

Australia: Marcia Langton implies opponents of indigenous Voice are “racist” and “stupid”

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A controversy has erupted in the lead-up to an October 14 referendum on enshrining an advisory indigenous Voice to parliament in the Australian constitution. At a public event in Western Australia on Sunday, Aboriginal academic Marcia Langton, one of the architects of the policy, launched a hysterical attack on those opposing the Voice.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* reported that Langton had branded those intending to vote no as “stupid” and “racist.” Langton has claimed that this is a misrepresentation of her remarks, has threatened legal actions and declared that she is being “targeted” by the media.

The basis of Langton’s objection is that she did not describe all no voters in those terms. Instead, she stated: “Every time the no cases raises one of their arguments, if you start pulling it apart, you get down to base racism. I’m sorry to say it, but that’s where it lands, or just sheer stupidity.”

That would appear to be a distinction without much of a difference. If the only grounds upon which one can oppose the Voice are “racism” or “stupidity,” the logical inference is that everyone intending to vote no is racist and stupid. Langton has since stated: “I am not a racist, and I don’t believe that the majority of Australians are racist.”

The problem for her and other backers of the Voice is that according to all polling, the majority of the voting population opposes the Voice. The implication of those who accept Langton’s argument, is indeed that a “majority of Australians” are racist. In reality, however, there are other reasons why the referendum is tanking.

In the corporate media, defenders of the Voice have branded Langton’s comments as a “misstep,” as though implying everyone who disagrees with you is a racist was a mere slip of the tongue.

More thoughtful commentary has made the apt comparison between Langton’s comments and Hillary Clinton’s infamous declaration in the 2016 US presidential election that supporters of Donald Trump’s candidacy were a “basket of deplorables.” That remark was widely and correctly interpreted as an articulation of Clinton’s intense

hostility to the American working class.

Langton’s comments have a similar significance. First of all, they are entirely rooted in the debased racialism that characterises both the official Yes and No camps in the referendum.

The Voice was always intended to put race in the centre stage. A key aim is to sow racial divisions among working people amid the highest inflation in decades and a rapidly worsening social crisis. Race can be discussed ad nauseam; the fundamental class division in society remains the great unmentionable. In this, there is a certain symmetry between the Aboriginal identity politics being peddled by supporters of the Voice and the racist positions of the far-right.

As with Clinton’s statement, the assertion that the majority of Australians are racist, or even a substantial portion of them, is a slander against the working class. It is both false and deeply cynical.

Cynical because the proponents of the Voice know it’s not true. After all, the right-wing, pro-business Labor government placed the Voice at the centre of its political identity, beginning the very night it was elected on May 21, 2022. It hardly did that because it thought most Australians were racist and the policy would crash and burn.

Instead, Labor wanted to exploit what it correctly identified as mass sentiment to redress the crimes committed against the Aboriginal people and the appalling social conditions that most of them still confront. The aim was to put a fake-progressive veneer on a government committed to intensifying Australian involvement in a war with China and a related austerity offensive against working people.

Labor and its backers, such as Langton, no doubt conducted extensive polling before they decided to hold the referendum. Indeed public polling from earlier this year showed up to 65 percent of voting-age respondents were intending to cast a yes ballot.

But now that the Voice is in a crisis, Labor’s backers have discovered mass racism. This is a sham. Firstly, racism has always been a class phenomenon. It was Labor that for decades oversaw the White Australia policy, implemented to

undermine the struggles of the working class and divide them from their class brothers and sisters in Asia and internationally.

This line also ignores the demographic transformations of recent decades. More than a quarter of the population was born overseas, almost half have a parent who was born abroad. The processes of economic globalisation have undercut the basis for all forms of racism and nationalism, with the working class itself having been internationalised to an unprecedented extent.

Even within the narrow framework of the referendum, Langton's comments are a false presentation of the actual political dynamics.

There is no question that Liberal-National Coalition leader Peter Dutton, who heads the official No campaign, has dog whistled to anti-Aboriginal racism. He continues to do so, but is also keeping a rather low profile. It appears that his handler's have advised him to stay in the background, and allow the Voice to fall apart without his intervention, which could backfire. While the "no" vote continues to increase, there is no comparable rise in Dutton's fortunes. He remains a deeply unpopular figure.

The real reason the Voice is in a parlous state is that there is massive alienation from the official political establishment. And there is a widespread sense that another advisory body to parliament will do nothing to improve the plight of ordinary Aboriginal people or any other workers.

Proponents of the Voice have not outlined a single way in which it will address the social crisis, while at the same time they have stressed their reverence for the reactionary Australian Constitution, the state and the status quo more generally. That such a right-wing pitch would not win mass support is hardly surprising.

To the extent that there is an Aboriginal constituency for the Voice, it is a narrow indigenous elite, not working class indigenous people.

Immediately preceding her remarks about "stupidity" and "racism," Langton had commented to the Western Australian meeting: "What are they [the No campaign] talking about? See, 'Aborigines are bludgers, Aborigines steal everything, Aborigines aren't entitled to the compensation that everybody else gets because they're lying.'"

Those are reactionary positions. The issue, however, is that impoverished Aborigines, such as welfare recipients, have also been vilified by supporters of the Voice.

Langton has for many years warned against what she terms "welfare dependency." That is a right-wing line that has been used to justify government attacks on social spending.

Langton supported the Northern Territory intervention, a police-military occupation of majority Aboriginal-areas

launched by the Howard Coalition government in 2007 and continued in different forms by successive Labor and Coalition governments. She has also promoted welfare quarantining measures, which involve governments effectively seizing control of a welfare recipients' payments and determining what they can spend their money on.

In 2017, Langton penned an opinion piece, explicitly backing a welfare quarantining policy of the then Coalition government, before later acknowledging that it was a "brutal policy."

Langton's positions on the mining conglomerates have had a very different tone. In 2012, Langton delivered a series of Boyer Lectures, which credited the mining boom, i.e., the super-profits accumulated by billionaire tycoons, with leading to "the emergence of an Aboriginal middle class."

In 2017, Langton launched a diatribe, not against "racists," but indigenous and environmental groups opposed to the creation of a new Queensland coal mine by the Adani corporation. As favorably reported in the *Australian Financial Review*, Langton denounced "incapable governments, the Green lawfare and media disinformation, the union movement and the soft left," for opposing the mine, the creation of which she claimed would result in "economic advancement."

Workers and young people should reject the right-wing filth that constitutes the official Yes and No camps in the referendum with the contempt they deserve. Nothing good will come from the further elevation of an indigenous elite into the structures of corporate and state power.

The real alternative is the campaign for an active boycott that has been launched by the Socialist Equality Party. It is openly tied to the struggle to unify the entire working class, regardless of race, in a fight against war, austerity and the whole political establishment. The fight to end the oppression of Aboriginal people, and of the working class, is a fight against capitalism and all of its defenders.

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.

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