

Australian Liberal Party leader launches vicious attack on Aborigines in Alice Springs

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Peter Dutton, the federal leader of the Liberal Party, used a tour of Alice Springs last week to vilify the town's Aboriginal population, with lurid allegations of widespread child abuse and other criminality. The trip was a political provocation, based on a transparent dog whistle to the most right-wing and backward layers of the population.

Speaking to the media, Dutton declared: "You've got kids here tonight who are going to be sexually abused or families where domestic violence has now become a current occurrence and we're told that nothing can be done about it." He repeatedly claimed that children were being returned to known perpetrators of abuse, presumably by Northern Territory authorities.

Dutton, a former police officer, did not attempt to conceal the racially-directed character of his allegations. Instead he emphasised on multiple occasions that he was speaking about indigenous families.

As with all such witch-hunts, Dutton's claims were based on hazy anecdotes and gossip. "There are stories that we've heard today as we've walked the streets about the dysfunction, the desperation of young Indigenous kids who are being sexually assaulted, still, on a regular basis," Dutton said. He had also "heard stories...about break-ins, about stolen cars, about risk to human life."

The stories did not come from many people. Dutton hardly met with anyone in Alice Springs, except for a handful of private individuals, including small business people, whose remarks about a purported "Aboriginal crime wave" have repeatedly been aired in the right-wing gutter press.

Dutton did not meet with Aboriginal groups, child welfare organisations or any other body that would be in a position to know if there was a hidden child abuse epidemic.

When an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) journalist asked what data Dutton's assertions were based upon, the Liberal leader condemned this as "such an ABC question," as though facts and figures were an irrelevance. Dutton, predictably, was not able to indicate any statistics or reports that verified his claims.

In the days since, Dutton has been widely condemned by

Aboriginal organisations as well as by the Northern Territory Labor government. Catherine Liddle, CEO of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, said that "The claims of 'rampant' abuse fly in the face of evidence. Data from Territory Families show there has been no escalation in investigations of sexual abuse or exploitation."

Others noted that it is a legal requirement to notify police of child abuse. If Dutton did have information backing up his claims, he should have reported it to the relevant authorities.

Dutton's media campaign was linked to a call for an immediate Australian Federal Police (AFP) intervention. This would take the form of a hostile occupation of the town, which has a large Aboriginal population, as well as other areas in the Northern Territory.

Dutton's pitch on this line is connected with several developments. In the first instance, his trip to Alice Springs served as a launch for the Liberal Party's campaign for a "no" vote in the national referendum that is to be held on an indigenous Voice to parliament.

The policy, brought forward by the federal Labor government, would enshrine the Voice in the Constitution as an advisory body to the parliament and executive government. This would do nothing to address the horrendous social conditions confronting Aboriginal workers and youth.

Instead, its purpose is to put a progressive veneer on Labor's right-wing agenda, including advanced preparations for war with China and sweeping budget austerity measures.

The Voice has received the backing of the dominant sections of big business, not only because its aim is to cover over these essential class issues. Within the ruling elite, there is broad recognition of the importance of integrating a layer of the Aboriginal elite and upper middle-class even more directly into government and corporate structures. The aim is to fashion a purportedly "inclusive" nationalism, to further the war drive and to blunt social opposition from the working class.

It goes without saying that the Liberal Party's opposition to the proposal is not based on any of these principled issues. Instead, the Liberals are running a campaign that is a thinly-veiled appeal to anti-Aboriginal racism.

The party's opposition to the Voice dovetails with the line of the extreme right-wing nationalist One Nation organisation, which has similarly called for a police deployment to the Northern Territory and even for the forced displacement of Aboriginal people living in remote communities there.

The Liberal Party's orientation to this right-wing layer is bound up with its historic crisis. In last May's federal election, the Liberals received their lowest primary vote in some 80 years. The party was similarly reduced to a rump in the Victorian state election last year. It suffered a substantial defeat in the recently-concluded New South Wales election and, weeks after that poll, still does not have a state leader. The results are the starkest indication of an existential crisis of the Liberal Party and of the entire two-party set-up.

For some years, sections of the Liberals have flirted with a turn towards the development of an alt-right movement, modelled on Donald Trump. During the pandemic, some prominent Liberals promoted the right-wing anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine movement, which included outright fascists. Dutton's visit to Alice Springs, and his right-wing campaign against the Voice, indicate a deepening of this orientation.

The outraged response of the Labor Party, together with sections of small 'l' liberals, to Dutton's remarks is drenched in hypocrisy.

Dutton is simply reprising the line that was used to justify the Northern Territory intervention in 2006. In the period preceding that police and military deployment, the ABC published a stream of lurid coverage, alleging an epidemic of child sexual abuse and demanding government action. Those claims were no less false than Dutton's assertions.

The NT intervention, while launched by the Howard Liberal-National government, had the full support of the Labor Party. The intervention was extended and deepened by the Labor administrations of Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. Together with the Liberals, they used the intervention to establish a precedent for broader attacks on the working class, including the introduction of welfare quarantining.

The intervention, building on decades of government attacks, has deepened a social catastrophe in the Northern Territory. Figures prior to the pandemic showed that almost 45 percent of the roughly 61,000 Aboriginal people in the NT were living below the poverty line. They are afflicted by a lack of healthcare, education and employment.

The situation is continuing to worsen. In remote

communities, a lack of housing is resulting in massive overcrowding, and is forcing others into town centres, such as Alice Springs, where they are provided with no assistance or opportunities.

The situation inevitably results in crime, but contrary to the lurid media accounts, these are primarily petty crimes of poverty, such as theft and youth vandalism.

Albanese, while denouncing Dutton, peddled a very similar line when he visited Alice Springs in January. He adapted himself completely to the media hysteria of a crime wave in the city. Rather than propose any policies to address the social crisis, Albanese's announcements centred on a major boost to police funding.

Dutton's trip has only underscored the right-wing character of the official "yes" and "no" campaigns. The Liberal Party is openly orienting to the far-right. Meanwhile, Labor is hailing those few Liberal Party representatives who have backed the Voice as representing the real heritage of their right-wing, bourgeois party. Media pundits have written articles stressing that the Voice is not "revolutionary," but "moderate" and "reasonable."

Workers and young people must reject both camps, based on the fight for the unity of the entire working class, irrespective of race and other forms of identity. The horrific social conditions facing most Indigenous people, a sharp expression of the broader onslaught on the working class, underscore the urgent need for a socialist perspective that rejects the subordination of society to profit interests.



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