Australian indigenous Voice seeks to entrench existing elite

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25 April 2023

Australia's Labor government, backed by big business, is cynically exploiting the deep and long-felt revulsion throughout the working class toward the horrendous crimes committed by the ruling class for more than two centuries against the country's indigenous people to hold a referendum to constitutionally embed a new body, named the Voice.

This body, although nominally advisory, would become a central part of the ruling capitalist state apparatus itself. The indigenous Voice would have a constitutional right to "make representations," that is, to be consulted, by the "parliament and the executive government" at every level, including cabinet ministers.

Far from redressing the dispossession, massacres, repression and trauma inflicted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by British and Australian capitalism since 1788, the Voice would entrench and enhance the power of a privileged layer of indigenous CEOs, business operators, bureaucrats and senior academics that have helped increasingly to implement the requirements of the capitalist profit system for several decades.

That is clear from an examination of the Indigenous Voice Co-design Process Final Report, issued in 2021, which set out the structure and selection procedures that have been proposed by this same layer, and accepted by the Albanese government, as the foundation for the new constitutional institution.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has not explicitly stated that his government would adopt the recommendations of the 272-page report but has said it would form the basis of what the Voice would come to look like.

The report, prepared by several government-appointed advisory groups, is premised on the Uluru Statement from the Heart, a 2017 document adopted by a similarly hand-picked gathering that supported the creation of a constitutionally-enshrined "Voice to Parliament."

What is most striking about the report, chaired by two prominent indigenous professors, is its thoroughly anti-democratic character. The report explicitly rejected the very idea of elections to the four-year posts on the Voice, saying voting would undermine the "legitimacy" of the scheme.

Instead, the proposed Voice would consist of 24 unelected members, chosen by the existing bodies and vested interests, such as land councils and government-funded service providers, that have presided over the social misery suffered by most indigenous people, augmented by a burgeoning number of indigenous business owners.

Regardless of claims of the Voice being independent, governments and Voice leaders could jointly appoint two additional members of the body, and all members would be vetted by an equally unelected Ethics Council. It could disqualify them as not a "fit and proper person," including on the grounds of indigenous identity, criminal conviction or bankruptcy.

The report advocated selection, mostly by existing organisations, to Voice local, regional and national bodies. The reasons it gave for rejecting elections included potential conflicts over the eligibility and "indigeneity" of Voice voters and members, fears of "low voter turnout" that could "affect the legitimacy and authority of the National Voice" and the "high cost of elections."

As well as contempt for the basic requirement for the necessary resources to be allocated to elections, the anxiety over low turnout points to the lack of support among most indigenous people for the Voice project.

This lack of support is not least due to many bitter experiences with previous supposed consultative institutions, such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), which lorded over increasing inequality of income and wealth among indigenous people, alongside the working class as a whole, from 1989 to 2004.

Underpinning the report's anti-democratic proposal was, above all, an intent to keep power in the hands of the same bodies that have emerged over the past five decades, ever-more integrated into big business and the corridors of government power.

The report cited a submission from the National Native Title Council, which primarily oversees lucrative deals with mining companies. It stated: "The risk of [the direct election] model is that elected individuals may not have a strong relationship with existing local and regional structures or a vested interest in maintaining communication with and seeking advice from local structures, which may affect the legitimacy of the National Voice."

Another submission highlighted by the report pointed to the real material interests at stake. "A direct election model is likely to produce a set of parallel institutions (Local and Regional Voices, and a structurally separate National Voice) that would likely fall into conflict and competition for resources and attention."

Existing bodies to be protected

Despite the atrocious conditions of many indigenous people—from those deprived of basic services in remote communities to those living on town outskirts or in working-class suburbs—and the annual "closing the gap" reports showing deteriorating outcomes, the report praised the performance of those who have been responsible for this blight.

It boasted of "the existing effective relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies and organisations and government, including the historic National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement) between the Coalition of Peaks and all Australian governments."

These existing structures are among the key "stakeholders" in 35 yet-to-be determined regions that would select the members of the National Voice. The report stated that local and regional Voices "would be a mechanism to bring together views from a range of local people and stakeholders within their region, including members of community-controlled organisations, service providers, business, advisory bodies, statutory bodies, educators and others whose participation in these arrangements is vital."

Although lip service was paid to hearing the views of "local people,"

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this mechanism is preoccupied with protecting the primacy of the existing bodies. One of the central nine principles of the Voice is that it must "not duplicate or undermine their roles."

The report acknowledged that concerns have been expressed about this. It stated: "A number of respondents highlighted the need to ensure that Local & Regional Voice arrangements do not work only to reinforce existing 'loud voices' or power structures, particularly where these do not promote broad and diverse inclusion." These objections, however, were brushed aside.

The report was more concerned to guarantee that business voices would be heard. "Existing peak bodies do not have full coverage over all sectors, for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses and individuals who are not members of organisations," it stated. "Ensuring these interests are considered and represented is important."

Under legislation to be drafted if the referendum were to pass, the local and regional bodies also would be subjected to a process of government evaluation before recognition, underscoring the thoroughly establishment character of this plan.

The Voice would have a lop-sided membership as well. There would be two members from each state and territory, as well as the Torres Strait Islands, plus a third member for "remote" parts of New South Wales (NSW), Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory, and one member for mainland Torres Strait Islander people.

That means a substantial over-representation for the Australian Capital Territory, the home of top government bureaucrats, which accounts for less than 1 percent of the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, compared to NSW, which accounts for 33 percent of the indigenous people, including large working-class populations in Sydney and regional centres.

The report rejected "strong feedback" from consultation sessions "not to preclude people with criminal convictions, given the disproportionate rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with contact with the criminal justice system." The report insisted that anyone sentenced to imprisonment of 12 months or longer could nominate for National Voice membership "only after the sentence has ended and an Ethics Council report on the matter has been provided to the National Voice for decision."

It claimed this stipulation would ensure "utmost integrity, legitimacy and confidence in the National Voice."

In keeping with the pro-business thrust of the Voice, it would have a corporate form. "The membership of the National Voice should be supported by a CEO and policy and administrative support staff," the report recommended. This would be the "Office of the National Voice," with "secretariats" in each of the 35 regions.

The report envisaged a drawn-out process of constituting the Voice, with an even less accountable Interim Body for a National Voice in place in the meantime. It estimated "that it could take up to 3 years [after the enabling legislation] for the vast majority of Local & Regional Voices to be fully established." Only then would it be possible to establish the National Voice.

Hand-picked advisory groups

Far from expressing the voices of ordinary indigenous people, the report was compiled by three government-selected advisory groups. They included representatives of the elite indigenous layer of land council chiefs, senior government officials and business consultants, alongside ex-mining company executives and right-wing non-indigenous ruling class figures such as Sky News host and Australian associate editor Chris Kenny, businessman and former Victorian Liberal state premier Jeff Kennett and ex-federal Liberal government minister Fred Chaney.

The report was presented by two senior advisory group co-chairs, professors Marcia Langton and Tom Calma, appointed by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government. Both have long records of well-rewarded service to successive governments as advisors and officials of royal commissions and other inquiries that have invariably served as whitewashes for the ongoing oppression, killings and incarceration of indigenous workers and youth.

Langton and Calma advised the Coalition government on the membership of the three advisory groups that compiled the report, featuring the explicitly pro-business and anti-welfare indigenous figure Noel Pearson, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda and longtime Rio Tinto executive Joanne Farrell.

Significantly, the advisory groups included business figures, such as Donna Odegaard, CEO of First Nations Broadcasting, an indigenous-owned radio, television and production network, Katrina Fanning, owner and managing director of Coolamon Advisors, an indigenous consulting firm based in Canberra, and Karen Milward, who has "owned and operated Karen Milward Consulting Services since 2004."

The involvement of such business representatives epitomises the rapidly growing cultivation and integration, by governments, big business and indigenous leaders, of indigenous business operators as members of the corporate elite that ruthlessly exploits the labour power of workers, indigenous and non-indigenous alike.

In recent years, particularly since the latest push for indigenous "recognition" in the 1901 Constitution began under the Abbott Coalition government in 2015, governments and the Business Council of Australia (BCA), representing the largest companies operating in Australia, have committed billions of dollars to boost indigenous businesses. In 2019, for example, members of the BCA announced they would collectively spend more than $3 billion over five years on procurements from such businesses.

As the WSWS has explained, for all the misleading claims of the Albanese government, the media and big business, the Voice has nothing to do with redressing the historic crimes of British and Australian capitalism or improving the conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and youth, which will continue to worsen rapidly, along with those of the entire working class, as the cost of living and housing crisis intensifies.

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

The only way forward for indigenous workers and youth lies in a common working-class struggle against the program of austerity, ever-widening social inequality, massive military spending and US-led war being implemented by Labor and every other capitalist government.

Decades of false apologies, broken promises and elite consultative bodies have proven that ending the appalling situation confronting most indigenous people requires a fight by the entire working class to abolish the socio-economic order that has produced it. That means overturning the capitalist profit system as a whole, and replacing it with a socialist society, based on genuine social equality and democracy. The developing international working-class struggle provides the objective basis for that fight.

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