

Australian PM pitches for bipartisan front as support plummets for indigenous Voice

Mike Head
25 September 2023

With opinion polls showing a continuing fall in support for the Labor government's referendum to entrench an indigenous assembly, called the Voice, in the constitution, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has made a revealing plea for unity with the opposition Liberal-National Coalition.

Speaking at the launch of the Uniting Church's Yes23 campaign for the Voice in Sydney on Sunday, alongside Liberal politician and Yes advocate Julian Leeser, Albanese said he had secretly made a pitch for a cross-party front in March.

For the first time, Albanese announced that he had met privately with Liberal leader Peter Dutton and Nationals leader David Littleproud in March to propose a joint parliamentary committee, with co-chairs from Labor and the Coalition, to oversee the drafting of legislation to govern the functions of the Voice.

Three polls published yesterday indicated that support for a Yes vote has dropped as low as 33 percent. This continued the trend of polls showing the Yes campaign, which the government has made absolutely central to its entire platform, headed for defeat at the October 14 referendum.

Significantly, the polls reported a parallel fall in support for the Labor government itself, above all because of the cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis. The ongoing cut to living conditions, the worst since World War II, is causing immense financial stress and social problems throughout the working class, including its most vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members.

For millions of working-class households, the Labor government's claim that the Voice would mean "better outcomes" for indigenous people is as hollow as Labor's 2022 election promise of a "better future."

Albanese's decision to now disclose his secretive offer to Dutton and Littleproud underscores the right-wing, pro-business character of the entire Voice project, which has the backing and financial support of large sections of the corporate elite.

While trying to appeal to the widespread sentiment for action to address the shocking social conditions of most

indigenous people, it seeks to revamp and bolster the apparatus of the capitalist state that has been responsible for these conditions since 1901.

Despite Albanese's March offer, both the Liberals and Nationals have officially called for a No vote, reflecting concern that the Voice could trigger constitutional conflicts under conditions of intensifying working-class alienation from the whole political setup. However, prominent factional leaders of both parties, like Leeser, have campaigned actively for a Yes vote.

At a doorstep media conference after the Uniting Church event, Albanese also revealed that he privately spoke to Dutton last weekend to give the Liberal leader advanced notice that he would make public his March offer. Albanese said Dutton had thanked him for the "courtesy."

The offer of a joint parliamentary committee underlines the extent to which the Voice, although termed an "advisory body," would become a key part of the existing political order. Representatives of a privileged indigenous layer of CEOs, bureaucrats and academics would be further integrated into the ruling establishment, while operating under the close supervision of the parliamentary establishment.

This is in line with the proposed amendment to the Constitution. The new section 129 would state explicitly that parliament—that is, the existing capitalist institution—would have the final say on all "matters relating to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, including its composition, functions, powers and procedures."

As the Socialist Equality Party's statement calling for an active boycott of the referendum explains, the Voice would sit at the heart of the state apparatus of parliament, governments and the armed forces of Australian capitalism. This regime, established in 1901, has its roots in the British colonial administration that cleared the land of indigenous tribes through massacres, poisonings, disease and the herding of survivors into squalid reserves.

At the Uniting Church event, Albanese again declared that a Yes vote would be "a moment of national unity." By

“national unity” he really means unity with the Coalition and the corporate boardrooms! In making a patriotic appeal, they want to put a progressive gloss on the program of austerity and US-led war, to which they are all committed, against the working class.

The latest media polls show that the disintegrating support for the Voice is directly related to rising disaffection with the Labor government and the whole ruling establishment. They do not indicate a lack of support for genuine measures to address the plight of indigenous people, nor support for a small minority of right-wing racists.

A Redbridge poll, published in the *Guardian* on Sunday, said 62 percent of respondents intended to vote No and only 38 percent Yes. A Newspann poll, conducted for the *Australian*, produced a similar outcome—56 percent No and 36 percent Yes.

In the Newspann poll, the biggest swing occurred among women and younger voters, who were previously the strongest supporters of the Voice. In the 18- to 34-year-old demographic, support for Yes fell another five points to 50 percent, down from close to 70 percent at the beginning of 2023.

Significantly, the Newspann also recorded a six-point fall in the satisfaction rating for Dutton, who has dog-whistled to racist elements in opposing the Voice. The official opposition leader has dropped to his lowest level of approval—minus 20—since taking the post after the Coalition’s election defeat in May 2022.

The most revealing result came from the *Australian Financial Review’s* AFR/Freshwater Strategy poll. It registered support for the Voice at only 33 percent, while the No vote reached 50 percent, with 17 percent undecided. That 33 percent figure matched the four-point fall in support for the government since December, back to the near-record low level that the Labor Party obtained at the May 2022 election.

The financial newspaper reported: “Among those who have switched their vote from Yes to No over the past five months, the most commonly cited reason is the Voice has served as a distraction from the top two issues of voter concern—the cost of living and the cost of housing.”

To that could be added crucial issues not even canvassed by the poll. They include the government’s accelerating commitment to the AUKUS alliance and massive military spending for a war against China, the “Stage Three” income tax cuts for the rich, the growing COVID toll of illness and deaths since the Labor government scrapped health safety measures, and the lack of any real measures to reverse the climate change disaster.

An accompanying AFR editorial voiced anxiety. Speaking on behalf of big business, it described the decline in popular support for the Voice as “alarming.” It said a “national

tragedy” was looming due to the likely Yes defeat and the Labor government’s “loss of gloss.”

The editorial warned of political instability. “After winning government with a bare one-seat majority, since increased to two seats, this is a political recipe for a Labor minority government at the next election.”

Discontent by itself, however, will not provide a way forward for workers and youth. The deepening working-class disenchantment with the Labor government, whose policies are policed by the trade union bureaucrats, has to be transformed into a politically conscious fight against the capitalist order itself, as part of an international movement.

The SEP’s campaign for an active boycott of the Voice referendum is helping to chart the course for that development. As our statement says: “The Socialist Equality Party will use its campaign for an active boycott of the referendum not only to champion measures to address the social plight of indigenous people, but to fight for a socialist solution to the pressing issues that confront the working class as a whole—a catastrophic war, climate change and the relentless attack on social and democratic rights.”

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



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact