

How and why big business is backing Australia's Voice referendum

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One of the most striking features of the Australian Labor government's referendum to entrench an indigenous Voice advisory body in the country's 1901 Constitution is that the official Yes campaign is bankrolled by major corporate interests.

The Voice would do nothing to help the vast majority of indigenous people, who are among the most oppressed layers of the working class. On the contrary, it would insert an unelected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander assembly into the heart of the capitalist state apparatus of executive governments and parliament that has been responsible for continuing the crimes committed by British colonialism and Australian capitalism over the past two and a half centuries.

The referendum offers only a false "choice" between two ruling capitalist class camps, both of which are committed to the underlying program of preparing to join a US-led war against China and inflicting the deepest cuts to workers' real wages and living conditions since World War II.

This is most visible for the official Yes23 campaign, which reportedly has a \$50 million budget, overwhelmingly derived from the largest mining companies, the four big banks and three major supermarket and retail chains.

Of the top 20 businesses listed on the Australian share market, representing almost half the value of the stock exchange, 13 have publicly expressed support. None of the top 20 has opposed the Voice, with the rest staying silent.

Significantly, the corporate giants endorsing the Yes campaign include some of the most aggressive in attacking the jobs, wages and conditions of all workers, including indigenous workers. Airline company Qantas has a decade-long record of spearheading the offensive, most recently by illegally sacking its ground staff. It has painted Yes slogans on its aircraft and provided Yes campaign leaders with free travel.

Also on the list are the banks—Westpac, ANZ, NAB and the Commonwealth—which are intensifying their job cuts (2,000 this year so far) and branch closures, and have extensive records of profit-gouging from customers.

Prominent too are the retail and mining empire Wesfarmers (Bunnings, Kmart, Target, and Officeworks to name only a few), supermarket chains Coles and Woolworths, and mining companies BHP, Rio Tinto, Woodside, South 32 and Newcrest. Others include road toll operator Transurban, property developer Lendlease, software giant Xero and the Paul Ramsay Foundation, built on a private health empire.

Among the known donations, Wesfarmers, Rio Tinto and BHP have funded the Yes campaign to the tune of \$2 million each. Visy Industries boss Anthony Pratt, the country's third richest billionaire, reportedly donated \$1 million. His companies have engaged in numerous strike-breaking operations over the years.

The Business Council of Australia (BCA), whose members comprise the top stock exchange-listed firms, as well as others such as Boeing, Cisco and the big four accounting firms, has strongly endorsed the Voice, as has the Minerals Council of Australia, the mining industry peak body.

The Directors for the Voice group ran full-page ads in national newspapers in September declaring support for the Voice. Conexus Financial, publisher of *Investment Magazine*, officially announced its backing in August after co-hosting an event at which Prime Minister Anthony Albanese met with finance industry leaders, urging them to join the Yes campaign.

The Yes23 campaign is being run by figures drawn from the brains trusts of both the Labor and Liberal-National parties, and CT Group, a political consultancy firm, previously known as Crosby Textor, that has long worked on Liberal Party election campaigns. Operatives inside the campaign HQ in North Sydney are led by chief operating officer, ex-Victorian Liberal Party director Simon Frost. The Yes23 board features ex-Prime Minister John Howard's former chief of staff Tony Nutt and Kevin Rudd's chief media adviser as prime minister, Lachlan Harris.

What lies behind this line-up?

First and foremost, the high-level corporate backing for the Voice is bound up with the ideological, political and geo-strategic agenda behind the proposal. That is to put a false progressive face on Australian capitalism, both for foreign policy and domestic purposes.

Revamping Australia's image is regarded as essential for war purposes, especially to claim to be backing the US aggression against Russia and China in the name of "human rights" and to help bully Asia-Pacific states, whose largely indigenous populations have bitter experiences with British-Australian colonialism and neo-colonialism, into lining up behind Washington.

The Albanese government's equally fraudulent appeal to "unify the nation" is a precondition for creating a war economy and imposing the inevitable sacrifices of lives and livelihoods, as occurred in both previous world wars. Far from united, Australia, like the rest of the world, is more sharply divided than ever by

yawning social inequality and class tensions, producing rising strike struggles.

For the corporate boardrooms, the Voice is a means of further incorporating into the capitalist class and the state apparatus a layer of indigenous business owners who are profiting off government and corporate contracts, in the name of “economic empowerment,” at the expense of indigenous workers and youth.

In its August statement backing the Voice, the BCA committed itself to “support Indigenous Australians to own and grow their own businesses.” BCA members spent over \$1 billion a year with indigenous businesses, BCA chief executive Jennifer Westacott said.

Direct profit interests are at stake also. This is most evident with the mining industry, which accounts for two-thirds of Australian capitalism’s export revenue and whose interests are closely tied to those of the banks and finance houses that underwrite its projects. They regard the Voice as a more institutional and centralised vehicle for pursuing mining and other corporate projects on land that is subject to indigenous title claims.

Multi-billion dollar mining projects depend on deals struck with Aboriginal land councils and native title bodies. These usually involve royalty payments of just 0.5 to 0.8 percent of annual production, or minor shares in ownership, typically around 10 percent, that are dwarfed by the massive revenues generated.

In its statement of support for the Voice, BHP said its “long-term agreements with traditional owners” were “central to our business success, and the creation of long-term value for BHP’s shareholders.”

For the mining giants, a major problem is that their operations have often become embroiled in legal disputes with rival clan or family groups. Frequent court challenges have been made by indigenous groups to deals struck with other land claimants. The BCA said the Voice would “provide a formal and authoritative avenue for corporate Australia” to work with indigenous communities on business “programs and initiatives.”

Very little benefit flows to most indigenous people from any of these arrangements. East Arnhem Land remains one of the poorest local government areas of the country according to census data, even though hundreds of millions of dollars in royalties since 1971 have come from Rio Tinto’s Gove bauxite project near Nhulunbuy, as just one example.

Open business support for the Voice is not universal. Other big companies like CSL, Fortescue Metals Group, Goodman, Santos, Medibank and Macquarie bank have opted to stay silent. So have the Australian Industry Group and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, two groups representing medium-sized companies. At the same time they defend the right of those advocating Yes to do so, and endorse the underlying program of “reconciliation” between indigenous people and Australian capitalism.

According to the *Australian Financial Review*, some chief executives have kept quiet to avoid the perception that the Voice referendum is “an elites-led push.”

The only prominent business figure to back the No camp is mining billionaire Clive Palmer, the founder of the right-wing United Australia Party. He is spending \$2 million on ads

promoting the No vote.

A few large No donors have been identified. They include Sam Kennard, chief executive at Kennards Self Storage, who is also a director of the right-wing think tank the Centre for Independent Studies, and Marcus Blackmore, the son of the founder of the Blackmores health supplements company. Simon Fenwick, a former fund manager, is thought to have put in \$500,000, on top of a \$1 million donation to Advance, a right-wing body behind the campaign. Two other anonymous donations of more than \$1 million have been reported.

These individuals no doubt reflect concerns expressed by the official No campaign that the operations of the Voice, despite having its functions defined by parliament, could complicate legal or constitutional conflicts, especially under conditions of rising working-class discontent with the entire political and corporate establishment.

In other cases, the silence may be to avoid public attention being drawn to their profiteering operations. Some mining companies, such as the Fortescue Metals Group, have paid royalties to indigenous groups as low as 0.1 percent of production. Fortescue chairman Andrew Forrest opposes paying any more on the basis that it constitutes “mining welfare” that discourages Aboriginal people from seeking jobs or setting up businesses.

The fact that the major companies are pouring millions of dollars into the Yes campaign underscores the reality that the Voice plan has never been a grassroots movement coming from oppressed indigenous people. Whatever the tactical differences in ruling corporate circles, both the Yes and No camps are preoccupied with furthering the interests of the capitalist class and its reactionary agenda of war and austerity.

The Socialist Equality Party is urging workers and youth to reject both the Yes and No cases and join an active boycott of the referendum itself in order to fight for the development of an independent road for the working class, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, based on an internationalist and socialist program, against the capitalist profit system itself.

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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