continue to suffer massive rates of poverty and incarceration, together with police and state violence. What she says is true, but what needs to be examined is her alternative.

She is pitching to widespread suspicion about the Voice among indigenous workers. They have gone through repeated experiences with such entities as the various land councils and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), which helped to create a wealthy indigenous upper middle-class, but did nothing for the vast majority.

However, there is nothing progressive about Thorpe’s stance. She is a representative of a rival wing of the Aboriginal elite, which is hostile to the Voice from the standpoint that it does not provide this wealthy constituency with enough of the privileges and power that they demand.

At the ideological level, there are no fundamental differences between Thorpe and those backing the Voice. Both are proponents of Aboriginal identity politics, which posits that race, not class, is the fundamental division in society. If anything, Thorpe is a more vociferous proponent of an indigenous racialism that serves to divide the working class, and subordinate Aboriginal workers and youth to a “black” elite.

While Thorpe references the horrendous social conditions facing most Aboriginal people, her primary opposition to the Voice is that it would “cede Aboriginal sovereignty” on unfavourable terms. She has frequently declared that “white society” and “Aboriginal society” remain in an undeclared war that began with colonisation in 1788.

Behind the “sovereignty” agenda

Thorpe’s argument is false on a number of grounds. The horrendous

crimes against Aboriginal people in the genocidal wars that paved the way for the establishment of the Australian state, were not perpetrated by “white society”—an ahistorical abstraction that denies class divisions. They were crimes of capitalism, aimed at establishing capitalist property relations and the foundations of a capitalist nation-state.

Aboriginal society, prior to colonisation, knew nothing of concepts such as sovereignty and nations, or for that matter, private property. Social relations were those forms of primitive communism, with, in many cases, nomadic clans and tribes living communally off the land. These relations were incompatible with the British project of establishing a modern capitalist nation-state that depended from the start on the private appropriation of land.

Thorpe and other proponents of identity politics retrospectively project the conceptions of sovereignty and nation back into the past, to justify their own upper middle-class political projects of today. In reality, Aboriginal people are now completely integrated into the capitalist system, and the class divisions are if anything wider between the well-off layer of black businessmen, media personalities, academics and politicians and the vast majority of Aboriginal people they purport to represent.

While racism still exists, and is fostered by the ruling elite to divide the working class, the source of the oppression of the indigenous people, as it is with the rest of the working class, is the capitalist private ownership of society’s resources, relations which Thorpe and the other identity politics representatives defend. Non-indigenous workers are not responsible for the oppression of Aboriginal workers. They share the same fundamental class interests. Attacks first levelled against Aboriginal workers have frequently been extended to the working class as a whole.

The aim of those like Thorpe is not a return to pre-1788 primitive communist society, which would be an impossibility and utterly retrograde. Instead, it is to secure privileges for a narrow Aboriginal elite within the framework of the capitalist system itself.

In an interview with the youth publication *Junkee* last year, Thorpe set out her program in more detail than is often the case. Her central demand is for a “treaty” between Aboriginal society and the capitalist state.

She stated: “[T]reaty is so important to have first because it’s the clans and the nations that need to be at the table to negotiate the sharing of sovereignty in this country. And that’s, again, why the treaty is so important because we don’t want to cede our sovereignty.”

Thorpe continued: “We need to have real power. We’ve been advisors for too long in this country. This government is not about to give us real power. They still want us to be advisors. So a treaty will negotiate real power through shared sovereignty...”

Such a treaty would be struck by representatives of the Aboriginal elite, for their benefit. Thorpe favourably referenced the Waitangi Treaty in New Zealand. It has provided for the development of a privileged Maori layer, which now exercises substantial influence in capitalist politics and controls \$70 billion in business assets. Meanwhile, the vast mass of Maori remain oppressed and impoverished.

Thorpe has also recently called for 10 seats of the federal parliament to be earmarked for indigenous representatives. This would not change the class character of parliament as the political vehicle for capitalist rule by one iota, any more than dedicated Maori seats have done in New Zealand. Instead, it would further elevate an Aboriginal

elite while sowing racial division among working people.

In fact there are at present 11 indigenous representatives in the House of Representatives and the Senate, more than at any time in history. They have done nothing to alleviate the plight of Aboriginal workers. That only highlights that parliament will not carry out any measures for the benefit of the indigenous working class or any section of workers.

Thorpe has identified herself with other projects of a grasping, upper middle-class Aboriginal layer. Some of the real motivations behind her references to “sovereignty” are revealed in the “Pay the Rent” campaign. It “encourages” all non-indigenous people to pay a weekly “rent” to the Aboriginal people who run the program, on the grounds that the land was never ceded. In other words, on the basis of reactionary identity politics, those running this program aspire to become de facto landlords.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes divisive identity politics in all their forms. The only means of ending all types of discrimination, oppression and exploitation in modern capitalist society is through the unity of the international working class in a common struggle against the profit system. Greater privileges for an Aboriginal elite will do nothing for Aboriginal workers, whose conditions will only deteriorate further, along with the working class as a whole, amid the deepest crisis of capitalism in decades. Workers have the same fundamental interests, whatever their racial background, nationality, gender, etc..

What is required is a fight for the socialist reorganisation of society from top to bottom. The banks and corporations must be placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the entire working class, which produces all society’s wealth. This is the basis for ending poverty and all other social afflictions and establishing a society based on genuine social equality.

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