

A fraudulent presentation of Australia's Indigenous Voice

Nick Beams
9 July 2023

The address by Indigenous Australians Minister Linda Burney to the National Press Club last Wednesday was part of the attempt by the Labor government to turn around flagging support for a Yes vote on its proposed referendum to be conducted later this year to change the Constitution and establish an indigenous advisory body, or Voice, to the government and the executive.

Her speech signified a shift in the government campaign away from an emphasis on the support of big business for the Voice—virtually universal among the corporate and financial elites—and from promotion by celebrities. Instead, she emphasised the supposed “practical” outcomes the Voice will have in addressing the appalling social and economic conditions confronting large sections of the Indigenous population.

Burney was attempting to appeal to the widespread sentiment, going back many decades, that the dire and, in numerous cases, worsening conditions for Indigenous people must be addressed.

However, this is where the Yes campaign is coming adrift because the more is known about the Voice, the more there is growing, well-founded scepticism in wider sections of the population, not least among Aborigines, that it will do anything to alleviate these conditions. It will be simply a mechanism through which the social and political status of a layer of well-connected, and invariably well-heeled Indigenous individuals, is further elevated.

Towards the beginning of her address, Burney advanced a historical falsification which is at the centre of the Yes campaign. “The idea of constitutional recognition through a Voice is what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves have asked for, not the government,” she said.

As the WSWS has documented, using material provided in the book *Everything You Need to Know About the Uluru Statement from the Heart*, written by Voice supporters Megan Davis and George Williams, the origins of the Voice lie in the efforts of the Abbott Liberal government in 2015 to deflect anger over the major cuts to Indigenous services in the 2014 budget and the deepening disillusionment with

decades old pledges of some form of “recognition.”

A meeting involving Abbott, the then Labor leader Bill Shorten, as well as prominent Indigenous figures such as Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson, was convened at the prime minister's Sydney residence, Kirribilli House. It issued a statement which included the establishment of a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous council to advise governments on legislation.

This initiative is the foundation of the Voice referendum now being advanced by the Albanese Labor government, which is one of its cornerstone policies.

The fact that it has been, from the outset and throughout the entire course of its development, a top-down and not a bottom-up movement is one of the reasons for its faltering support, including within the Indigenous population.

Burney gave a list of the appalling conditions for many sections of the Indigenous population including health, suicide rates, higher incarceration rates, especially of youth, life expectancy, education and housing among others. She noted that a report last month showed that just 4 out of the 19 targets for “closing the gap” were on track—over a decade after the program was put in place.

According to Burney, the reason is that there has not been a body such as the Voice which would work in a “practical way” to overcome them.

But over the past decades, there has been no lack of “voices,” including Indigenous ones, pointing to the failure of government policies to bring any real advance. There has been no lack of reports on conditions—including housing, health, education, incarceration rates and deaths in custody, to name just some—after which the terrible situations they document very often worsen.

In seeking to present the Voice as the path forward, Burney gave a very revealing example of where it would make “an important practical difference,” citing the Community Development Program, more commonly known as work for the dole, or unemployment benefits. The CDP scheme involves around 40,000 people, the vast majority Indigenous, across 1000 communities.

Burney said that the CDP program had been a “failure.” In fact, based on a government report issued in 2019, a more accurate description would be a disaster. The report found that since its introduction the scheme had led to an increase in social problems, including stealing of food by children, increased family violence, growing financial problems, and an increase in mental health problems.

According to Burney, however, “the Voice can play a key role in helping to fix CDP.” In other words, it would assist in giving this cheap labour scheme a much-needed facelift. That would be its “practical” value.

The Voice will likely consist of 24 unelected members chosen by existing bodies such as Aboriginal land councils and government-funded service providers, that is, the very organisations that have been integral to the imposition of social misery inflicted on the Indigenous population, together with representatives of the growing number of Aboriginal businesses.

There was one grain of truth in Burney’s press conference remarks. She said the social crimes committed against the Aboriginal population have causes that are “systemic” and “structural.”

The roots of the oppression of the Indigenous population do not lie in the establishment of “white” society, as the issue is so often portrayed, but in the formation of capitalist society based on private ownership of the means of production and the land requiring the “clearing” of its inhabitants through shooting, poisoning and the spread of disease, in some cases deliberately.

Today, the ever-worsening conditions of large sections of the Indigenous population are part of a capitalist offensive against the working class as a whole, particularly its most impoverished sections. This is exemplified by the Robodebt crime, which illegally claimed nearly \$2 billion from at least 433,000 welfare recipients.

In her Press Club remarks, Burney presented the Voice as a continuation of the 1967 referendum in which the Aboriginal population was counted in the census and which gave the Federal government the power to make laws regarding them over and above state legislation.

The overwhelming Yes vote in that referendum was an expression of a growing upsurge of the working class, a component of which was the developing sentiment that action had to be taken to support the advancement of the Indigenous population.

However, over the more than half century since, there has been a concerted campaign to separate the struggle against the oppression of the Indigenous population from the broader struggles of the working class, diverting it into the fight for land rights and property titles within the framework of identity politics.

Burney played to this agenda in her speech. Departing from her prepared remarks, she lashed out at Trump-style politics in the opposition to the Voice. Undoubtedly there are racist elements in the No campaign, but to brand the growing opposition to the Voice in this way, including from within the Indigenous community itself, is a crude attempt to tarnish genuine opposition as racist.

The Voice does not represent a way forward for Indigenous people. It is yet another trap as all the nostrums advanced in the past are more clearly exposed.

It is part of an agenda of “reconciliation” and constitutional “recognition.” That is, reconciliation with the capitalist system responsible for the crimes against the Aboriginal population from 1788 to the present day and the integration, via constitutional recognition, of a privileged layer of academics, business executives and bureaucrats into the political establishment.

With unerring class instinct major corporations, finance houses and multi-million-dollar sporting enterprises have taken the measure of the Voice and are backing it to the hilt as their demands for deepening attacks on the working class became ever more strident.

Key sections of the military establishment support it on the basis that it will assist in the development of national unity and patriotism as the drums of war beat ever louder.

The Voice is part of this agenda. Burney concluded her speech by declaring that a Yes vote would “unify and strengthen Australia” and would be “an act of patriotism.”

The appeal to nationalism and patriotism, long ago characterised as the last refuge of the scoundrel, is aimed at trying to obscure the central task of unifying the working class, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, in the fight for an internationalist and socialist program as the only way in which the historic and ongoing crimes against Aboriginal population can be ended.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact