

Australian government vows to hold indigenous Voice referendum despite falling support

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Australian Labor Party Prime Minister Anthony Albanese last weekend declared that his government would proceed, sometime later this year, with its referendum to entrench an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory body, called the Voice, in the country's 1901 Constitution.

Albanese made his vow in the face of media opinion polls showing collapsing support for the proposal. The latest Newspoll published in the *Australian* yesterday, indicates that support has dropped to 43 percent, from 54 percent in April, and is now below 50 percent in every state. To pass, the referendum needs a majority nationally and in four of the six states.

The prime minister was speaking at the annual Garma Festival organised by the Yothu Yindi Foundation, formed by five regional Yolgnu clan groups, held 40 kilometres from the remote Northern Territory township of Nhulunbuy. Albanese rejected calls, including from within the “Yes” camp, to postpone the vote. He stated: “I can promise all of you—and all Australians—there will be no delaying or deferring this referendum.”

Albanese's stand indicates how much is at stake for his government, as well as for big business, most of which publicly backs the referendum and provides much of the multi-million dollar funding for the official “Yes” campaign.

A wider political crisis is developing. There is growing distrust in the Voice project and the government itself, especially in the working class, amid falling real wages and a worsening cost-of-living and housing crisis, and opposition to the massive spending on AUKUS nuclear submarines and other weaponry for a US-led war on China.

From the day it narrowly won last year's election, Albanese's government made the Voice plan a central feature of its entire political agenda. Its primary concern is fashioning and presenting a concocted image of Australian “unity.” At the same time, it is seeking to divide the working class along racial lines, in order to prevent a unified movement against the deepening assault on working-class living standards, including those of the indigenous workers, one of the most vulnerable sections of the working class.

In his Garma speech, Albanese again made this pitch. “We can vote Yes, in a spirit of unity,” he said. “We can bring our country together.” He emphasised that this unity included “employers and business leaders, who understand the value and power of a Yes vote.”

This appeal is being made for domestic purposes, to divert attention away from the intensifying class divide between the wealthy and the working class, including most indigenous people. It is also for geo-strategic purposes, to portray Australian imperialism as “democratic” and “inclusive.” That is particularly important in the South Pacific, where the Labor government is under intense US pressure to do more to bully countries into line against China.

Albanese once more tried to falsely present the Voice as a means to improve the appalling and still-deteriorating conditions of most indigenous people—seeking to exploit the widespread public concern over these conditions. He cited some of the latest damning statistics, showing the shocking low life expectancy, and high disease and suicide rates, among indigenous people.

“Only four out of 19 Closing the Gap targets on track,” Albanese said, without referring to the fact that the last Labor government, that of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, set up the “Closing the Gap” program more than a decade ago, falsely promising that it would rectify the disaster.

Albanese could not explain how the Voice, a proposed unelected body whose members would be selected mainly by representatives of existing land councils and other government-funded indigenous organisations, would make any difference. For the past five decades, similar consultative bodies have failed to do so, while cultivating a privileged layer of indigenous business owners, media personalities and senior academics.

Nor could Albanese make any mention of the roots of the historic and ongoing social crisis, which lie in the past 235 years of history since British colonisation and the establishment of Australian capitalism. That silence is because the Labor government is totally committed to upholding the corporate profit system that has been responsible for the dispossession,

massacres, destruction of communities, forced separations and ongoing trauma inflicted on the indigenous population.

The Voice would only continue that catastrophic record by strengthening the state apparatus of “the parliament and executive government” responsible for it. Members of the Voice and its accompanying staff and agencies would be integrated directly into this system of capitalist rule.

One of the architects of the Voice, right-wing Aboriginal lawyer Noel Pearson, outlined its pro-business agenda in an interview published by the *Australian Financial Review* last Friday. Pearson said the Voice would “empower” indigenous communities to help end “passive welfare,” which he blamed for the surging indigenous incarceration rates and over-representation of indigenous children in out of home care, separated from their families.

Pearson, himself an adviser to prime ministers since the 1990s, told the newspaper: “I think for too long, at least for two decades, we’ve been in a world where everything that has gone wrong means the indigenous community can say, ‘it’s the government’s fault.’”

His comments serve to shift the blame away from the successive business-backed governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, that have presided over the oppression, with the assistance of such figures. It also demonstrates what Pearson and other Voice backers mean by “self-empowerment” of indigenous people.

Pearson has long been an advocate of cutting people off welfare payments, which he derides as “sit-down money,” in order to coerce them into what are invariably low-paying jobs. At the same time, he encourages the expansion of the indigenous business elite, often on the back of land claims and deals with mining and pastoral companies.

The Garma Festival itself provided a picture of the pro-corporate agenda behind the Voice scheme. Initially launched in 1999, the festival has become an annual elite gathering of government leaders, capitalist politicians, bureaucrats and corporate chiefs.

Those in attendance this year included what the *Australian Financial Review* termed “a large corporate delegation.” It featured Business Council of Australia president Tim Read and executives from the country’s largest companies, such as Telstra, Qantas, Woodside, Woolworths, Rio Tinto and the big banks. It said business leaders welcomed the chance to explore commercial opportunities.

Far from being a grassroots affair, Garma is a ticketed event of 2,500 people, for which you had to register and be accepted. Tickets cost \$2,503—far out of reach for most people—while businesses pay up to \$5,000 for a corporate ticket. The basic price of \$2,503 includes airport transfers, meals, accommodation (tent, air mattress and sleeping bag). Participants could drive, but the festival is about 700 kilometres from the nearest large town, Katherine.

Interviewed by the *Australian*, Yothu Yindi Foundation chief

executive and Garma Festival director Denise Bowden basically echoed Pearson’s perspective. She said: “Across the nation we think people can learn from our strong law and cultural leadership.” She said cultural authorities like the Dilak Council, headed by leaders of Yolngu clans, who own a range of businesses, including a mine, could help the Voice identify government waste and underperformance.

The festival is even run as a business venture. Speaking to the *National Indigenous Times*, Bowden said the event brought in millions of dollars in tourism revenue and supported 46 local businesses in the Arnhem Land region, as well as another 39 businesses elsewhere in the Northern Territory, while employing 160 Yolngu people.

Among the festival participants were indigenous leaders from 12 regions across Australia who represent an alliance called Empowered Communities. It boasts of speaking directly to governments since 2015 and depicts itself as proof that the Voice can work, including by producing substantial government savings.

Cape York representative Fiona Jose told the *Australian* that the Empowered Communities initiative showed indigenous people were ready and willing to cut waste. “We make tougher decisions with and for our people than government will ever be able to do ... It’s possible because we’re doing it,” she said.

This is the true face of the Voice. It is a pro-capitalist operation to promote indigenous business ventures, at the expense of ordinary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and thus perpetuate the economic system responsible for their impoverishment.

From the start, the Voice plan was orchestrated by Pearson and other hand-picked indigenous elite figures, working in partnership with the then Liberal-National government of Tony Abbott in 2015, to head off anger over that government’s wholesale scrapping of indigenous welfare and health services, as part of its brutal austerity measures against the working class as a whole.

Far from being a movement from below, the Voice plan remains a bid to divert the ongoing anger and disaffection among ordinary indigenous people, and the rest of the working class, as workers and their families suffer the greatest cuts to their real wages and living conditions since World War II.

The historic and continuing crimes of capitalism can be rectified and overcome only through a unified struggle by workers, indigenous and non-indigenous together, in Australia and internationally, to overturn the profit system as a whole and develop a socialist society, based on genuine equality and democracy.



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