

Australia: Right-wing figures vent racist opposition to indigenous Voice plan

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A high-profile public meeting in the Australian regional city of Tamworth on March 31 pointed to the racist opposition being whipped up around the Albanese Labor government's referendum proposal to enshrine in the country's Constitution a still undefined body to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

From the platform, speakers openly invoked a spectre of an indigenous takeover of the country, claiming the Voice plan would give indigenous people "special rights." Such agitation points to the kind of reactionary appeals to which the Liberal-National Coalition, led by former defence minister Peter Dutton, is pitched. Last week, Dutton announced that his Liberal Party would join the rural-based Nationals in opposing the Voice plan outright, and he would campaign personally against it.

The Tamworth line-up brought together elements throughout the political establishment, from the Labor Party to the Nationals—who are a critical component of the Coalition—including Senator Pauline Hanson's One Nation, which has a two-decade record of inflammatory slurs against indigenous people, as well as refugees, immigrants and welfare recipients.

To the extent that the Coalition and the far-right could possibly gain traction on the issue of the Voice, it is because the Labor government's proposal is based on reactionary identity politics that divides workers along racial lines, while doing absolutely nothing to redress the appalling social conditions of most indigenous people.

Far from affording "special rights" to indigenous workers and youth, the Voice is a plan, backed overwhelmingly by big business, to further integrate a small but increasingly wealthy indigenous elite into the capitalist class and its machinery of rule. In an entrenched constitutional advisory role to parliament and governments, the Voice will help to enforce the dictates of the financial markets against the working class as a whole.

The Tamworth meeting was the first major public event for the referendum "no" campaign. Gary Johns, a right-wing former Keating Labor government minister, was joined on stage by One Nation leader Hanson, ex-deputy prime minister and National Party leader Barnaby Joyce and far-right broadcaster Alan Jones.

The event was hosted by "Recognise a Better Way," a group fronted by Johns, indigenous businessman and ex-Labor Party president and failed Liberal Party candidate Warren Mundine, and John Anderson, another former deputy prime minister and National Party leader. Both Anderson and Joyce remain significant figures in the Nationals.

Despite being given considerable corporate media coverage in advance, the gathering attracted no great public support. All 800 tickets to the free event were sold online, but the Tamworth Town Hall was two-thirds empty, even though some people reportedly travelled long distances to attend. Organisers bunched the audience together to give the appearance of a larger crowd for the benefit of the media.

This organisation says it supports symbolic recognition of indigenous Australians in a constitutional preamble, but its agenda goes far further in seeking to foment a far right base similar to that of Trump in the United States.

Speakers claimed that establishing an indigenous advisory body, with the power to "make representations" to parliament and the executive government, and cementing it into the 1901 Constitution would create an unequal state ultimately dominated by Aborigines.

According to media accounts, Johns spoke disgustingly, and at length, about "integration," claiming rates of "inter-marrying" between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians were such that "there will come a time in Australia when we are all Aboriginal."

Hanson's line was similar. In a March 7 media statement promoting the meeting, she said the Voice was "only the first step towards permanently dividing and separating Australia on race and the creation of an Aboriginal state..."

"Make no mistake, black nationalism activists will not stop with the Voice. They will continue until they have their own nation within Australia, one which the rest of us pay for and one which has sovereignty over the rest of us."

In another media release on March 8, seeking to drum up support for the meeting, Hanson revealed her party's brutal supposed solution to the appalling conditions confronting many indigenous people in remote communities.

Instead of the Voice, Hanson stated: "[W]e must prioritize helping those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in

real disadvantage in neglected remote communities. The only way to close the gaps is to close those communities down and help the poor people who live in them to go where they can take advantage of the economic and education opportunities the rest of us have.”

This would amount to the forcible or coerced removal of indigenous people, often from traditional clan land. These communities have long been deprived of the basic services and facilities that must be provided to all members of society, including those in remote locations, as fundamental social and democratic rights.

In reality, the oppressive social conditions in indigenous communities are also experienced in settlements on the outskirts of cities and towns, and in working-class areas across the country.

Hanson’s confected image of “the economic and education opportunities the rest of us have” could not be further from the truth. Indigenous workers and youth are among the most oppressed members of the working class, whose working and living conditions as a whole are being gutted by the cost-of-living and housing crisis, over which the Labor government is presiding.

An ugly line-up

Interviewed by media outlets after the Tamworth meeting, Joyce, who was deputy prime minister twice under the previous Coalition government, refused to distance himself from what the other speakers, including Johns and Hanson, had said.

Joyce said he would not comment on their remarks, but his appearance at the event was to “stop race distinctions being entrenched in the constitution.” He claimed that the Voice referendum would lead to “differentiation of rights based on race.”

Joyce, who remains a prominent member of parliament, openly sought to pit non-indigenous people against the indigenous population, saying: “Quite obviously if someone gets more rights because of their race, then someone else is gets less rights because of the colour of the skin, or their race.”

The truth is that the only people who would secure “rights” under the Voice plan—which would have its members selected, not elected—would be representatives of the small upper middle class indigenous layer of CEOs, business owners, media personalities and senior academics. They have been groomed and cultivated by the governments, Labor and Coalition, for years at the expense of the vast majority of indigenous workers and youth.

Until last month, the Recognise a Better Way organisation featured Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, an indigenous Nationals-aligned representative of the Coalition’s Northern Territory Country Liberal Party. She has a record of denouncing indigenous “welfare dependency” and “opportunistic collectivism,” and demanding “law and order.”

Price has since joined an even more right-wing “no” group, called Fair Australia, organised by Advance, an Australian

nationalist outfit that has agitated against Muslims, COVID-19 safety measures, climate science and China since it emerged publicly in 2019.

Speaking on behalf of Recognise a Better Way, Mundine told journalists that the two groups would work together. His organisation would spearhead academic work and contribute newspaper opinion pieces, while Advance’s campaign would manage volunteers, door-knocking and publicly campaigns.

Both Advance and One Nation are already running rabid scare campaigns, raising the alleged threat of indigenous secession or domination.

Dutton has aligned the Liberal Party with these elements. “We don’t support Mr Albanese’s Canberra Voice bureaucracy that will divide Australians,” he declared last week. He proposed “a local and regional voice” that would focus on “a practical outcome,” particularly “a restoration of law and order” and “a reduction in domestic violence.”

This is a clear pitch to right-wing and racist forces that seek to blame indigenous people for the devastating social conditions and staggering incarceration rates created by the capitalist profit system, and demand an even more repressive “law and order” response.

Having suffered series of disastrous electoral defeats, from last May’s federal election and three state elections to last month’s Aston by-election—exposing the disintegration of the Liberal Party’s traditional constituency in both affluent and middle-class areas—Dutton and his supporters are seeking to cultivate and mobilise a new base.

However, by installing a small privileged indigenous elite in the constitution, the Voice plan itself is equally racially divisive. Labor is attempting to put an inclusive and progressive gloss on its pro-corporate and pro-war program. Under conditions of rising working-class struggles in Australia and globally against the devastation of living standards, the Voice’s primary purpose is to block a unified working-class fight against the ever-widening social inequality and danger of catastrophic war being created by the same corporate profit system that has shattered the lives of so many indigenous people.

As proven by the bitter experiences of many previous consultative bodies and “reconciliation” programs for decades, the only way forward for indigenous workers and youth lies in a common struggle by the entire working class, in Australia and internationally, to overturn the oppressive capitalist order and create a socialist society, based on social equality and genuine democracy.



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