

Yes marches in Australian Voice referendum promote big business Labor governments

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Tens of thousands of people across Australia took part in official rallies over the weekend supporting a Yes vote in the October 14 referendum on enshrining an indigenous Voice in the Australian Constitution. Establishing the advisory body to parliament is a central policy of the federal Labor government, designed to put a progressive veneer on an administration committed to a deeply unpopular program of escalating militarism and austerity.

The largest event was in Melbourne, where roughly 30,000 took part. Some 15,000 turned out in Sydney, while rallies in other capital cities and some regional centres were attended by thousands more.

The attendance was not insignificant, but given that the Yes campaign is backed by a majority of official institutions, from the state and federal Labor governments to the sporting codes, many corporations and the trade unions, the rallies were not massive either. Because of their state-sanctioned character and explicit support for the government, even the term “protests” would be something of a misnomer.

Unquestionably, the bulk of those who participated were motivated by a sincere concern over the plight of indigenous people, the overwhelming majority of whom still confront an appalling social crisis on every front, but the sentiments were generally of a vague character. The Voice “might make things better,” “couldn’t make things worse” and was “worth trying” were fairly typical comments from attendees.

Intense discussion on the historical origins of the oppression of Indigenous people, its relationship to the broader political situation and, above all, to the deepening social crisis confronting the entire working class, was absent. The atmosphere was festive, bordering on apolitical.

These were, however, political events. Their character, and to a certain extent the composition of the crowds themselves, pointed to the establishment character of the Yes campaign and indicated why it is in a deepening crisis.

Two key demographics were largely absent. Very few young people took part, despite polling indicating they are the constituency most likely to vote in favour of the Voice

out of a concern for Aboriginal rights, and most strikingly, attendance from indigenous people was also very low.

That led to an obvious irony. At events calling for an Indigenous Voice to parliament, the voices of Aboriginal people, especially the most oppressed and exploited, were largely absent. The demographics of the rallies spoke louder than the frequent assertions of speakers that the Voice was an idea that had somehow emanated from all indigenous people.

At large events, there are always exceptions to the rule and people in attendance for different reasons. This is all the more so given the vaguely-defined character of the Voice itself and a broad-based sentiment that something must be done to alleviate the horrific social plight of indigenous people.

But the dominant constituency was made up of well-meaning, but often quite complacent layers of the middle-class and older people who warmly received speeches by ministers in the Labor government and other representatives of big business.

That is entirely in keeping with the character of the Voice as a top-down initiative, birthed in the corridors of power. Its purpose has always been to divide the working class along racial lines, elevate a privileged indigenous layer into government and corporate structures, and revamp Australian nationalism, including to aid the preparations for war with China.

As if to drive home the point, the first speaker from a political party in Sydney was New South Wales Labor Premier Chris Minns. The MC noted that it was his birthday and requested that attendees sing him “Happy Birthday” before his remarks.

Minns has spent his decades-long career in Labor’s most openly right-wing faction. He is a champion of the unfettered free market, including privatisation, and his recently installed government has seamlessly continued the wage-cutting and “let it rip” COVID policies of its conservative predecessor.

The Labor premier declared that the Voice would “make

Australia an even better country.” It was, he said, “a safe, reliable change in our Constitution.” It would not “override the supremacy of the House of Representatives and the Senate,” “sideline our parliamentary democracy”, or “jeopardise this wonderful country that’s been built in these lands.” It would merely make Australia somewhat “fairer,” though Minns did not say how.

His remarks summed up the essentially right-wing character of the Voice, premised on a complete endorsement of the anti-democratic and reactionary 1901 Constitution, Australian nationalism and endorsement of the status quo. It is a line that is a million miles from the working class, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, which is confronting the worst cost of living in decades, soaring rental and housing expenses and an offensive against wages and conditions presided over by Labor and the corporatised trade unions.

Tanya Plibersek, a prominent federal Labor MP, gave a demagogic speech. She declared that the Voice was part of a protracted struggle for Aboriginal “self-government.”

Plibersek noted that the rally was taking place in Redfern Park, where then Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating made a speech on Aboriginal rights in 1992. She made no explanation as to why the situation for ordinary indigenous people has not only failed to improve, but has even worsened in the three decades since.

Plibersek was also a leading figure in the last Labor government that continued the Northern Territory intervention, a brutal police-military occupation of Aboriginal areas accompanied by welfare quarantining and other punitive attacks.

Plibersek held up Redfern, which historically had a large Aboriginal population, as a model to be emulated elsewhere. Most impoverished Aborigines, however, have been driven out of the inner-city suburb. A key turning point was the shutdown of “the block,” an area with a concentration of indigenous housing. Its residents were moved out by the Aboriginal Housing Corporation, which struck a deal with property developers to build mostly private apartments.

Just down the street from Redfern Park, in the neighbouring suburb of Waterloo, the Minns government is proceeding with plans to demolish much of the remaining public housing, also to the benefit of one of Labor’s main constituencies, the property developers.

At the Sydney rally, the organisers made a point of stressing “cross partisanship” for the Voice. Greens MP Sarah Hanson-Young expressed her support, underscoring the Greens’ backing for the right-wing Labor government. NSW Liberal parliamentarian Jacqui Munro was also given a platform. Her speech paralleled that of Minns, stressing the “responsible” and “modest” character of the Voice proposal, i.e., its essentially conservative character.

The comments pointed to an obvious contradiction in the Yes campaign. Its proponents alternate between assurances that the advisory body will not challenge the status quo in the slightest and vague assertions that it will vastly improve the social plight of ordinary indigenous people.

Of course, the establishment of yet another advisory body, composed of elite layers of the indigenous population and wholly beholden to parliament, will resolve nothing, as all past experience shows. The Yes campaign has been compelled to make a highly-limited and vague pitch on the social crisis, very late in the referendum, to try to reverse a crisis that is evident in all polling.

The official No camp is dominated by the Liberal-National Coalition and its leader, Peter Dutton. It is based on right-wing and at times racist dog whistling, as well as the same reverence for the reactionary Constitution that characterises the official Yes camp.

That underscores the crucial importance of the campaign for an “active boycott” of the referendum that has been launched by the Socialist Equality Party. It is the only vehicle in the referendum for workers to take an independent stand, in opposition to the racialism of the Yes and No camps. It points the way forward, beyond the referendum: the urgent need for an independent movement of the entire working class, directed against the whole political establishment and its program of war and austerity.

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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