

Liberal Party decision to oppose indigenous Voice intensifies internal divisions

Mike Head
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The federal parliamentary Liberal Party last week decided to join its coalition partners, the rural-based Nationals, in opposing outright the Labor government's referendum proposal to enshrine in the Constitution a still undefined body to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

This decision, spearheaded by right-wing Liberal leader Peter Dutton, intensifies rifts within Australia's ruling capitalist class over the plan to entrench an entirely new institution in the country's 1901 Constitution, and hence the capitalist state apparatus.

After a two-hour party room meeting in Canberra, Dutton vowed to campaign actively against the Voice plan and made that stance binding on all members of the Liberals' shadow ministry in an effort to silence internal dissent.

There are open divisions within the Liberals. Several backbenchers and most state Liberal leaders have said they will call for a "yes" vote in the referendum, due to be held later this year. Former Indigenous Affairs Minister Ken Wyatt—who backed the development of the Voice proposal from 2017 onward under the previous Liberal-National Coalition government—resigned from the Liberal Party in response to Dutton's announcement.

Today, the Coalition's shadow attorney-general and indigenous Australians spokesman Julian Leeser quit the Liberal Party frontbench, allowing him to campaign for the Voice, in whose planning he has been involved from its inception.

Those splits reflect the fact that much is at stake for the ruling class in this conflict. Together with the Labor government, big business overwhelmingly supports the Voice, not least as a mechanism for further integrating a privileged indigenous layer of corporate and agency CEOs, business entrepreneurs and senior academics into the capitalist establishment.

On the other hand, sections of the ruling class have

raised concerns that the Voice would have a constitutionally-entrenched power to intervene into every aspect of government, including military and foreign policy, and to mount challenges to the High Court on the grounds of not being adequately consulted.

The stand taken by the Liberals goes further. It rejects the Voice project altogether, rather than simply objecting to the wording of the proposed constitutional amendment, which is yet to be finalised by a six-week parliamentary committee inquiry.

Those elements around Dutton have no fundamental differences with the underlying political and business agenda of cultivating and using an increasingly wealthy indigenous elite for mutual advantage, as they have done for decades in the name of "reconciliation," essentially with capitalism.

The Liberals are proposing purely symbolic recognition in the Constitution and perhaps a legislated form of an advisory body, based on "local and regional voices," that would not be cemented in the Constitution.

Having suffered a series of major electoral defeats, from last May's federal election to the recent Aston by-election, marked by the implosion of the Liberal Party's base in affluent and middle-class areas, Dutton and his supporters are veering further to the right, to seek to agitate and mobilise a new base.

Dutton's National Right faction of the much-depleted Liberal federal party room, which is estimated to account for 27 of the 66 remaining MPs, is reviving efforts to develop a more Trump-style populist movement, raging against what Dutton calls a "Canberra Voice."

Dutton stated: "Our proposal is to have a local and regional voice to listen to local elders who live in the community and listen to what will make a practical outcome in terms of maternal health, a restoration of law and order, a reduction in domestic violence."

This is an obvious dog whistle to right-wing and racist

forces that seek to blame indigenous people for their shocking social conditions and demand a repressive “law and order” response. It is reminiscent of the Howard Coalition government’s brutal and disastrous 2007 Northern Territory intervention.

That military-led operation, while presented as an intervention to protect indigenous children, was part of a plan to close “economically unviable” communities, open up land for exploitation and private profit, and develop a cheap labour force by undermining welfare benefits. Aboriginal people, the most oppressed section of the working class, were used as a test case for punitive measures against welfare recipients nationally.

Dutton, who was a minister in that government, now seeks to cloak the Coalition’s position in terms of defending “equal rights” against an alleged bid to afford indigenous people special rights under the Constitution. The only people who will have special constitutional rights are the thin and wealthy indigenous layer who will serve unelected on the Voice.

This fraudulent refrain is shared by various right-wing formations, such as Senator Pauline Hanson’s One Nation and Advance, which are heavily involved in “no” campaigns against the Voice plan.

Neither the Liberals nor these elements have any difference whatsoever with the Labor government’s real agenda, which consists of imposing onto the working class as a whole, the full brunt of the cost of the escalating military commitment, via the AUKUS pact, of war against China. On that, there is a bipartisan front with the Coalition.

Nevertheless, the Liberals’ stance throws into question protracted efforts, spanning two decades, by Labor and Liberal-National Coalition leaders alike, to give the appearance of redressing the more than 200-year dispossession and oppression of the indigenous population by British and Australian imperialism by inserting amendments into the colonial-era Constitution to “recognise” the indigenous people.

Ever since it barely scraped into office last May, winning less than a third of the vote, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s Labor government has made the Voice referendum central to its political pitch.

This certainly has nothing to do with addressing the past crimes of Australian capitalism or the appalling conditions of many indigenous people. These conditions will continue to deteriorate, along with those of the entire working class, as the cost of living rises, the housing and social crisis deepens, and the Albanese government pours

billions into military spending and tax cuts for the rich.

In fact, Albanese has already declared that the Voice project is not about spending any extra money on programs for indigenous people, which are woefully inadequate. Rather, the Labor government is desperate to use the Voice referendum to put a supposedly progressive veneer on its reactionary, pro-business and militarist agenda.

With the Liberals in disarray, the ruling class is depending on Labor and its trade union partners more than ever to impose this program. These apparatuses, however, are also widely discredited among workers and youth after decades of pro-business betrayals.

The Voice is intended to portray a fake national unity, covering over the ever-widening social inequality and class divide, both for domestic purposes and for war mobilisation preparations. It is central to seeking to promote reactionary nationalism by cloaking ruthless Australian imperialism in a new national identity of supposed inclusiveness.

The corporate elite also regards the Voice as a more institutional and reliable vehicle for pursuing mining and other corporate projects, which have often become embroiled in prolonged legal disputes with indigenous land claimants.

Both the Labor government and the opposition Coalition, in different ways, are seeking to divide workers along racial lines under conditions of rising working-class struggles in Australia and globally. In Labor’s case, it is appealing to racial and other forms of identity politics to block a unified fight against the social disaster being created by the same private profit system that has devastated indigenous people.

As the WSWS has explained, decades of false and broken promises, such as “reconciliation,” royal commissions, advisory bodies and official apologies, have proven that ending the atrocious situation confronting most indigenous people requires a fight by the entire working class to overturn the capitalist order and replace it with a socialist society, based on genuine social equality and real democracy.



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