

Australian government unveils “tweaked” Voice referendum proposal

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After months of backroom talks with hand-picked representatives of an affluent indigenous elite, constitutional lawyers and ex-High Court judges, the Australian Labor government last week announced a modified version of the constitutional amendment it proposes to entrench a body to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

The Labor government is desperate to put a progressive, even humanitarian, gloss on its reactionary, pro-business and militarist agenda by establishing a new advisory institution at the heart of the same capitalist apparatus of government and parliament that has dispossessed, massacred and suppressed the indigenous people.

It falsely claims that the Voice institution would make a practical difference to the atrocious living and social conditions of most indigenous people, when in fact their conditions are rapidly worsening on every front.

The intensive behind-the-scenes negotiations, however, were about reassuring the ruling class, particularly all the many big business backers of the Voice, that the new institution will have no legal powers to stymie their operations, such as to open new mines on land claimed by indigenous groups.

Under the new form of words, parliament can pass legislation to ensure that the Voice, however it is finally constituted, has no legal right to challenge any government decisions—particularly affecting corporate interests—on the grounds of inadequate consultation with the members of the Voice.

The Voice also will be limited to making representations “on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples” to the “Commonwealth” (federal) parliament and executive government—specifically ruling out any challenge to

decisions by state, territory and local governments.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese told last Thursday’s media conference that the “tweaking” of the words was about “making it very clear about the primacy of the Parliament, making it very clear that this isn’t about veto or third chambers or anything else.”

This “tweaking” simply underscores the hypocrisy and fraud of the entire Voice project. While posturing as defenders of Aboriginal rights, the government is pursuing policies that are having a devastating impact on the lives of workers—indigenous and non-indigenous alike.

It is presiding over the biggest cut to living standards since World War II, particularly by working with the trade union apparatuses to keep workers’ wage “rises” far below soaring prices, rents and interest rates.

The government is also continuing to let rip the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic while cutting public hospital and health spending by billions of dollars a year, and intensifying preparations to join a catastrophic US-led war against China.

That has been heightened by the government’s massive expansion of military spending, spearheaded by the \$368 billion AUKUS nuclear submarine program. These billions, which could be used to build public hospitals, schools and housing, and tackle poverty, will instead be poured into the war machine, with the price to be paid by the working class.

The same government that claims to be addressing the historic injustices done to indigenous people is seeking to impose on the whole working class the burden of the intensifying crisis of the financial markets and global capitalism, which has been deepened by the escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

In fact, Albanese is also attempting to promote the

Voice as a symbol of national unity in preparation for war. “This referendum is an historic democratic opportunity for a unifying Australian moment,” Albanese stated last Thursday, trying to drum up nationalism. The truth is that there is nothing democratic about the Voice and it cannot paper over the real class divisions in Australia.

Rather, under conditions of rising working-class struggles in Australia and globally, the Voice is another effort to block a unified fight by workers of all backgrounds against the social disaster being created by the same private profit system that has devastated indigenous people.

It is increasingly plain that the Voice will do absolutely nothing to reverse the horrendous conditions of most indigenous people under capitalism—those living in working-class suburbs, outskirt settlements or remote communities deprived of basic facilities.

Even the Labor government’s own latest “Closing the Gap” report, issued at the end of last year, showed an intensifying economic and social crisis afflicting indigenous households. One of the most shocking statistics was that indigenous youth comprise 6 percent of the Australian youth population, but make up 48 percent of the youth prison population.

Rather, the central aim of the Voice is to further integrate, as a constitutionally entrenched advisory agency to parliament and the executive, a privileged and wealthy indigenous elite of CEOs, business entrepreneurs and academics, who have prospered alongside this social misery.

One exchange at Thursday’s media conference underscored that reality. Albanese presented the Voice as the solution to the oppressive conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Yet he insisted this was “not because of a shortage of goodwill or good intentions on any side of politics, and it’s not because of a lack of funds. It’s because governments have spent decades trying to impose solutions from Canberra, rather than consulting with communities.”

Yet it is precisely the lack of funding that has led to atrocious conditions for broad layers of Aboriginal workers. Albanese’s comments make clear that there will be no increase in funding to end the lack of basic health, education, housing and other essential services.

When asked what measures would exist to ensure that

this record would not continue with the Voice, Albanese requested Professor Marcia Langton, a prominent member of the indigenous elite, to respond.

Langton flatly defended the role of the many previous “advisory and consultative groups and councils” that she and others from this privileged layer had been involved with for decades. They had made “a very positive difference.” In reality, only a miniscule layer of the Aboriginal upper-middle class has benefitted, while the conditions of working-class indigenous people have continued to deteriorate.

More than two centuries of Australian capitalism have demonstrated the organic incapacity of the ruling class to put an end to the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It was built on the ruthless exploitation of the working class as a whole, of whom indigenous workers and youth are the most oppressed section.

There is only one way to reverse the disaster confronting Aboriginal workers and youth. That is a unified political struggle of all workers, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, to overturn the capitalist profit system—the source of the worsening social crisis facing the working class as a whole.



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