

Defeat of Australian Labor's Voice referendum highlights massive class divide

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The Australian Labor government's referendum to enshrine an indigenous Voice in the Constitution suffered a resounding defeat on Saturday. Nationally, more than 60 percent of voters cast a ballot against establishing the Aboriginal advisory body to parliament, with the Yes camp registering less than 40 percent support.

The result was so overwhelming that the defeat was clear an hour-and-a-half after the close of voting. To have been successful, the referendum required a majority of the popular vote, and a Yes result in most states. All the states, however, registered No majorities, with the Australian Capital Territory the only jurisdiction led by Yes ballots.

Another measure of the scale of the defeat is that only 41 seats of the country's 151 lower house parliamentary electorates recorded majority Yes support.

The outcome has been met by the Voice proponents in the political and media establishment with an outpouring of racist hysteria. The majority of the population is being denounced in these quarters as racist, mean-spirited and as having rejected a generous offer for "reconciliation" with the indigenous population. At best, ordinary people who voted against the Voice are being presented as the dupes of "misinformation."

These claims are a fraud, as was the entire Voice policy. In reality, the most striking feature of the result was the massive class divide it revealed.

All the initial demographic breakdowns and voting data paint the same picture. The Yes vote was most successful in the affluent areas of the country, especially the wealthy and inner suburbs of the major capital cities. As a general tendency, the poorer and more working-class an area, the more likely it was to vote No.

In New South Wales and Victoria, the Yes votes were highest in the inner-city areas of Sydney and Melbourne, where median income is multiple times higher than in working-class suburbs. Several former Liberal Party blue-ribbon seats in Sydney with some of the highest income levels, won at the last election by Teal independents, voted Yes.

This pattern underscores the fact that the result is not an expression of mass racism. Instead, it indicates an even greater deepening of popular hostility to the federal Labor government and the entire political establishment, above all, in the working class.

Even the corporate media, for its own reasons, has been compelled to acknowledge that the fundamental issue was the deepening social crisis, expressed in the cost-of-living disaster.

Over the course of the year, as it has been promoting the Voice, the Labor administration has rejected any substantial relief as the cost of all essential goods has soared, real wages have been cut and mortgage repayments have skyrocketed as a result of interest rate hikes. Labor, narrowly elected in May 2022 on the slogan of a "better future," has insisted that workers must "sacrifice" as it imposes an austerity agenda benefitting the corporations and the ultra-wealthy.

The Voice was never going to improve social conditions, including for indigenous people, the majority of whom constitute the most oppressed section of the working class. Instead, its aim was to put a progressive gloss on the Labor government's pro-business program and the other key plank of its agenda, the ever-greater alignment of Australia with the advanced US-led plans for a catastrophic war with China.

The claims of widespread racism and misinformation are a cover for the real dynamics of the campaign, which increasingly exposed the fraudulent character of the Voice.

Those claiming mass racism are incapable of explaining why opinion polls from the beginning of the year showed that 60 to 65 percent of the population supported the Voice, a proportion that has been almost exactly reversed in the final result. The very calling of the referendum by Labor was an acknowledgement of a mass sentiment in favour of redressing the oppression of Aboriginal people, a sentiment the government hoped to cynically exploit.

The Yes campaign, however, was shot through with contradictions.

Labor and its proponents insisted that what they were seeking to enshrine was a powerless advisory body, which they depicted as a minor change.

At the same time, however, they vaguely asserted that the establishment of the Voice would help to resolve the appalling social conditions afflicting most Aboriginal people, including far below average life expectancy, chronic disease and poverty. But they never explained how the Voice would alter this state of affairs in the slightest.

In fact, the Voice was premised on an explicit rejection of any increase to federal funding for Aboriginal health, education and other services, which advocacy groups say is billions of dollars short of what is required every year. Instead, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese pitched the Voice as a means of slashing indigenous spending, part of the broader austerity onslaught.

Proponents of the Voice repeatedly denounced those requesting more details about the body, in some instances arrogantly instructing them to “Google it.” But there were no more details. The entire composition and structure of the Voice was to be determined by parliament after the referendum, without any reference to the sentiments or will of the population.

The official No campaign, headed by Liberal-National Coalition leader Peter Dutton, unquestionably dog-whistled at times to anti-Aboriginal racism. At the same time, it was based on the same reactionary Australian nationalism and defence of the anti-democratic 1901 Constitution as the Yes campaign.

The No campaign largely capitalised on the weakness and racialism of the Yes camp, pointing to the lack of detail and warning against “dividing the nation” along racial lines. Polling has shown that despite the swing against the Voice, Dutton remains one of the most unpopular figures in recent Australian political history. Dutton kept a low profile throughout the campaign. He largely delegated leadership of the No camp to Jacinta Price, a newly-elected National Party senator, and Warren Mundine, a former president of the Labor Party. Both Price and Mundine are indigenous.

In reality, there was little in terms of their background and class character that separated Mundine from leaders of the Yes camp, including such figures as Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton. They are leaders of a privileged layer of the indigenous elite that has collaborated with governments for years, including in significant attacks on oppressed indigenous people through the Northern Territory intervention and welfare quarantining.

As many workers, including of an indigenous background are aware, previous initiatives spearheaded by the indigenous elite, such as the establishment of land rights and state-funded organisations, have done nothing to improve the lot of ordinary Aboriginal people.

When polling made it clear that the Yes camp was in a deepening crisis, Langton and others denounced opponents of the Voice, implying they were stupid and racist. The outcome of such tirades was to fortify opposition to the initiative. Langton and others have responded to the defeat by doubling down on the claims of widespread racism and hysterical denunciations of the population.

In a rare breach of the dominant line that the outcome shows mass racism and ordinary people having been duped by “misinformation,” Kos Samaras, a director at RedBridge Group polling, made several comments pointing to the class issues. Samaras supported the Yes campaign. His comments have the character of internal disputes within the establishment, but are nevertheless revealing.

Samaras noted that for months, Albanese had sought to base the campaign on a vague “vibe” of assisting indigenous people. The Yes camp decried misinformation and requests for more details on the Voice, but were unable to respond with any information of its own. Samaras stated that the Yes camp, with its endorsements from major corporations and celebrities, and its deployment of identity politics, “ran a campaign beautifully suited to white, highly educated progressives in inner urban suburbs.”

Notably, as many as 80 percent of traditional Labor Party seats

voted against the Voice. That continues the collapse in Labor’s previous working-class base of support. In the 2022 federal election, Labor’s national primary vote was below 33 percent, the lowest level since 1933, and it only scraped into office as a consequence of the implosion of the Liberal Party’s support.

For Albanese, the outcome is a disaster. The Voice was supposed to be the progressive veneer for an otherwise deeply unpopular agenda of war and austerity, but the Voice itself has intensified popular anger and hostility to the Labor administration.

In his remarks on Saturday night, Albanese did not even attempt to explain why the majority of the population had voted against one of his government’s signature policies.

The result is a crisis for the entire political establishment. While media commentators have anxiously declared the referendum vote does not reflect the political standing of the government, that is precisely what was revealed in pre-poll surveys. As the No vote increased, support for Labor decreased, with no rise in the fortunes of Dutton or the Coalition.

This underscores the reality that amid a global breakdown of capitalism and an ever-greater shift to the right by the official parties, none of them are able to make an appeal to the vast mass of the population. Rather than a shift to the right, what is developing is a shift to the left, animated by hostility to social inequality, the evermore difficult conditions of life, and war.

It was notable that in the last week of the campaign, Labor and the Coalition joined hands to condemn the resistance of the oppressed Palestinian people and to signal their complete support for the genocidal bombardment of Gaza being conducted by the Israeli state.

As the Socialist Equality Party has insisted, anger and opposition are not enough. In this referendum, the SEP advanced the fight for an active boycott, opposed to the pro-business racialism of both the Yes and No camps. It explained that this position was aimed, beyond the referendum, at developing an independent movement of the entire working class against the political set-up and the capitalist system itself. That is now the decisive question.



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