

Australian Aboriginal professor Marcia Langton presents indigenous business as “the way forward”

Mike Head**29 January 2024**

Amid a worsening cost-of-living crisis devastating all working-class households, including the indigenous ones, prominent Aboriginal academic Marcia Langton has doubled down on her agitation for greater corporate and government cultivation of indigenous businesses.

According to Langton, “investing in their successes is the way forward” following the overwhelming defeat of the Labor government’s October 14 referendum to entrench an indigenous Voice assembly at the heart of Australia’s colonial-era 1901 Constitution.

Langton was one of the chief proponents of the Voice proposal, alongside another right-wing pro-business indigenous figure, Noel Pearson. The pair have long been vehement advocates of pushing indigenous people off welfare benefits and into either cheap labour employment or into setting up their own business to exploit the labour power of other indigenous people.

Langton’s latest call, published in last weekend’s *Saturday Paper*, is a continuation of her efforts, and those of the Voice “Yes” campaign as a whole, to depict race, not class, as the fundamental divide in society.

She urged “Australian governments, notably the Albanese government” to “build wealth” for indigenous people by “investing in Indigenous innovation and engagement.” This underscores the agenda behind the Voice project, and one of the primary reasons for its defeat.

The Voice was a plan to further elevate a wealthy elite Aboriginal layer of business owners, CEOs and senior university administrators, like herself, further into the capitalist corridors of power. That would be at the expense of working-class and remote community indigenous people, whose social conditions are still rapidly deteriorating under the Labor government, along with those of the working class as a whole.

Langton began her comment by again venomously accusing all those who voted against the Voice of racism. She asserted that “two out of three Australians” voted for “racist misinformation” peddled by Liberal Party leader Peter Dutton. That is in line with her foul insinuation, during the Voice campaign, that “No” voters were racist or stupid.

Langton also denounced Dutton for criticising big business leaders for supporting the “Yes” campaign.

In reality, the defeat of the corporate-backed Voice referendum

was one result of a widening class divide. The schism was, above all, between the more affluent inner-city areas of the country, where Yes votes were concentrated, and the outer suburban working-class suburbs, where people—including the majority of the indigenous population—are experiencing a deepening financial, social and housing affordability crisis.

There was also widespread disbelief, notably among indigenous working-class people, that the addition of the Voice to the parliamentary and governmental apparatus would do anything to address the ongoing oppression of Australian capitalism, which began with massacres and land seizures.

Most Aboriginal people have gained nothing from all the previous such promises—from land rights to official apologies for the “Stolen Generations” of Aboriginal children forcibly separated from their families. That includes the multi-billion dollar government and corporate procurement programs to favour indigenous businesses.

More broadly, the Voice vote became a referendum on the Labor government’s entire pro-business and war agenda, which involves a growing commitment to US militarism, from Ukraine to Gaza and China.

Not accidentally, soon after the defeat, Langton vociferously backed the Israeli genocide in Gaza. She justified the collective punishment unleashed on the Palestinian people for acts of resistance against the Zionist regime, just as the Australian colonial authorities justified the mass killings of indigenous people after some fought back against their dispossession.

In her *Saturday Paper* column, Langton indirectly alluded to the class basis for the Voice defeat. She said two out of three indigenous Australians had no chance of escaping some of the worst levels of “poverty and disadvantage” in the world, yet “one in three Indigenous Australians have reached economic parity with other Australians.”

This “success” for a minority she essentially attributed to her claim that: “Refusing to be defeated by the relentless racism, however, Indigenous entrepreneurs and community leaders running non-profit corporations have succeeded in establishing businesses with positive outcomes.”

Langton boasted of research by herself and others at the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership showing that “Indigenous businesses contribute at least

\$4.88 billion to the Australian economy—more than the beer industry.”

The research, she said, found that between 2006 and 2018 there had been “a 74-percent increase in the number of Indigenous businesses, that those businesses recorded 115-percent growth in gross income and that the sector created more than 22,000 new jobs.” Moreover, “in the second report of this research, data revealed Indigenous businesses were thriving across all regions of Australia and all sectors of the economy.”

Langton termed this “economic inclusion.” She said it was the result of decades of collaboration between indigenous and corporate leaders, especially from “the top 200 corporations,” as well as government procurement programs.

It was aided also by favourable court rulings on native title, so that “more than a third of Australia’s land mass is subject to Indigenous rights and interests, in formal legal arrangements.” Langton added: “Many native title claims remain outstanding, but the legislation accords the claimants important legal rights to be consulted and involved in negotiations in many circumstances.”

Langton’s vision highlights how land rights have become a vehicle for business deals, particularly with mining and pastoral conglomerates, rather than for recovering land or overcoming the impact of the atrocities committed by the same corporate empires.

Actually, the University of Melbourne research was not so glowing. It found 3,619 indigenous businesses—defined as at least half owned by indigenous people—“alive and active.” That was about half the listed indigenous enterprises.

On average, counting small businesses, they were larger than non-indigenous businesses, with an average gross annual income of \$1.6 million, four times the \$400,000 for non-indigenous businesses. The research graded them as only “middle-performing” for financial performance, however.

In other words, these enterprises, even if buoyed by government and corporate programs, operated on the same law of the jungle as other capitalist businesses, surviving by extracting bigger profits from their labour forces than their rivals.

A growing class divide

The outcome, which Langton avoids mentioning, is a growing class divide among indigenous people, as in the population as a whole. Far from business-accumulated wealth “trickling down” to the poor, as the capitalist class endlessly asserts, the terrible indigenous poverty to which Langton briefly refers is part of the vast social polarisation that the private profit system is increasingly and inevitably creating.

The 2021 Census data for gross weekly personal income of around 460,000 indigenous people over 18 years old revealed that nearly 200,000, or 42.6 percent, had a poverty-level income of less than \$499 a week. At the top of the income scale, however, 5,965 individuals, or 1.3 percent, had a weekly income of more than \$3,500.

Langton has long been in the upper echelon. Since 2000 she has held the Foundation Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne. Since 2017, she has been Associate Provost, which is the deputy to the university’s deputy vice-chancellor. Such posts have secret salaries, but they would exceed \$300,000, placing her in the richest 3 percent of the country’s

population.

Langton’s message has been promoted by the ruling class for years. In 2012, she delivered the high-profile Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Boyer Lectures, which credited the mining boom, that is, the super-profits accumulated by the billionaires, with leading to “the emergence of an Aboriginal middle class” based on “hundreds of Aboriginal businesses.” This process, she claimed, was “delivering economic outcomes to communities on an unprecedented scale.” In reality, the benefits have gone to a small layer, to the cost of the majority.

For such deeds, in 2020 the Morrison Liberal-National government anointed Langton with her second Order of Australia award, promoting her to an “officer” of the order for “distinguished service to tertiary education, and as an advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

Her “advocacy” had included supporting the Northern Territory intervention, a punitive police-military occupation of Aboriginal communities launched by the Howard Liberal-National government in 2007, with the Labor Party’s support, on the pretext of protecting Aboriginal children or families from domestic violence, alcoholism, drug abuse and other endemic social problems.

It included “quarantining” or cutting off welfare payments to indigenous people, designed to coercively create a new supply of cheap labour for employers, including indigenous businesses. It also featured the breaking up of communal land ownership to clear the way for private wealth accumulation.

Langton’s latest response to the Labor government’s Voice debacle underlines the entirely pro-capitalist character of the narrow-privileged layer she represents. Their interests are diametrically opposed to those of oppressed Aboriginal workers and youth.

This confirms the correctness of the stand taken by the Socialist Equality Party in fighting for an active boycott of the referendum, exposing it as a sham. One of the central aims of the Voice was to further integrate an indigenous elite into the ruling class and its state apparatus. We opposed both the “Yes” and “No” camps, equally mired in racialist politics, and charted an independent road forward for the working class as a whole.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes all attempts to divide the working class along racial lines. The only means of resolving the appalling situation confronting most Aboriginal workers and youth is through the mobilisation of the entire working class, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, to end the capitalist socio-economic order that has produced it.



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