

Australian pseudo-left slanders population as racist after defeat of Voice referendum

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The affluent upper middle-class in the corporate press, academia and online have responded to last Saturday's defeat of the referendum to enshrine an indigenous Voice to parliament in the Constitution with frenzied denunciations of the population.

The rejection by most working people of the Labor government's divisive and pro-business policy has been depicted as proof of mass racism, or at the very least, of a successful "misinformation" campaign that duped the majority of the population.

Among the chief proponents of this false and slanderous line is the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative organisation. Throughout the referendum campaign, Socialist Alternative aggressively campaigned for a Yes vote. It did so, even while acknowledging that the Labor government's initiative would resolve nothing for impoverished indigenous people and could even be used to impose further attacks on their social conditions.

That position, and Socialist Alternative's response to the defeat, centres on a rabid racialism. The decisive issue of social class is completely buried, with political developments interpreted solely through the lens of race. On that basis, Socialist Alternative lined up behind a right-wing, pro-business and pro-war Labor government, and is joining its defenders in attacking the working class.

The title of its post-referendum analysis sums up the argument: "Voice defeated, but fight against racism must continue."

Socialist Alternative author Jordan Humphreys writes: "After waging a campaign of racist lies for the last six months, the No campaign has achieved its goal. As was widely predicted in the last months, the proposal to establish an Indigenous Voice to Parliament has been defeated. Smashed would be more accurate, the results being even worse than many polls predicted."

He added: "The defeat is a significant victory for the racist right wing of Australian politics. They successfully turned what initially seemed to be an uncontroversial bipartisan exercise in symbolism into a purportedly terrifying Trojan horse..." The No camp had "mobilised the most significant anti-Indigenous campaign in years, drawing on and amplifying longstanding

racist attitudes towards Indigenous people."

That is, essentially, the entirety of Socialist Alternative's explanation for the massive defeat of the referendum. More than 60 percent of the population voted against establishing the Voice. Under conditions where a Yes majority was required in most states for the referendum to succeed, every state registered more votes against, than for the initiative.

The claim that the vote can be explained on the basis of racism has the most sweeping implications. If true, it would mean that the majority of the population was politically mobilised on the basis of anti-Aboriginal hatred. That would signify a vast shift to the right, and would foreclose the prospect of any mass-based struggle for social equality, an end to war and other progressive causes, for the foreseeable future.

The connotations of Socialist Alternative's position are even more striking, when the voting breakdown is taken into consideration. The working-class suburbs of all the major cities voted overwhelmingly against the Voice, as did most rural and regional communities. Yes majorities were only registered in the most affluent areas of the capital cities. Depicted on a map, they appear like tiny enclaves surrounded by a sea of No votes.

But what does that mean? Socialist Alternative does not spell out the logical conclusions of its own arguments, but they are clear enough: The wealthiest areas of the country, home to the privileged upper middle-class and even layers of the financial elite, are areas of social progress and right-minded opposition to racism. Working class areas are dominated by backwardness and racial prejudice.

There are several striking omissions in Humphreys article. The phrases "poverty," "social crisis" and "cost-of-living" do not appear. For Socialist Alternative, the referendum occurred in a realm where racial prejudice exists, but class oppression does not.

As even the corporate media has been compelled to acknowledge, the social crisis was the dominant factor in the result. All anecdotal and polling data showed that working people were hostile to the referendum, because they opposed the Labor government, its pro-business policies and its decision to inflict the burden of the economic crisis on their backs.

Many, no doubt, drew the clear connection. If the Labor government would not assist the working class amid the

greatest cost-of-living crisis in decades, why believe that the Voice would improve the lot of oppressed indigenous people?

There is another striking absence. Socialist Alternative has, over the past week, participated in protests opposing the Israeli onslaught on Gaza. But the oppression of the Palestinians and its international ramifications are entirely absent from Humphreys' article on the Voice result.

In the final week of the campaign, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese gave his full support for Israel's genocidal bombardment. In discussions with Socialist Equality Party campaigners on polling day, many workers noted the apparent contradiction: the Labor government claimed it was attempting to give a Voice to Aboriginal people because they had been oppressed by colonisation, but at the very same time, it was supporting the extermination of the oppressed peoples of Gaza.

There are other issues that Humphreys simply cannot address. They include:

- Why would the Labor government have called the referendum, if it were the case that the overwhelming majority of the population were hostile to indigenous people?

In fact, Labor placed the Voice at the centre of its agenda, to exploit the mass sentiment that exists, in favour of redressing the crimes against indigenous people. The cynical aim was to put a progressive gloss on a government otherwise committed to deepening Australia's integration into US plans for war with China, and an austerity offensive against the working class.

- Why did polling at the beginning of the year show more than 60 percent support for the Voice? How was that figure reversed in the course of ten months?

- If the official No camp, headed by the conservative Liberal-National Coalition is on a political offensive and winning widespread support, why does its leader Peter Dutton remain one of the most unpopular figures in Australian politics?

Undoubtedly, there is a racist and far-right milieu in Australia, as in every country. But it constitutes a miniscule fraction of the population. To claim that this social layer exercises a dominant role in the highly diverse and multicultural working-class suburbs of the major cities is both a slander and an absurdity.

In reality, the anger over the cost-of-living crisis is intersecting with a decades-long alienation from and hostility to the official political establishment among working people. The referendum result continues the pattern demonstrated at last year's federal election, which saw Labor's primary vote plummet to less than 33 percent, the lowest level since the early 1930s. That outcome was not a swing to the right, however, as evidenced by the fact that votes for the Liberals declined by an even greater margin.

What the referendum reveals, as the Socialist Equality Party has explained, is not a racial divide but a class chasm between workers and the political establishment. The official political set-up is supported and propped up only by an affluent layer of the middle-class that has benefited from the processes of

financialisation and soaring property values at the expense of working people. This social layer is obsessed with issues of identity, including race, but by and large could not care less about the deepening hardship afflicting workers of all backgrounds.

The basic reason for Socialist Alternative's position on the referendum is that it sits on the other side of the social divide from the working class. Its constituency is the very middle class, ensconced in academia, the top layers of the public sector and the trade union bureaucracy, that defends the Labor government and is oriented to racial, not class politics.

An independent movement of the working class threatens the role and the very existence of such pseudo-left formations. Their entire social and political function is to chain workers and young people to the existing political establishment.

That is underscored by Humphreys' favorable reference to Marcia Langton. One of the architects of the Voice policy, Langton is a right-wing figure who has supported many attacks on oppressed indigenous people. That has included backing the Northern Territory intervention, a police-military occupation of Aboriginal areas initiated in 2007, supporting associated welfare quarantine measures targeting the most vulnerable, and aggressively campaigning in favour of the mining corporations, with which Langton enjoys a cordial and pecuniary relationship.

Humphreys particularly solidarises himself with Langton's comments during the referendum campaign, which implied that all those supporting a No in the referendum were "stupid," "racist" or both. Such is Socialist Alternative's essential class position—with government and corporate-connected representatives of a privileged elite against the working class.

Socialist Alternative's position on the referendum result again demonstrates that it has nothing whatsoever to do with socialism or the interests of working people. It is a rightward-moving vehicle of the upper middle class, seeking to deepen its ties to a political establishment committed to war and austerity.

Socialist Alternative's position is diametrically opposed to the socialist and revolutionary perspective advanced by the SEP.

The SEP fought for an active boycott of the entire referendum, as opposed to the racialism of both the official camps. This campaign was not primarily oriented to the ballot or its outcome, but to the development of an independent movement of the working class, directed against all the official parties and the capitalist system they defend. That is now the crucial task facing workers and young people.



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