

Australian Senate passes Voice referendum bill amid falling public support

Mike Head
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The Australian Senate yesterday passed, by 52 votes to 19, the Albanese Labor government's legislation to hold a referendum, sometime this year, to entrench in the country's 1901 Constitution an indigenous Voice, an advisory body, to "make representations" to parliament and the executive government.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has staked his personal political position, and that of his government, on securing a "yes" vote, but polling indicates increasingly that the referendum is likely to fail.

Now that the bill has passed both houses of parliament, the government must set a referendum date, no sooner than two months away and no later than six months. According to media reports, Albanese will probably set the date for mid-October. Yet there are growing doubts that a "yes" vote will reach the constitutionally necessary majority of voters, and separate majorities in four of the six Australian states.

At a media conference after the Senate vote, Albanese vowed to be front and centre in the referendum campaign, saying he and his government were "all in." At the same time, he and other government leaders sought to boost the flagging support for the proposal by downplaying the Voice plan itself. They presented the referendum as simply one about recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution for the first time.

Albanese and Labor ministers declared they had "confidence" and "faith" that the Australian people would vote "yes." But the government has shifted its ground, to avoid referring to the Voice as much as possible. That is because the more people learn about this proposed unelected institution at the heart of the existing political order, the more they distrust it.

The Voice has become more widely seen, including among ordinary indigenous people, as an elite project, backed by big business and other establishment voices, that will do nothing to address the appalling conditions of most indigenous people, whether in remote communities, regional towns or working-class suburbs of the major cities.

In fact, the Voice will further integrate a privileged indigenous layer of CEOs, entrepreneurs and senior academics into the capitalist political establishment, which is presiding over a deepening cost-of-living crisis and declining conditions

of the working class as a whole. Soaring prices, home mortgage payments and rents are having a devastating impact on all working-class households, aggravated by sharply falling real wages, staff shortages and intolerable workloads.

Media polls have shown a decline in support for the Voice, down below 50 percent, over the past year since Albanese first announced the referendum plan in his May 2022 election victory speech. A defeat would be a blow to the government. Albanese has made the Voice absolutely central to Labor's agenda, which consists of escalating war preparations against China, delivering income tax cuts for the wealthy, axing all remaining COVID-19 safety measures and further cutting public health and education spending.

Yesterday, most Liberal Party senators joined hands with their Labor and Greens counterparts, as well as three crossbench senators, to vote for the bill. But many Liberals, including party leader Peter Dutton, are calling for a "no" vote, which is the party's official position. Several Liberals voted against the bill, in order to participate in writing the "no" case in the official referendum pamphlet to be mailed out across the country. Also voting against were the rural-based Nationals, the far-right Pauline Hanson's One Nation and Lidia Thorpe, a former Greens, now independent, indigenous senator who opposes the Voice from a black nationalist standpoint.

The Labor government is systematically burying all reference to a report by Marcia Langton and Tom Calma, two prominent indigenous figures, setting out the proposed structure of the Voice. That is because the report outlines plans for an unelected 24-member body, 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 growing number of indigenous business owners.

Likewise, the multi-million dollar corporate-funded "yes" advertising campaign does not even mention the Voice. Instead, it makes a vague reference to giving indigenous people "a real say" and "recognition" in the Constitution.

At the media conference, Albanese again presented a "yes" vote as an act of national patriotism. "It will be a moment of national unity, a chance to make our nation even greater," he insisted. It was a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lift our

great nation even higher.”

That message is part of the government’s efforts to manufacture a new image of national unity, above all for war purposes, under conditions of ever-widening social inequality. It is connected to its call, issued in its Defence Strategic Review in March, for an “all of nation” effort to transform the economy into one prepared for war, including by pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military weaponry, such as AUKUS nuclear-powered attack submarines and long-range missiles.

Albanese also asserted that the Voice referendum was “something that has not arisen in Canberra.” It was “the culmination of years of discussion, consultation and patient hard work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves.” That is utterly false. Far from arising from a grassroots movement, it originated from the very top—a 2015 meeting between selected indigenous leaders and then-Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott at his official Sydney harbourside residence.

As documented in a book by two central advocates of the Voice scheme, Megan Davis, an Aboriginal law professor, and fellow law professor George Williams, rather than a movement from below, the Voice project originated as, and remains, a bid by members of an indigenous elite, including Davis and right-wing lawyer Noel Pearson, to head off anger and disaffection among ordinary indigenous people, especially after Abbott’s government slashed funding for indigenous services.

Today, most of all, the Voice plan seeks to prevent that ongoing discontent from linking up to the growing unrest throughout the working class as a whole, as workers and their families suffer the greatest cuts to their living conditions since World War II.

Albanese further claimed that “recognition of this continent’s first people in our nation’s constitution” would mean “making concrete practical change that makes a difference to people’s lives.” He has previously ruled out, however, extra funding to redress the shocking social conditions, including in remote settlements and town camps denied basic facilities.

As with previous initiatives, such as Labor’s 2008 parliamentary apology to the Indigenous Stolen Generations who were forcibly removed from their parents, the Voice will provide a supposedly progressive gloss over a stepped-up onslaught on welfare and other social rights of working people as a whole.

And the health, housing, education and living conditions of the majority of indigenous people, as one of the most vulnerable sections of the working class, will continue to decline, as they have throughout the official “Closing the Gap” program since the 2008 apology.

Moreover, “recognition” in the colonial-era 1901 Constitution means strengthening the very capitalist state apparatus and socio-economic order that has been responsible for the more than two centuries of massacres, dispossession,

separations and suppression inflicted on the indigenous population.

Speaking against the referendum bill during the final debate in the Senate, Thorpe declared it was “happy assimilation day.” An advocate of treaties between Australian governments and indigenous groups, she denounced the Constitution as “an illegal document.” She declared that “sovereignty was never ceded” by indigenous people and this sovereignty would mean dissolving “the colonial, violent institution that we’re all in right now.”

Behind this seemingly radical rhetoric, Thorpe demanded a place “at the table” for the “black sovereignty movement” and “real power.” This is basically a call for greater privileges and resources for the indigenous elites along the lines of the Treaty of Waitangi process in New Zealand. There, hundreds of millions of dollars have been distributed to Māori tribal corporations, fostering a wealthy layer of Māori entrepreneurs, politicians, lawyers, academics and bureaucrats, at the expense of Māori workers, one of the most oppressed sections of the New Zealand working class.

Ideologically, Thorpe and those backing the Voice share a similar outlook. Both are proponents of Aboriginal identity politics, which insists that race, not class, is the fundamental division in society. While racism certainly exists, and is fostered by the ruling class to seek to divide workers along racial lines, the source of the oppression of the indigenous people, as it is with the rest of the working class, is the capitalist private ownership of society’s resources—relations that Thorpe and the other identity politics representatives defend.

Exactly the opposite is required—a unified struggle of the working class, indigenous and non-indigenous, in Australia and internationally, to overthrow the capitalist profit system as a whole, and replace it with a socialist society, based on genuine equality and democracy. That is the only way to rectify and overcome the historic and ongoing crimes of this social order.



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