Australian Senator Lidia Thorpe advances right-wing racialism in speech on Voice

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In an address to the National Press Club yesterday, Australian Senator Lidia Thorpe condemned the indigenous Voice to parliament that is being promoted by the federal Labor government. While claiming to represent a "progressive no" campaign against the new advisory body, Thorpe's positions are saturated with reactionary racialism aimed at dividing the working class and suppressing the fundamental class issues.

For the Voice to be enshrined in the Constitution, a referendum must be held. Despite indications that the majority of the population opposes the initiative, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has indicated that a national poll will be held this year, likely in October.

The policy is among the signature measures of the government. Its purpose is to put a progressive gloss on a deeply reactionary administration that has dramatically escalated Australia's role in US-led militarism, including preparations for a catastrophic war with China, and that has already implemented deep-going austerity measures targeting the working class.

Aside from the political needs of the government, the Voice proposal serves broader, longer term interests of the Australian ruling elite itself. These include the necessity to further elevate an indigenous elite, tasked with suppressing opposition and anger from the broader Aboriginal population; to divide workers along racial lines, amid the worst cost-of-living and social crisis in decades, and to revamp Australian nationalism to further the war drive, particularly in the South Pacific and Southeast Asia.

None of these crucial issues was raised by Thorpe in her address. She made not the slightest attempt to place the Voice referendum within a broader political context, or to relate it to a single other issue confronting the working class. The words capitalism and class did not pass her lips, nor was there a single reference to the inequality and hardship that confronts the entire working class.

Instead, Thorpe's rambling address could be summed up in a few words: race and more privileges for a narrow layer of the indigenous population. Thorpe claims to lead a "black sovereignty movement." Its differences with the Voice are of an entirely tactical character. Essentially, they are demanding greater control over land, resources and finances, which they fear will not be secured through the establishment of the Voice.

Thorpe inevitably sought to dress up this reactionary and grasping perspective with references to the dire social conditions confronting most Aboriginal people.

Aborigines were still routinely brutalised and even killed by the police and in prison; children were being taken from their parents and placed into unstable foster care and group home arrangements, and Aboriginal youth were being locked up in juvenile detention facilities.

The sole explanation provided by Thorpe was the persistence of racism. She made clear she was not speaking of the racism of the ruling elite or of the capitalist state but of "colonial-settler society" and the like.

All white people, Thorpe proclaimed, had benefited from the mass killings of Aboriginal people associated with colonisation and continued to do so. Along with the bankers, mining magnates and billionaires, this presumably includes the growing numbers of non-Aboriginal workers facing poverty, financial crisis and even homelessness. All are dissolved into a reactionary, socially undifferentiated mass of "white society."

Thorpe's argument is a whitewash of capitalism, which she defends. The dispossession of the Aboriginal people was necessary for the establishment of a modern capitalist state, because the development of large scale private ownership of the land was incompatible with the social relationships of tribal Aboriginal society, a form of primitive communism.

For decades, the vast mass of Aboriginal people has been integrated into the working class. They form its most oppressed and exploited contingent. There is a deep-going relationship between attacks on the social and democratic rights of Aboriginal workers, and offensives against the broader working class.

Very frequently, measures trialed against Aboriginal workers, including such policies as welfare quarantining,

have subsequently been expanded to encompass broader sections of the working class.

All of this is a closed book for Thorpe.

Her assertions about colonisation are aimed at legitimising a "treaty" between sections of the Aboriginal elite and the capitalist state. This is necessary, Thorpe declares, to conclude the war that began with European settlement more than 230 years ago.

Aside from the historically false character of this claim, erasing as it does more than a century of the class struggle, what is most striking is the conservatism of the proposal. Thorpe and the layers she represents want to strike a deal, on the most favorable terms possible, with the capitalist state and the ruling class. Even if this transpires, the real war, between the capitalist class and the working class, will continue unabated.

Thorpe made some obvious points about the Voice. Its representatives would be handpicked by the government and would toe its line. They would hail from privileged and affluent sections of the Aboriginal population, who were already trusted by the political establishment. She noted that the members of the Voice would likely include Aboriginal CEOs, leaders of established organisations and others who have worked closely with previous governments.

However, Thorpe's denunciation of the Aboriginal elite rang exceedingly hollow, given she is a part of it herself. Thorpe's main argument was that a Treaty, rather than a Voice, would provide this stratum with greater access to wealth and privileges.

She denounced native title, which requires Aboriginal groups to prove a connection to land in order to have some control over how it is used and disposed of. Instead, Thorpe demanded unfettered land rights, which would provide immediate and direct control for the Aboriginal leadership over lands, enabling them to strike deals with mining companies and other corporate interests.

Highlighting the grasping interests of the layer for which she speaks, Thorpe also declared in the question and answer session that if reparations were paid in full to the Aboriginal population, the "country would go broke." She did not want that, Thorpe declared, which was why it was necessary for negotiations and a treaty. Of course, the vast sums that Thorpe is seeking access to would not be to the benefit of ordinary Aboriginal people, but to an elite layer tied to the capitalist political establishment and big business.

Thorpe's other policies were also striking for their essentially conservative character. She called for the full implementation of recommendations from two Royal Commissions: into Aboriginal deaths in custody and the forcible removal of indigenous children from their parents.

But the reports of both inquiries were whitewashes, orchestrated by governments and the political establishment to damp down widespread anger. The recommendations even if implemented, would not prevent or even impede the fundamental source of the oppression of Aborigines and the working class as a whole, the profit system.

Thorpe also called for the integration of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People into Australian law. This was connected to her demand for a treaty and for "real power," for the Aboriginal elite layer.

The National Press Club event demonstrated the cynical and opportunist politics of Thorpe and her "Black sovereignty movement."

Thorpe's attitude to the Voice, and to politics generally, is of an entirely opportunist character. Thorpe has repeatedly changed her position on the referendum, based on the shifting political winds and various backroom negotiations she has and continues to hold with the government and other political forces.

Even in denouncing the Voice as window dressing and a "new colonial institution," Thorpe held out the possibility of a deal with the government that would lead her to switch positions. All that was required, she indicated, was the implementation of the recommendations from the two royal commissions, and she could shift to endorsement of the initiative.

None of these considerations mattered much anyway. Thorpe proclaimed that a no vote on the Voice would demonstrate that "Australia is racist." When a journalist pointed out to Thorpe that she was campaigning for just such a no vote, she replied that a yes vote would also prove that Australia is racist. In other words, she will peddle the politics of racial division and grasping privilege, no matter what.

Workers should reject this racialist poison, as they should oppose the Voice. For their seeming differences, the proponents of the Voice and those who are opposed to it in the ruling elite, both Thorpe and right-wing forces, are seeking to whip up racial divisions.

All of them are seeking to prevent a unified movement of the entire working class, based on the socialist program that is the only means of combating war and austerity as part of the fight to end all oppression and exploitation, including that of indigenous workers and youth.