

Australia's Labor government and its phony Voice referendum in deepening crisis

Oscar Grenfell
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After it scraped into office in the May, 2022 election, Labor immediately proclaimed that it would hold a referendum on enshrining the Voice, an indigenous advisory body to the government, in the Constitution.

The measure, which headlined Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's election night speech, was intended to put a progressive veneer on a government that was committed from the outset to escalating Australia's involvement in the US-led preparations for war with China, and implementing sweeping cuts to workers' living and social conditions demanded by big business.

Now, with the referendum looming on October 14, the Voice is compounding and intersecting with a broader crisis of the Albanese government.

Polling is inherently limited. Under conditions of a huge disconnect between the political and media establishment and the vast mass of the population, it has frequently been off the mark over recent years.

But however accurate the precise voting breakdowns released by the various polling agencies, the trajectory appears to be clear enough. The Voice is not only failing to boost the fortunes of the government, support for the initiative is flagging to the extent that a defeat of the referendum appears to be highly likely.

Last week the *Guardian* produced a graphical representation of some 45 polls on the Voice dating back to September 2022. Viewable [here](#), the graph resembles the sinking of a ship. There are some outliers, but most of the polls indicate that the highest support from voting age respondents received by the Voice was around 65 percent. Most polls indicating such numbers, however, were early in the year.

All of the polls listed since July 24 indicate that less than half the voting age population is planning to vote "yes."

Resolve polling, reported by the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Monday, showed that just 43 percent of respondents were intending to vote "yes." The *Herald* noted that "Voters have swung against the Voice for the fifth month in a row and are backing the No case in every state except Tasmania..."

Significantly, that was the first Resolve polling showing a lead to the "no" vote in both Victoria and New South Wales. They are the most populous states, and Victoria had been one

of the few states where the "yes" vote had been ahead. To be successful, the referendum must be voted in favor by a majority of the voting population, as well as a majority of the states.

Resolve founder Jim Reed told the *Herald* that "If anything, the [yes] campaign is having the opposite effect because the No vote is still growing." Reed added, "The comments we collect from respondents are becoming more exasperated and frustrated in their tone as the campaign wears on. Many people seem impatient for this to be over, especially those who see it as a diversion or divisive."

The polling shows an intersection between the flagging fortunes of the Voice and the standing of the Labor government. Albanese's net approval rating is minus 7 percent, a fall of 2 percent over the past two months. It compares with a positive approval rating of 35 points in January.

The rating of Liberal-National Coalition leader Peter Dutton has improved marginally, but his approval is also in negative territory. This indicates that while opposition to the Voice is increasing, it is not automatically translating into support for the Coalition, which is leading the official "no" campaign in the referendum.

The impression is increasingly one of a degree of panic and disarray in the Labor government. This morning, the *Australian* cited two anonymous federal Labor MPs who both predicted that the referendum would be defeated with 60 percent voting against and 40 percent in favour.

One Labor MP allegedly commented: "It's hard not to be pretty pessimistic about the outcome. It would take something pretty close to a miracle to save it." Another described the shambles of the referendum as "a bit of a reality check for us."

Notably, some of the MPs reportedly tied the crisis of the Voice to the growing cost-of-living crisis. That was also indicated by the Resolve data and other polling, showing that the worst inflation in decades, coupled with stagnant or declining real wages, remains the chief concern of most working people.

The Labor government, while pushing the Voice, has rejected any assistance for working people facing the consequences of the crisis. Its two budgets since assuming office have featured major cuts to spending on health and other social necessities and the most contemptuous increases to welfare payments. At

the same time, they have handed tens of billions to the military, as Labor prepares Australia to play a frontline role in a catastrophic war with China. The government has rejected calls to scrap Stage Three tax cuts, which overwhelmingly benefit the ultra-wealthy and the corporate elite.

The shift in the polling, from majority “yes” support to “no” support refutes claims that the referendum is failing because of racist attitudes among ordinary people, as does the centrality of cost-of-living crisis. Instead, the outcome reflects widespread and correct skepticism that the Voice will improve anything for workers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

There is a substantial experience with indigenous advisory committees, land rights councils and the like. They have done nothing to address the appalling social conditions facing most Aboriginal people while feathering the nests of a narrow indigenous elite tied to the political and corporate establishment.

Proponents of the Voice are becoming increasingly desperate. Last Wednesday, one of the architects of the policy, academic Marcia Langton, ludicrously described the establishment of the advisory body as “our last hope of surviving as the First Peoples with any of our laws, cultures and languages intact.” She said a failure of the Voice would be “a mandate to cause us even further harm.”

But the very Labor government overseeing the “yes” campaign has done nothing to improve the lot of ordinary indigenous people. Instead, it implements an austerity agenda that is hitting workers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

Langton’s remarks underscored the duplicity of the official “yes” campaign. While vaguely suggesting that the Voice would improve the lot of oppressed Aboriginal people, she assured those assembled: “This proposition is the barest measure imaginable...”

In fact, leading figures in the “yes” campaign are pushing the far-right talking points associated with cutbacks to welfare and other social rights of indigenous and other poor people. Noel Pearson, a prominent representative of the indigenous elite, told the Murdoch-owned *Australian* that the Voice would “lock that whole paradigm together, rights and responsibilities...”

The need for individuals to “take responsibility” has for decades been a dog whistle used to blame impoverished Aborigines and others for their dire social conditions. Driving home that point, Pearson stated: “You think my mob like it when I talk about responsibility? They love it when I talk about rights and how they’ve been victimised; they don’t like it when I say take responsibility for your childre—nobody’s going to save you until you get your family together.”

Regarding its reactionary social content, there is nothing that differentiates Pearson’s statement from open attacks on Aboriginal people by those leading the “no” campaign. That underscores the fact that both camps represent rival factions of the political establishment, committed to the capitalist profit system and the strengthening of the Australian state apparatus

for the joint purposes of war abroad and an intensifying onslaught on the social conditions of the working class.

The “Yes23” group, part of the official “yes” campaign, has this week announced a series of purportedly “grassroots” events. The aim, more or less openly stated, is to distance the “yes” campaign from parliament and the government. That is a tacit acknowledgement that a broader groundswell of opposition to the entire political establishment is driving the hostility to the Voice.

The issue that “Yes23” has is that there is nothing “grassroots” about the Voice. It is a top-down creation aimed at putting a progressive gloss on a reactionary government, dividing the working class, integrating an indigenous elite into the corridors of power, and revamping the image of the Australian state.

The only genuine alternative for working people is the active boycott campaign launched last week by the Socialist Equality Party. It opposes the racialism of the “yes” and “no” camps. It outlines a perspective of independent working-class struggle against all of the official political parties and the whole program of war and austerity that they defend.

Note: Under conditions of compulsory voting, which makes it a crime to urge a boycott of the vote itself, the SEP calls on workers and youth to register their opposition by casting informal ballots and join our active boycott campaign in the lead-up to October 14, that goes well beyond the individual act of voting.

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Suite 906, 185 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000.



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