

# Why no referendum on AUKUS and Australia's role in war plans against China?

Oscar Grenfell  
3 October 2023

Official Australian politics are almost entirely dominated by the October 14 referendum to enshrine an indigenous advisory body to parliament in the Constitution. The Labor government, which is heading the Yes campaign, has proclaimed the referendum as historic. The establishment press, of all shades, is obsessively focussed on race.

As the Socialist Equality Party has extensively explained, the referendum is a sham. The establishment of the Voice would do nothing to resolve the horrendous conditions confronting the mass of indigenous people. The Yes campaign occasionally asserts that the Voice would improve these conditions, but they cannot explain how.

Instead, the Voice serves to divide the working class along racial lines and further entrench a privileged indigenous elite, connected to governments and the corporate elite.

The official No camp, led by the right-wing Liberal-National Coalition is basing its campaign on a defence of the status quo along with thinly-veiled dog-whistling to a racist minority of the population.

All in all, the referendum is an exercise in whipping up racialism and confusion. The official Yes and No campaigns offer no way forward for workers, which is why the SEP has called for an active boycott aimed at developing an independent movement of the working class against the whole political establishment.

The reactionary character of the entire referendum can be demonstrated in another way. The population is being given a “choice” on whether or not to change the country’s anti-democratic constitution to establish an unelected indigenous advisory body to parliament.

But what say do workers and young people have in issues of life and death that pose a question mark over the very future and existence of humanity?

The same Labor government that has spearheaded the Voice referendum has simultaneously engaged in a massive militarisation of Australia, aimed at preparing for a frontline role in a US-led war drive against China. There is a referendum on the Voice. But there is no referendum on these plans for a catastrophic war that would almost

inevitably involve the use of nuclear weapons.

Here are some of the key components of the war drive, which have never been voted upon by the population, and in most cases, not even by the parliament:

- Labor is extending the AUKUS military pact with Britain and the US, the explicit purpose of which is to militarise the Indo-Pacific region. In March, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese suddenly announced that Australia would purchase US nuclear-powered attack submarines, at a cost of \$368 billion. That announcement was made in San Diego, before the issue had been raised in a single public forum in Australia.

- Last October, it was revealed that the Labor government had given the US permission to station its nuclear-capable B-52 bombers in Northern Australia. The US never confirms or denies which of its nuclear-capable assets are carrying a payload at any given time, so it must be assumed that the B-52 bombers are armed with nuclear weapons. The Labor government has thus overturned Australia’s nominal status as a nuclear-free power. It did that without so much as a public announcement, with the stationing of the B-52 bombers only being discovered via US Congressional documents.

- The Labor government has also agreed to the “rotation” of US nuclear-powered submarines through Australian ports. American fighter jets and naval warships have a virtual *carte blanche* to access Australian facilities.

- In April, the Labor government endorsed a Defence Strategic Review (DSR) that it had commissioned. The DSR ends decades of official defence doctrine, nominally based on the defence of the Australian continent. Instead, it calls for “impactful projection” throughout the Indo-Pacific, centred on the acquisition of major missile capabilities. The DSR declares that this war drive must be a “whole-of-nation” effort, involving every aspect of society.

The implications of this program were spelled out in the *Red Alert* series, published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* earlier this year. Based on the statements of US and Australian-government connected “experts,” it declared

that by the end of 2025 Australia had to prepare for an “inevitable” war with China by stationing US nuclear weapons in the country and introducing mass conscription.

That is what is being discussed behind closed doors. Based on the level of secrecy surrounding defence policy, it is almost certain that the military build-up and Australian commitments to the US war machine are even more advanced than is publicly known.

There are several connections between this war agenda and the Voice referendum.

- The military build-up underscores the reality of capitalist rule. Behind a facade of elections, and even occasional referenda, the major decisions are made in the corridors of power by military generals, the leaders of intelligence agencies and the corporate elite. When it comes to such matters as war, the population simply has no say.

- The war drive underscores the purely tactical character of the disputes between the official Yes and No campaigns in the Voice referendum. While they may disagree on establishing an Aboriginal advisory body to parliament, all of the official parties, from Labor to the Coalition and the Greens, are as one when it comes to aligning Australia with US-led militarist policies that threaten a global nuclear war.

- The advanced state of the war drive demonstrates the intensely diversionary character of the referendum. While the population is being inundated with racialism, and political discussion centres on the possible creation of an indigenous advisory body, major decisions are being made without discussion that will shape the future of the world.

- The military build-up shows the fraudulent character of claims that the Voice would provide any say for most indigenous people. The central focus of the build-up is the Northern Territory, which has the largest per capita Aboriginal population. War games are conducted in historically-Aboriginal areas, US bombers are stationed there, without the impoverished local communities having any say. At the same time, the indigenous elite, the real beneficiaries of the Voice project, have never expressed the slightest opposition to the transformation of the Territory into a staging ground for war.

- Both sides in the referendum are whipping up nationalism. The Yes campaign is proclaiming that the Voice will “unify” the nation. The No camp whitewashes the history of British colonisation and the formation of the Australian state. The paeans to “Australian identity” by both sides, and their attempts to suppress the fundamental class antagonisms, are fully in line with the DRS’s insistence of the need for a unified “whole-of-nation” preparation for war.

- A central purpose of the Voice is to revamp the image of Australian capitalism. Labor is fearful that the horrific legacy of colonisation and the oppression of indigenous

people will obstruct its efforts throughout the Pacific and Asia to further the US-led anti-China campaign. It hopes that the Voice will provide a progressive veneer for its militarist activities.

The contrast between the unanimous support for war across the political establishment, and the confected Voice referendum, shows why the working class must take an independent position. That means joining the active boycott campaign being fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.

The SEP, which opposes the racialism of both the official camps in the referendum, is also the only party fighting against AUKUS and the preparations for war with China. That is not an accident. Both positions reflect the independent interests of the working class, which can only be pursued in a relentless struggle against the entire political establishment and the capitalist system that it defends.

Above all, the SEP advances an internationalist perspective. The fight against war requires a rejection of all forms of nationalism and racialism, and the unity of the great revolutionary force of our times, the international working class in the fight for a socialist future.

*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](https://wsws.org/contact)**