

Both camps in Australia's Voice referendum pledge to cut spending for impoverished Aborigines

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Australia's October 14 referendum to enshrine an indigenous Voice to parliament in the Constitution has descended into a debased and degrading spectacle of racialism and mutual recriminations.

Amid daily accusations of misinformation and racism traded between the Yes and No camps, there is a major area of agreement: both official campaigns have pledged that they will reduce federal spending for Aboriginal people.

This week, opposition Liberal-National leader Peter Dutton, who effectively heads the No camp, promised an audit into all federal funding for indigenous programs. This was in line with the No campaign's thinly-veiled racist dogwhistling, including claims that vast sums of money are being squandered on ordinary Aboriginal people.

The Yes campaign has refrained from attacking Dutton on this issue because they have an identical position.

The Labor government, which called the referendum and is seeking to establish the indigenous advisory body to parliament, claims that the Voice will help "close the gap" on social metrics between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and end the appalling social crisis afflicting indigenous communities.

The obvious way to do that would be to massively increase government investment in healthcare, education and other social necessities for oppressed indigenous people, but Labor is touting the Voice as a means of slashing the grossly-inadequate existing spending!

Yesterday, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese declared: "It is true that there are a range of programs out there, which is why there is also a conservative argument to vote Yes. When you talk with people who are directly impacted, you will have more efficiency, you'll have less waste. You'll actually do things that have an impact on

the ground and I believe you'll actually save money, not spend money..."

The entire discussion is obscene and reactionary. It highlights the sham character of the whole referendum. Both Coalition and Labor politicians, who speak for the banks, the corporations and the ultra-wealthy, are effectively promising that they will inflict even more social pain on the most oppressed sections of the working class.

From the tenor of Albanese and Dutton's remarks, one could be forgiven for thinking that the streets are paved with gold in indigenous communities, and that rivers of money are flowing into health and education programs. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that of the more than 460,000 indigenous individuals over 18 years old, nearly 200,000, or 42.6 percent, had an income of less than \$499 a week. That is, they are at or below the poverty line. The implications are plain when one considers that the weekly median rent, across the country, is now estimated to stand at \$570. The unemployment rate is twice that for Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous people.

The "Closing the Gap" program, set in place by a previous Labor government and continued by successive administrations, has manifestly failed. Even by its own dubious metrics, figures for indigenous incarceration rates, child removal and suicide are all increasing and on track to continue to rise.

There is still a major gap in life expectancy. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, overall average life expectancy for indigenous men is estimated to be 71.6 years and for females 75.6. That compares with life expectancy for non-Indigenous Australians of 80.2 years for males and 83.4 years for females.

An Equity Economics study last year, commissioned by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, estimated that as of 2019-20, the funding shortfall for indigenous health, which would be required to actually close the gap on life expectancy and other metrics, stood at \$4.4 billion. That included a \$2.6 billion shortfall in annual federal spending.

The Labor government claimed that its May budget included major increases to indigenous health funding. The headline figure of \$493.8 million still fell miles short of what Equity Economics estimated is required.

Even then, almost all of the newly-announced funding is over four years. That means new expenditure for this year on specific indigenous health initiatives was closer to just \$125 million, or the equivalent of \$127 per Aboriginal person. Some of the funding could only loosely be described as direct health expenditure. One of the largest single programs is for a public relations campaign involving billboards and other advertising, encouraging indigenous people to smoke less.

There is, moreover, not a brick wall between healthcare for ordinary indigenous people and workers of all backgrounds. The May budget was handed down amid the greatest crisis of the public healthcare system in decades. It has been triggered by decades of government spending cuts and freezes and the adoption of a “let it rip” COVID policy guaranteeing continuous mass infection, illness and death.

Under those conditions, Labor’s budget decreed that federal health spending would be slashed by \$11 billion in just two years—from \$115.5 billion in 2021–22 to \$104.1 billion in 2023–24. A pittance was allocated to public education, and the JobSeeker unemployment allowance was increased by just \$20 a week, increasing it from 41 percent of the poverty line to 44 percent.

The government has rejected any relief for the worst cost-of-living crisis in generations, and has declared that workers must make “sacrifices.” Of course the burden of this agenda falls on the most oppressed layers of the population, including indigenous people.

The declarations that the Voice will help slash indigenous funding show that it is part of this broader agenda of attacking the working class, not an exception to it.

The Voice’s origins lie in the decision of then Liberal-National Coalition Prime Minister Tony Abbott to call a meeting of indigenous representatives and Labor leader Bill Shorten in 2015. The gathering, which agreed to moves towards indigenous Constitutional recognition

which have culminated in the current referendum, was an attempt by Abbott to suppress anger over sweeping austerity measures, including at least \$600 million cuts to funding for indigenous community organisations.

The chief proponents of the Voice, representatives of a privileged indigenous elite, have for years demonised oppressed Aboriginal people, while supporting attacks on their rights such as through welfare quarantining.

Meanwhile, the entire political establishment is committed to ongoing and deepening tax cuts for the rich, and massive expenditure on the military to prepare for a US-led war with China.

The unanimity of Labor and the Coalition on funding cuts highlights the importance of the Socialist Equality Party’s campaign for an active boycott of the referendum. The vote on October 14 will resolve nothing for workers, whatever their background, and will be followed by an intensification of the social onslaught.

The solutions to poverty and the social crisis are clear. Hundreds of billions of dollars must be poured into education, healthcare, housing and other essential social services. Public works programs must be initiated to end unemployment. All workers must be provided with major wage increases to make up for decades of real pay cuts that are now accelerating.

Labor, the Coalition and the ruling elite would answer that there is simply “no money” for such policies.

There is plenty of wealth. The issue is that it is monopolised by the corporations, the banks and the ultra-rich. That demonstrates the need for a socialist program, aimed at establishing a workers’ government that would place the major businesses and the banks under public ownership and democratic workers’ control as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

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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