

Victoria's "truth-telling" commission: Australia's Aboriginal elite demands a greater slice of the pie

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A years-long "truth-telling" commission examining the historic and contemporary crimes of official institutions against Indigenous people in the Australian state of Victoria concluded at the beginning of this month with the release of a 455-page report and 100 recommendations.

The Yoorrook Justice Commission was hailed by those who led it, along with the Victorian Labor government and the establishment media, as a step towards a "reckoning" with the oppression of Aboriginal people and a model to be emulated in other states and territories.

In reality, Yoorrook will do nothing to alleviate the plight of the vast majority of Indigenous people in Victoria, or anywhere else, who constitute one of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

Over the course of several years, the Commission took testimony from many Indigenous people. They spoke about the consequences of anti-Aboriginal racism, which has a long history of being promoted by the ruling class and its political parties, including Labor.

Testimony underscored the brutal character of the oppression of Aboriginal people, including the decades-long practice of forcibly removing Indigenous children from their parents in what became known as the Stolen Generations, the denial of basic civil liberties until well into the latter-half of the 20th century and ongoing severe social deprivation.

However, this largely served as a smokescreen, and justification for the real purpose of the Commission which was to sanctify a mutually-beneficial arrangement between a layer of the Indigenous upper middle class and the Victorian Labor government.

For the Aboriginal elite, it was an opportunity to press the case for greater state funding, business opportunities and a lucrative Treaty with Victorian authorities. For Labor, it was an opportunity to shed crocodile tears over the past crimes against Indigenous people, and to posture as progressive as it is implementing a right-wing, pro-business program that is worsening social conditions for all working people, including those of Indigenous descent.

Yoorrook's formation

Yoorrook was established in May, 2021, as the result of an agreement between the state Labor government and the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria. That was one component of a broader process, under which Labor has committed to enacting a Treaty with self-styled Indigenous leaders.

The First Peoples' Assembly, convened in 2019, is empowered to prepare negotiations with the state government regarding a Treaty, as well as to make representations on behalf of Indigenous peoples to the

government on a broader range of issues.

Hailed as a groundbreaking initiative, the Assembly has an anti-democratic character, underscoring the narrow social base of the Indigenous upper middle class. Fewer than 2,000 people across Victoria participated in its inaugural election, or just 7 percent of the 30,000 Indigenous people who had registered after substantial advertising and an enrollment campaign—roughly 2.5 percent of Victoria's Aboriginal population.

Four years on, the 2023 election saw only a limited increase in participation, with around 4,000 total votes, or less than 10 percent of the eligible adult population. In other words, despite its name and its promotion by the government, the First Peoples' Assembly is not even remotely representative.

Nevertheless, substantial sums of money are being devoted to the "treaty process." That included a four-year commitment of \$151 million to Treaty preparations in the state Labor government's 2022-23 budget, on top of previous allocations. The Assembly is also being permanently entrenched. At the beginning of the month, it was reported that the government had committed to legislation to enshrine the Assembly as a permanent representative body to government.

These moves in Victoria are part of a broader national push, which has particularly been spearheaded by Labor governments in other states. However, the whole process was dealt a major blow when the federal Labor government's 2023 The Voice referendum to establish an Indigenous advisory body to parliament across Australia was defeated despite a slick, well-funded campaign claiming it would improve the lot of Aboriginal people.

The Yoorrook report bemoaned the outcome, ascribing the defeat to widespread racism and a lack of popular understanding of the plight of Indigenous people. In reality, the loss reflected the broad belief among working people that the Voice would do nothing to end the appalling conditions facing Indigenous people, particularly when the Albanese Labor government was presiding over the deepest cost-of-living crisis in decades.

In the final week of the campaign for the October referendum, Labor was vociferously defending the Israeli onslaught on the Palestinians of Gaza. The combined program of social austerity and aggressive support for neo-colonial barbarism swung voters against the Voice, recognizing it was a sham. How could a government that supports genocide abroad adopt policies to defend the population at home? This led to a reversal of the 60 percent support for the Voice when the referendum was flagged after Labor's election in May 2022 to 60 percent opposition in the actual vote 18 months later.

As the Socialist Equality Party explained, the Albanese government was seeking to exploit the mass sympathy for the plight of Indigenous people

to put a phony progressive gloss on its program of militarism and austerity. The aim was to direct these sentiments behind racial, identity politics, covering up the reality that the dire conditions facing Aboriginal workers are a class attack, which can be answered only by uniting the struggles of the working class as a whole, including its most oppressed layers.

The Voice was also aimed at strengthening the state and expanding its base, by integrating representatives of the Indigenous elite into the corridors of power.

Following the defeat of the Voice referendum, the drive to establish similar mechanisms at the state level has only continued and, if anything, accelerated. Amid widespread alienation and hostility to the entire political establishment, the ruling class recognises that class struggles are on the agenda and that the plight of Indigenous people could become a focal point for explosive opposition. “Truth-telling,” treaties, and advisory bodies are the means for diverting this opposition into safe channels.

“Truth-telling” with the oppressors

Yoorrook was marked by its thoroughly establishment character. Its Indigenous commissioners were all successful academics, most of them with lengthy records on government bodies. They were joined by two former judges. These are individuals, whatever their past family backgrounds, whose social position and experiences are a million miles removed from the vast majority of impoverished Indigenous people.

In keeping with its character as a government-sanctioned and promoted exercise, the Commission provided senior Labor representatives with an opportunity to present themselves as devotees of “truth-telling” committed to improving the lot of Indigenous people.

The report lauds the involvement of Premier Jacinta Allan, who participated in ceremonies and gave testimony. The report presented as good coin Allan’s “acknowledging the limits of her own education—not a personal failing, but the results of a deliberate act of collective national forgetting.” Her testimony was “personal and, at times, emotional,” it declared.

This utterly hypocritical exercise, literally shedding crocodile tears, was replicated by other government representatives. The police were also invited to testify.

All of this is to bury the record of the right-wing, pro-business Labor government in Victoria, which is taking the knife to social spending. It is carrying out the deepest budget cuts in the country. Billions of pledged funds have been withheld from public education. Up to 3,000 public servants face the sack. It is pressing ahead with plans to destroy 44 public housing towers in Melbourne, home to more than 10,000 residents, to open up lucrative opportunities for developers.

The government’s anti working class policies inevitably impact Indigenous workers and youth, who are the victims of its law-and-order measures. The Sentencing Advisory Council noted: “The imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria grew by 96.7 percent between 2011 and 2023, from 965.2 to 1,898.2 [per 100,000].” Labor has been in office since 2014.

While fawning over Allan, the Yoorrook report was compelled to point out her role in locking up Aboriginal children. In 2023, Labor vowed to lift the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 before again raising it to 14 by 2027. Allan, however, walked back that latter commitment, despite protests from human rights organisations.

Marshalling the crimes of colonialism to press for a Treaty

Much of the report is in the form of a history of the settlement of Victoria. The British colonisation is reviewed at length, as are the more than 50 documented massacres that accompanied the forcible displacement of Indigenous people.

The various crimes committed by the colonial authorities are documented, as are the lies used to justify them. The objective of colonial rule was to establish the unfettered control of the land. The report places the colonisation of Victoria and Australia within the context of the global rapacity of the British Empire.

The explanation, to the extent that there is one, is entirely subjective. Various colonial representatives were greedy or racist and thus committed abuses against the Indigenous population.

The fundamental social dynamic of colonialism is not even addressed, as it contradicts the contemporary political objectives of the report’s authors.

Indigenous societies were characterised by a form of primitive communism. Tribal groups largely lived off the land, hunting and gathering cooperatively, pooling resources communally and frequently living a nomadic or semi-nomadic existence. There were scores of tribes within Victoria itself.

The communistic social relations that prevailed among the Indigenous peoples were incompatible with capitalism. To establish private ownership of the land, the colonial authorities, one way or another, had to drive the Aboriginal people from the land. Many of the massacres documented were aimed at not only clearing Indigenous people from a particular area, but at ensuring its ownership by the state and colonists. In the brutal logic of capitalist production, moreover, Indigenous people were viewed as surplus to requirements because, based as they had been for millennia on hunter-gatherer activities, they could not readily be integrated into the wage-labour system.

The report’s authors repeatedly reference Aboriginal “sovereignty” in order to demand expanded Indigenous land ownership in the present, based on vague “connection to country.” However, the concept of national sovereignty only emerged with the rise of capitalism in Europe and was completely foreign to the Indigenous tribes.

The report’s demands on these fronts do not emanate from the strivings of Indigenous people, dating back to the time of colonisation. Instead, a layer of the Indigenous upper middle-class, itself very much a product of capitalism, is marshalling the crimes of colonisation and the legal framework of the profit system to advance its own interests within it.

The section of the report detailing the colonial crimes hints at various points of missed “opportunities” and bewails the malfeasance of various administrators. The none-too-veiled suggestion is that a treaty was not entered into at that time. Elsewhere, the report laments the fact that Australia is one of the few British colonies in which a treaty was never signed.

The report fails to examine the outcome of treaties in New Zealand, the United States and Canada, where they were struck and which did nothing to stop the seizure of land and the destruction of indigenous tribes through disease, poisoning and violence. Its interest lies in modern-day outcomes, as seen in New Zealand, for instance, where the Waitangi Treaty has been used to secure large payouts to Maori elites. It must be noted that the majority of Maori, like their Aboriginal counterparts, are among the most oppressed layers of the New Zealand working class.

A celebration of the rise of the Indigenous upper middle class

The class orientation of the report becomes even more evident when it deals with the emergence of the thin layer of the Aboriginal elite. It becomes remarkably upbeat, even jubilant.

“For too long, Aboriginal people have been overrepresented in the statistics that shame the nation—incarceration, suicide, child removal, chronic illness,” the report notes. “But they are also overrepresented in excellence. In academia, in science, in journalism, in the arts, in music, in sport. They dominate fields that were never designed for them to enter.”

Whereas official politics had “for centuries” been “designed to control, to exclude and to confine... Today, the language has changed. There are forums, partnership agreements, frameworks, strategies, policies, action plans. There are taskforces and steering committees.”

The report stated: “The apparatus of consultation is now so embedded that many young First Peoples have known nothing else... Access to power is no longer the barrier: there’s plenty of access via the ears of senior advisers and ministers’ clerks.”

The authors are speaking about themselves and others like them. But their social position and their intimate relationship with governments, ministers and the police are as far removed from the everyday experience of an Aboriginal worker or young person as workers more broadly are to those who tread the corridors of power.

The authors note the “broken promises” and failed “outcomes,” but they essentially chart an upward curve, expressed in the various phony apologies to Indigenous people, and above all in the moves towards a treaty. This is the Aboriginal upper middle class hailing its own ascent, indifferent to the plight of the vast majority of Aboriginal people, except as a means for opening doors and boosting their own privileges and wealth.

Recommendations

The report’s 100 recommendations are aimed at securing the most lucrative terms for the treaty that the Yoorrook Commission is pushing for. The proposals constitute a demand for a vast hand over of resources from the state government to the Indigenous elite, covering virtually every aspect of economic life.

The report demands “transfer” of “decision-making power, authority, control and resources to First Peoples, giving full effect to self-determination in relation to their identity, information, data, traditional ecological knowledge, connection to Country, their rights to their lands, waters and resources, in the Victorian health, education and housing systems and across economic and political life.”

The government, it continues, “must establish independent funding streams, including through hypothecation of a portion of land, water and natural resource-related revenues, to support the Self-Determination Fund and other First Peoples-led initiatives.”

To facilitate these ends, the report demands an audit and ongoing reporting to the First People’s Assembly of “the revenues collected by the Victorian Government in respect of: i. freehold land; ii. Crown land & waterways; iii. minerals and resources; iv. gas and petroleum; v. forestry; vi. fisheries; vii. renewables; and viii. water (surface, groundwater).”

The report earlier complains about the inadequacy of Native Title in Victoria. Under Native Title, Indigenous leaders are granted partial control over ancestral lands. They can then barter with mining and other corporations seeking access. However, as the report notes, the opportunities are limited, as much of Victorian land was already privately or government-owned by the time Native Title was introduced in the 1980s.

The report demands “a default mechanism to transfer to Traditional

Owners entitlements to land, waters, resources on the sale, surrender or expiration of third party leasehold, licences, entitlements and other interests.” It insists upon: “Not granting new rights or entitlements in Crown lands, waters and resources without providing opportunities for Traditional Owners to themselves acquire the relevant interest, or benefit from the revenues generated.”

These are calls for control over vast and profitable farmland and resources, as well as for corporate activities that will enrich a narrow minority. The various mechanisms are spelled out in great detail and elaborated in multiple recommendations.

Other recommendations call for mandating a percentage of government contracts to be exclusively awarded to Indigenous businesses. The report also calls for what would effectively be preferential hiring practices for Indigenous people in the upper levels of the Victorian public sector bureaucracy.

The recommendations do condemn and call for an end to the incarceration of Indigenous children and demand increases to Indigenous health, education and other social spending. However, none of this is connected to a demand for basic social services to be vastly improved for all working people.

And in virtually every area of the social crisis afflicting Indigenous people referenced in the recommendations, there is a demand for the establishment of Aboriginal-led entities to administer funds and oversee services. This, of course, would again enhance the opportunities for the Indigenous upper middle-class.

Conclusion

The striving of the Indigenous elite for ever greater privileges and integration into the corridors of corporate and state power must be viewed within its broader context.

Capitalism, globally and in every country, including Australia, is in a historic breakdown. The ruling classes everywhere are responding by hurtling to the right, with a program of militarism and war that threatens a global catastrophe, and an accompanying onslaught on the social and democratic rights of the working class.

Everywhere, there is an official promotion of far-right and fascistic forces and a turn to authoritarianism. The vast sums being allocated to the war machine and the underlying economic crisis, mean an offensive against the working class unprecedented in scale since the 1930s.

The Indigenous elite is coming forward, under these conditions, to present itself as a trusted and vital partner of capitalist governments that are on a collision course with the working class. Their role is to divide the working class by promoting the fraud that race, not class, is the fundamental distinction in society. They serve as a de facto police force over one of the most oppressed sections of the working class, Indigenous people, by walling off their struggles from other working people with racist nostrums that blame everything on “whites” and “white colonialism” not capitalism.

The fawning over Victoria Premier Allan underscores these realities. The Labor leader has been a vociferous support of the Israeli genocide in Gaza. That has included sweeping moves to outlaw mass opposition, carried out in coordination with the federal Albanese government. Allan’s social policies, involving massive austerity measures on the one hand and handouts to big business on the other, can only be described as class war.

Members of the Indigenous elite have not only cooperated with governments carrying out such anti-working class policies, but have championed this right-wing program themselves. Among the most vociferous defenders of the genocide of Palestinians are prominent

Indigenous representatives, such as University of Melbourne academic Marcia Langton who is extensively and uncritically cited in the report. Former Olympic athlete and Labor politician Nova Peris, who travels frequently to Israel, has completely aligned herself with its slaughter of the Palestinians. Others promoted the Northern Territory Intervention—the police-military occupation of Aboriginal areas and accompanying social attacks, including welfare quarantining.

All of this underscores the reality that class, not race or personal identity, is the fundamental division in society. Ordinary Indigenous people cannot defend their social rights and fight the horrendous conditions they face imposed on them without establishing their independence from the Aboriginal elite and its political representatives. That elite is committed to the very social order, capitalism, which is responsible for social hardships faced by most Indigenous people and the working class as a whole.

The only way forward is to unite the working class, irrespective of race and nationality, in a common political movement. Such a movement must be based on an implacable struggle against Labor and the entire capitalist political establishment. Its aim must be the bringing to power of the working class, in a revolutionary struggle that would place society's resources under public ownership and the democratic control of working people. In an epoch of world economy and world society, in which all problems from war to pandemics and economic crises present themselves in global terms, the fight for socialism can only go forward on an international scale. That underscores the thoroughly reactionary character of all forms of racialism and nationalism.



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