

Defeat of Australian Labor's Voice referendum highlights stark class divide, not racism

Mike Head**17 October 2023**

The scale and social content of last Saturday's overwhelming rejection of the Australian Labor government's referendum to entrench an indigenous advisory body called the Voice into the country's constitution is becoming clearer.

Overall, the referendum was defeated by about 61 percent to 39 percent, with postal votes still being counted. Despite an intensive more than year-long campaign by the Albanese government, heavily backed financially by the largest companies, the outcome was a double defeat: The Voice failed to win a majority in the required four states out of six.

In fact, the No majority prevailed in every state and territory, except for the Australian Capital Territory, based on Canberra, the headquarters of the political establishment.

This was definitely not, as Yes proponents poisonously insist, the result of widespread racism and hostility to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Rather, it was the outcome of a widening class divide, above all between the affluent inner-city areas of the country and the outer suburban working-class suburbs, where people are experiencing an insufferable cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis.

The pattern of results indicates that the deepening assault on the living conditions of workers and their families—via falling real wages, soaring mortgage payments and rents, and skyrocketing food, energy and petrol prices—is producing mounting antagonism to the Labor government and the entire political elite.

In the working-class areas, the claims by the government and the Yes23 campaign that the establishment of a Voice assembly inside the parliamentary and governmental apparatus would lead to “better outcomes” for indigenous people were no more believable than the Labor government’s now discredited May 2022 election slogan promising a “better future.”

Every statistic from the referendum vote points to a massive class chasm. The highest Yes votes—up to 77 percent—were recorded in gentrified upper middle-class electorates. On top of the list, on 77 percent, was the inner-city seat of Melbourne, currently held by Greens leader Adam Bandt, followed by the inner-Sydney seat of Grayndler, on 74 percent, held by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

These were followed by the most affluent electorates in the country, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, the primary bases of the corporate and financial elite. Support ranging from 62 percent to 58 percent was secured in the wealthiest Sydney and Melbourne seats such as Wentworth, North Sydney, Kooyong and Higgins, mostly won by Teal independents at the 2022 election amid the collapse of support for the Liberal-National Coalition in its former heartland base.

There were similar results, though less pronounced, in the highest-income suburbs of the other state capital cities—Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart.

A gulf existed between these results and those in outer suburban electorates, where the impact of the social crisis is being felt most severely, including by the substantial Aboriginal populations in these increasingly stressed areas.

In Sydney, the Yes vote was lowest in the far-western and southwestern electorates, where the majority of the city’s working-class people live. These included Lindsay (30 percent), Macarthur (34 percent), Blaxland (37 percent) and Werriwa, Fowler and Chifley (all around 39 percent).

Likewise in Melbourne, the western, northern and southwestern working-class electorates recorded Yes votes as low as 35 percent. There were comparable results, as low as 30 percent, in outer Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

All these seats are currently held by the Labor government, which barely scraped into office in 2022 with only 33 percent of the vote, so the outcome portends a political crisis.

As interviews conducted by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters in working-class areas on polling day showed, the rejection of the Voice proposal was entirely bound up with distrust and anger toward the government and the political establishment as a whole. That was not only due to the social crisis but also the escalating government commitment to US war operations and the bipartisan unconditional backing of the Israeli atrocities against the people of Gaza.

There was an understanding that the only beneficiaries of the Voice would have been a narrow layer of the well-off Aboriginal elite, and that the appalling conditions facing indigenous people would only worsen, along with the rest of

the working class.

Even lower levels of Yes support resulted in regional and rural electorates, where there are also poor levels of income and high levels of deprivation of basic services. The support was as low as 15 percent in regional Queensland seats, which have some of the lowest income levels in Australia.

Booths in numbers of remote Aboriginal areas showed high levels of support, ranging up to 86 percent in central Australia and northern Queensland, but these were generally small communities. The votes possibly reflected the support of leaders in those communities for the Voice plan.

Graphs produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) showed that the results correlated with geographical distance from the inner-cities, age, educational levels and income. They displayed a steep decline in Yes support along an income axis, with the lowest levels of support among those on incomes of less than \$52,000 a year. Another strong correlation was with high school as the highest level of education, which is another measure of social inequality.

The first media poll conducted since the Voice defeat, an Essential poll published in the *Guardian*, further exposed the claims of mass racism. Such polls provide only a distorted picture, depending on how the questions are framed, but it reported that 63 percent of respondents want the government to address indigenous disadvantage, while only 35 percent support formal recognition of indigenous people in the Constitution.

Among those who voted No, the main reasons given were that the Voice would have divided the country in the Constitution on the basis of race (41 percent), there was not enough detail on how the Voice would work (27 percent) and it would make no real difference to the lives of ordinary indigenous people (19 percent.)

The majority of respondents (74 percent) said the Albanese government's No 1 priority should be to address the cost-of-living pressure on households. The poll also indicated that the Voice vote was not a shift to the right to support Liberal-National leader Peter Dutton, who opposed the referendum. By its measure, his approval rating dropped from 38 percent to 36 percent in a month.

That is in line with previous such polls, which also showed support for the Labor government dropping back to the almost record low level it obtained at the May 2022 election. In other words, this indicates that the disaffection is directed against the entire political elite.

One key question that the government, the media and the Yes camp's indigenous figures cannot explain is why support for the Voice collapsed from early this year, when media polls indicated more than 60 percent support. In fact, the Albanese government called the referendum to exploit the widespread sentiment in favour of rectifying indigenous disadvantage. It was an effort to put a progressive gloss on Labor's program of war and austerity, project a false "national unity" and give Australian capitalism a new humane image.

An insight into that unanswered question was belatedly provided by ABC political correspondent Laura Tingle after the polls closed. She reported that focus group polling conducted by Visibility Consulting had found that the shift against the Voice occurred when people realised that the cost-of-living crisis could not be blamed on the Ukraine war, was not temporary and would worsen as the Reserve Bank of Australia, backed by the Labor government, continued to raise interest rates.

Tingle wrote: "[T]he realisation hit that this was the new reality—that this was people's financially stressed lot for the foreseeable future. That prompted a general anger—at governments, at big corporations. And now it is starting to turn on the Albanese government."

She added that there were "countless reports" of people saying they would vote No in the referendum to "send the government a message" on issues ranging from the cost of living to how much it was spending on AUKUS submarines for a war against China.

The results underscore the importance of the campaign conducted by the SEP for an active boycott of the referendum. We urged workers and youth to reject both the Yes and No camps, which each conducted the referendum on a racially-divisive basis, and both vowed to cut, not increase, spending on indigenous social programs.

The SEP did so in order to fight for an independent road for the whole working class, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, against the root cause of oppression and war, which lies in the capitalist profit system. The seething discontent in the working class has to be transformed into a conscious movement, as part of the global struggle against capitalism, for socialism, based on human need, not corporate profit.



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