

Right-wing Aboriginal leader makes nationalist pitch for the Voice

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An address to the National Press Club by Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson, calling for a yes vote in the referendum to enshrine an indigenous advisory body to government in the Constitution, received a standing ovation from the assembled journalists. With little pretense of impartiality, they have since hailed Pearson's remarks as "inspiring" and "powerful."

In fact, Pearson's statements summed up the essentially right-wing, conservative and pro-business character of the proposal to establish a Voice to parliament in the October 14 referendum. His remarks were based on complete support for the status quo, i.e., the dominance of the corporate and financial elite, and a promotion of Australian nationalism that dovetails with the escalation of militarism and war.

In their coverage, various Yes-aligned journalists have sought to draw a parallel between Pearson's remarks and some of the famous civil rights speeches, such as those made by Dr Martin Luther King. Much of Pearson's address was delivered in a sort of free verse poetry and he used every rhetorical trick in the book.

The effect, however, was other than intended. Essentially, Pearson combined hackneyed and clichéd rhetoric with banality. The strained character of the speech reflected two basic facts.

Unlike the civil rights movement in the United States, there is no democratic content to the Voice. King and others, for all their limitations, were associated with a fight against discrimination and government oppression. Pearson is promoting a government policy aimed at dividing the working class along racial lines, revamping the image of Australian capitalism and further entrenching a privileged indigenous elite, of which he is a prominent representative.

Secondly, Pearson spoke as the referendum and the Yes campaign are in a deep-going crisis. The Labor government placed the Voice at the centre of its agenda, to exploit widespread concern over the plight of indigenous people and to put a progressive gloss on its agenda of war and austerity.

However, the campaign has backfired. Polling is indicating that less than 40 percent of the eligible population will vote yes. The polls also indicate that the cost-of-living crisis, and the refusal of the government to address it in any way, is a major factor in the decline in support for the Voice.

For many months, the Yes campaign made little reference to the social crisis afflicting most indigenous people, reflecting its character as a top-down initiative. That has shifted in recent weeks, with vague assertions that the existence of the advisory

body will somehow improve the situation.

This was a feature of Pearson's speech. He referenced the appalling levels of rheumatic heart disease among Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

But as with the rest of the Yes campaign, Pearson could not provide a compelling explanation as to how the Voice would improve indigenous health in any tangible way. His only argument was the hazy assertion, "When we listen to each other, outcomes improve."

Governments, however, are well aware of the appalling conditions afflicting most Aborigines. Those conditions are themselves the deliberate outcome of official policy and form part of a broader onslaught against the social rights of the entire working class, which is being deepened by the Labor government.

The Voice, moreover, will provide no voice for oppressed indigenous people. Instead it will further integrate the wealthy Aboriginal bureaucrats and businesspeople, such as Pearson, into the structures of government and the state.

The bulk of Pearson's remarks were not about the social conditions facing indigenous workers.

Instead, his pitch was that the establishment of the Voice would "complete Australia." It would bring together the three strands of the "Australian story and identity" which Pearson identified as indigenous culture, "constitutional democracy" and a "multicultural triumph."

This argument was connected to a full-throated promotion of nationalism. "It is the love of our country that joins us all as Australians," Pearson said. As if by way of a disclaimer, he added: "I said it's not the same as patriotism, because there's nothing political about this love of country."

This is simply false. The peddling of nationalism is always political. In this instance it aligns completely with a key aim of the Labor government in calling the referendum. That is to revamp and prettify the image of Australian capitalism, in order to help prosecute the US-led economic, geo-strategic and military conflict with China. Labor is fearful that its agitation against Beijing throughout the Pacific and Asia will be complicated by Australian capitalism's horrific record of oppression against the Aboriginal people.

The other key purpose of nationalism is to suppress class divisions. Pearson described the Voice as a "peace dividend," that would end racial and social conflicts. "If we vote yes, we're voting yes to orientate the relationship between Indigenous and

non-indigenous Australians down a safe and responsible middle path,” Pearson said. “Voting Yes is a rejection of confected war. Voting Yes crosses the bridge on the pathway to peace.”

This is an argument for “national unity” that extends beyond the immediate issue of the plight of indigenous people. It is an insistence that all layers of society must unite around a new “Australian identity” consecrated by the Voice. This is directed against the growth of opposition in the working class, amid unrelenting attacks on jobs, wages and conditions, enormous social inequality and a resurgence of class struggle internationally.

As if to hammer away at the conservative character of his pitch, Pearson repeatedly emphasised the “safe” character of the Voice. It would not challenge the existing constitutional and parliamentary order in any way, he insisted. Its composition and function would be wholly determined by parliament.

In the course of his address, Pearson favourably referenced the empty calls for “reconciliation” by former Labor Prime Ministers Gough Whitlam and Paul Keating. Pearson also quoted John Howard, the previous Liberal-National prime minister who denounced all references to the historical oppression of Aborigines as a form of “black arm-band history.”

He essentially presented the Voice as a means of blaming impoverished Aborigines for their own plight. With the establishment of the advisory body, indigenous people would have to take “responsibility.” Pearson stated: “Blame us when you give us a voice. Hold us accountable, too, when we do this.”

Those comments dovetailed with Pearson’s repeated denunciations of “welfare dependency.” The indigenous leader has frequently joined with openly right-wing politicians to depict the plight of oppressed Aborigines as a result of excessive government assistance, which can be overcome through grit and an entrepreneurial spirit. Pearson’s entire record points to the reactionary character of the Voice proposal.

Pearson’s rise to prominence in the 1990s was associated with his establishment of the Cape York Land Council. Such councils have acquired some control of historically-indigenous lands under the framework of the Aboriginal land rights system, set in motion by previous Labor governments. Land rights have done nothing to improve the social plight of ordinary indigenous people, but have created a wealthy indigenous elite.

Pearson has for years been involved in official politics. He was a supporter of the Howard government’s 2007 Northern Territory intervention, a police-military occupation of Aboriginal areas which involved the suspension of basic civil liberties and brutal social attacks, such as welfare quarantine. Pearson effectively participated in the intervention, helping the Howard government to establish an “advisory council” of indigenous elders backing the state operation.

Pearson’s record also highlights the grubby origins of proposals for a Voice and for indigenous recognition in the Constitution. In September 2007, Pearson wrote an open letter to Howard, warning his political ally of likely defeat in that year’s election. Pearson urged the right-wing Liberal prime minister to hold a referendum to recognise indigenous people in the constitution as a means to reverse Howard’s deep unpopularity, resulting from Australia’s involvement in the criminal US-led Iraq war and sweeping attacks

on workers’ rights, and ensure his reelection.

Pearson gushed to Howard: “I believe that Australia needs your leadership during the next term of government.”

Howard indicated his support and announced plans for a referendum. But before Pearson’s proposal could get going, the Howard government was ousted in the November 2007 election and Howard himself lost his seat.

Pearson revived the push for constitutional recognition under the Gillard Labor government, joining an official panel to develop the proposal in 2010. Gillard continued the sweeping attacks on Aboriginal people associated with the Northern Territory intervention, as part of a broader onslaught on welfare, education and healthcare.

Pearson also had close ties with the Liberal prime minister who succeeded Gillard, Tony Abbott. An extreme right-wing figure, Abbott hailed Pearson as a “prophet” because of his calls for Aborigines to take “responsibility” for their social conditions.

Pearson was at a 2015 meeting convened by Abbott to discuss constitutional recognition, which then Labor leader Bill Shorten participated in, together with other indigenous leaders. Abbott called the meeting as a bid to deflect social opposition to the sweeping austerity measures that his government had recently introduced. That meeting would set in motion a process that has culminated in the current referendum.

The referendum is being held now, because the powers-that-be recognise that these social tensions have reached a breaking point. The aim, as Pearson spelled out, is to drum up a sense of “national unity” and to suppress the fundamental class questions, for fear that they will erupt.

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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