

The right-wing, pro-war character of Australia's indigenous Voice plan becomes clearer

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Events and media interviews over the past week have shed further light on the very right-wing, pro-capitalist and nationalistic nature of the Australian Labor government's proposed referendum to entrench in the country's constitution a new institution to be called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

The interviews, featuring the main indigenous architects and proponents of the Voice, mark a stepping up of the Yes campaign for the Voice, which will accelerate over the next months financed by wealthy family foundations and corporations.

It is increasingly clear that this proposal, for an unelected indigenous advisory body with the constitutional right to be consulted by parliament and every level of government, is one of two key pillars of the Albanese government's agenda. The other is the unprecedented escalation of war against China, in which Australia is slated to play a central role, accompanied by the imposition of historic cuts to spending and attacks on the wages and conditions of the working class to pay for the massive military buildup.

The Albanese government, backed by the corporate elite, is cynically exploiting the widely-felt hostility among workers and youth toward the crimes of capitalism against the indigenous population to further a program of war, wage-cutting and the slashing of social spending for the entire working class.

The Voice seeks to take to a totally new level decades of moves by successive governments and big business for "reconciliation" and constitutional "recognition." This means reconciliation with the same capitalist profit system that massacred and sought to eradicate the indigenous population and recognition within the anti-democratic capitalist constitution.

That also means further elevating, as an entrenched part of the political establishment, a privileged indigenous layer of CEOs, bureaucrats and senior academics, ever more based on business, that is organically hostile to the working class, particularly the indigenous working class.

Patriotism and war

First of all, a "yes" vote for the Voice is being presented as a patriotic duty, necessary to unite the nation or complete the national unity of Australia. This will soon be promoted by a massive advertising blitz heavily backed by the corporate boardrooms.

The purpose is to project a manufactured façade of national harmony and inclusivity. This is not just a diversion from mounting social inequality and working-class discontent. It is being developed to help

place the population on the frontline of a US-led war against China and spend hundreds of billions of dollars on an unprecedented military buildup, as outlined by the government's Defence Strategic Review, released last week.

As that report stated repeatedly, this requires an "all of nation" mobilisation, that is, a total war economy. As is increasingly evident to workers and youth, that can be achieved only at the cost of working-class wages, living standards, and essential social programs, such as disability services, public health, education and housing, and welfare payments.

Hand-in-hand with this program will be the suppression of any opposition among workers and young people. The transformation of the conditions and rights of ordinary people in order to undertake this war effort cannot be implemented democratically.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese personally led the charge last week, using this year's annual Anzac Day, glorifying Australian imperialism's past wars, as a vehicle for connecting the Voice to the requirements of war. Great prominence was given to the indigenous soldiers who served and died "for the country" in previous wars, including both world wars and the Vietnam War.

Albanese told the dawn service at the national war memorial in Canberra: "[W]e must acknowledge the truth that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who donned the khaki fought harder for Australia than Australia was sometimes willing to fight for them."

He linked this unmistakably to the Voice proposal, saying: "Yet we learn, and we keep taking steps forward together."

Indigenous Affairs Minister Linda Burney was more blatant in trying to stoke nationalism in the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) magazine last Friday. Bitterly denouncing and witch-hunting opponents of the Voice plan, she said: "Of course, there will always be those that seek to hold us back. Those doubters, those wreckers, they want to hold Australia back. Well, we want to take Australia forward. We want to make Australia far more united, more hopeful and more reconciled than ever before."

The AFR magazine said this declaration dovetailed with the plans for the multi-million dollar Yes campaign: "[It] chimes with what is expected to be the final phase of the campaign, that the referendum is a moment of national unity, that voting Yes will be an act of patriotism. An earlier phase, earmarked for the start of the campaign proper, will make the case that the overwhelming majority of Indigenous Australians back the Voice."

There is no evidence cited for this latter assertion, despite being the centre piece of the first phase of the campaign for the Voice referendum. In reality, there is widespread suspicion and distrust toward it, especially in working-class areas. That is the major reason why the Langton-Calma report, setting out the details of the Voice scheme, proposed selection, not election, of the members of the Voice.

Anti-democratic details buried

One of the more revealing interviews in the same magazine was with Megan Davis, a constitutional legal professor and one of the central figures in drafting the Voice plan, based on the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart. Her outline of the yes campaign emphasised the need to hide the details of the 2021 report by two indigenous professors, Marcia Langton and Tom Calma, on how the Voice would operate.

Throughout 2022 and into early 2023, Albanese cited the Langton-Calma model when he was asked for detail on the Voice. Then the report suddenly disappeared from public debate. According to the AFR, Pat Anderson, who co-chairs the Uluru Dialogue with Davis, and former High Court chief justice Robert French told the Albanese government in February to stop referencing it.

“Davis played a key role in moving the debate away from the nitty-gritty to the bigger picture,” the AFR said approvingly. “We don’t want Australians to vote on a model A and model B,” Davis told the AFR. “What we want Aussies to vote on is the principle.”

As the WSWS has pointed out, the Langton-Calma report, commissioned by the previous Liberal-National Coalition government, 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, mainly 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.

The report advocated selection to Voice local, regional and national bodies. The reasons it gave for rejecting elections included potential conflicts over the eligibility and “indigeneity” (establishing the degree of Aboriginality) of Voice voters and members, and fears of “low voter turnout” that could affect the authority of the Voice.

The anxiety over low turnout points to the lack of support among most indigenous people for the Voice project.

A right-wing vehicle

In fact, despite constant assertions that the Voice will benefit all indigenous people, there is nothing grassroots about the Voice scheme. It is a creation of governments—Coalition and Labor. That was further laid bare by an interview in the *Australian* with its main architect, indigenous lawyer Noel Pearson, a vehement advocate of welfare-cutting and supposed “self-determination” via business activity.

As the interview explained, the proposal for a constitutionally-entrenched Voice was first concocted in 2014 by Pearson and Julian Leeser, a Coalition MP and, until his recent resignation, its indigenous affairs spokesperson.

Pearson’s initial partnership was with then Prime Minister Tony Abbott, whom Pearson said had agreed to the idea. At the same time, Abbott was slashing funding for indigenous services and pushing for the closure of remote communities.

After Abbott was ousted in 2015, his successor Malcolm Turnbull teamed up with then Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten, to establish and fund a Referendum Council. Through that government-appointed body, Pearson’s Voice proposal became the basis for a

government-financed process, with equally handpicked gatherings, that agreed to support the Voice as part of the Uluru statement in 2017.

Pearson also outlined the nationalist core of his scheme. He told the *Australian* that “recognition” was essential in having a unifying national narrative. He stated: “Constitutional recognition answers a spiritual need in the Australian nation.”

Pearson said he had spent years with Leeser and two right-wing legal figures, Australian Catholic University (ACU) vice-chancellor Greg Craven and ACU academic Damien Freeman, to develop a “conservative model” for recognition that would have bipartisan support.

The anti-working class basis for that “conservative model” was illustrated when Pearson said requiring ministers and public servants to consult with a Voice would have kept alcohol bans in place in Northern Territory indigenous communities, thus effectively blaming and punishing Aboriginal people for the social blight created by capitalism.

That is in line with Pearson’s repressive record, which includes operating government programs to end supposed welfare “passivity,” like the Cape York Welfare Reform Trial, which withholds welfare payments from parents who allegedly fail to address the truancy of their children.

A big business project

The AFR magazine also highlighted that the Yes campaign is funded by corporate sources, led by Visy chief Anthony Pratt, a multi-billionaire, and the Paul Ramsay Foundation, whose funds are derived from a private healthcare empire. “There’ll be TV and online advertising, as well as billboards, social media and in-person events around the country,” the AFR reported.

“The Voice is on track to be one of the biggest advertising vehicles of the year. The cost of the Yes campaign alone is expected to be more than what one of the major parties would spend on an entire federal election—which was about \$25 million in 2022.”

No less than four main business-backed groups are campaigning for Yes: Uluru Dialogue led by Davis and Anderson, From the Heart led by Dean Parkin, Uphold & Recognise led by businessman Sean Gordon and founded by Leeser and Freeman, and Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition (AICR).

AICR has a “high-powered” board, chaired by “corporate heavyweight” Michael Chaney, who has headed some of Australian capitalism’s biggest companies, and indigenous filmmaker Rachel Perkins. It includes Pearson, BHP director Catherine Tanna, ex-Liberal Party director Tony Nutt, former Rudd government adviser Lachlan Harris and Mark Textor of CT Group, who is running polling.

According to the AFR: “The organisation is offering funding to Yes activities and advice on matters including how to direct resources, interpreting polling results and framing key messages for voters.”

Corporate tax deductibility

A joint interview in the *Saturday Paper* with Rachel Perkins and top corporate lawyer Danny Gilbert, also described as an AICR co-chair, underscored the big business character of the Voice.

Gilbert, who co-founded one of the country’s largest corporate law firms, Gilbert + Tobin, said that in 2019, “after long discussions with his old friend Noel Pearson,” he helped establish the AICR, although it sat dormant for a time. Gilbert said “we had to virtually put it on the shelf,

because the charities commission under the former commissioner would not give us deductible gift recipient status. We were only able to achieve that when Labor came into office.”

So all the corporate donations are also tax write-offs, courtesy of the Labor government!

In sum, the Labor government’s promotion of the Voice cannot be separated from its program of militarism and attacks on working class living conditions. In fact, the Voice is a necessary component of that program, while trying to dress it up as somehow progressive.

The highly-featured interviews in corporate media outlets point to growing nervousness in ruling circles about the passage of the Voice referendum. That is part of the intensifying crisis of the Albanese government and the political establishment as a whole, as the brutal class character of its program becomes clearer through cuts to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), healthcare, housing and welfare, alongside huge military spending and income tax cuts for the wealthy.



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