

Australian PM touts business opportunities at Garma Indigenous festival

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6 August 2024

Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese delivered a right-wing, pro-business speech at the annual Garma Festival in the Northern Territory (NT) on Saturday, depicting expanded corporate investment and the capitalist market as the means of overcoming the horrendous social conditions afflicting the majority of indigenous people.

Garma, the largest indigenous gathering in the country, is presented as a cultural festival and an opportunity to discuss improving the plight of indigenous people.

In reality, it is a festival by and for a narrow Aboriginal elite. It is essentially a private event, run by the not-for-profit arm of leaders of the Gumatj clan who have close connections to government and substantial business interests.

Among the sponsors of the gathering is Rio Tinto. The British-Australian mining corporation, with a market capitalisation of \$167 billion, has been accused of environmentally and socially destructive practices in Australia, as well as in impoverished countries.

Other sponsors are Qantas, Australia's largest airline, and Telstra, the biggest telecommunications company, both of which have implemented mass sackings over recent years.

Notwithstanding the corporate largesse they receive, the organisers reportedly charge \$2,750 for a ticket to the four-day festival and \$5,000 for a corporate pass.

For business leaders and politicians, the festival is an opportunity to shed crocodile tears over the dire conditions afflicting the Aboriginal population and to cover their own responsibility.

This year's festival occurred just days after the release of the annual Closing the Gap report by the government's Productivity Commission. Only five of the 19 areas of indigenous social progress were deemed to be "on track" with official targets, which are themselves woefully inadequate.

Indigenous life expectancy was still a decade lower than for non-Indigenous people. The indigenous incarceration and suicide rates had increased, and record numbers of Aboriginal children were being taken from their parents and placed in out of home care.

In his Garma speech, Albanese declared: "No-one can defend the gaps in life expectancy, health, opportunity, education or justice as inevitable or acceptable," but Albanese has been the

prime minister for over two years during which the Closing the Gap metrics have remained unchanged or worsened! He was a senior minister in the last Labor government in 2008 when it devised the Closing the Gap framework that has so manifestly failed.

The social programs outlined by Albanese, most already announced multiple times, were miserable. They include a plan to build "up to" 2,700 homes in the NT, which the government itself states would "halve," not abolish overcrowding in a decade. According to figures cited by the Aboriginal Housing organisation, only 43.4 percent of indigenous-occupied dwellings in the Territory are big enough for the number of residents.

Albanese touted three new dialysis units in the NT as great progress, even while acknowledging that "chronic kidney disease is twice as prevalent among indigenous communities and four times more likely to be fatal." The government was going to provide clean drinking water to several remote communities and planned to expand Internet connections, he said.

In fact, the Labor government is overseeing the worst reversal in working-class living standards in 50 years in a pro-business offensive that hits the most oppressed layers, such as Aborigines, the hardest. It has rejected calls for any substantial cost-of-living relief and is instead lowering tax rates for the wealthy, slashing social services and helping to fuel a speculative housing bubble.

State and territory Labor governments in office across the entire mainland are implementing a similar austerity offensive. In June, the NT Labor administration shut Darwin's only joint residential rehab facility, detox unit and sobering up shelter to make way for a prison. Last month, it implemented a police-state style curfew in the town of Alice Springs over a handful of violent incidents fuelled by the acute social crisis.

The greater part of Albanese's speech was dedicated to his vision of a "comprehensive economic policy for Indigenous peoples." Essentially, it consisted of boosting profit-making opportunities to the benefit of major corporations and the indigenous elite.

The government was setting up various consultative bodies, "meaning investors and developers, companies and job-creators

can directly contact communities.”

Albanese noted that there were “more than 270 native title bodies,” some of which “don’t have the resources to engage in commercial negotiations. Equally, there are many companies that wouldn’t know where to start, who to talk to or how to make a worthwhile agreement.” The government would assist, bringing together business and Aboriginal leaders.

Under Native Title, indigenous representatives negotiate access to Aboriginal land to businesses, for a fee or royalty. Almost half of the NT, for instance, is subject to such arrangements. The consequence has been the enrichment of a small minority while the majority have continued to live in abject poverty.

Albanese referenced speaking to the late Gumatj clan leader Yunupingu at the 2022 Garma festival. Yunupingu was, until 2005, head of the Northern Land Council. In that position, he was reported to handle up to \$50 million in royalties, especially from mining. Yunupingu lived in luxury, with multiple houses, maids, cars and helicopters, while most indigenous people continued to live in appalling poverty.

The polarisation has only deepened, with the latest stage being an official promotion of indigenous-owned businesses, which the *Conversation* reported in 2022 generated a combined revenue of \$16 billion a year. Albanese crowed that he was “lifting investment in Indigenous businesses and employers, all over the nation. Rewarding and incentivising wealth creation.”

The suggestion that any of this will improve the lot of ordinary people is a version of trickle-down economics. Greater business investment and return will mean greater exploitation and a deeper social divide.

The Aboriginal elite is promoted by the government as a state and corporate-aligned layer that can help suppress the social aspirations and opposition of ordinary indigenous people. This milieu also has a critical role to play in furthering the program of militarism and war.

Albanese declared that “new defence and security projects” could help to “unlock” “prosperity for Indigenous communities.” His government is completing Australia’s transformation into a frontline state for a US-led war against China which centres on a massive militarisation, including through vastly expanded US basing arrangements.

The areas of focus, particularly the NT, have large Aboriginal populations, and while mostly shrouded in secrecy, it is known that some Native Title bodies have done deals to facilitate the war build-up. Albanese also raised the need for expanded mining of critical minerals under conditions where Australia is seeking to aid the US in undermining Chinese influence in this strategic economic sector.

Albanese’s speech again underscored the right-wing character of Labor’s attempt last October to insert an Indigenous Voice to parliament in the Constitution. The Voice would have been a means of integrating even further the indigenous elite into the state structure to further the pro-

business program Albanese outlined at Garma and the war plans.

Albanese and others at Garma bewailed the defeat of the Voice referendum, which has played a major role in the government crisis and was a setback to the indigenous elite. Proponents of the Voice have depicted the overwhelming “no” vote as a result of racism. In reality, broad sections of the population correctly doubted that the Voice would do anything to improve the lot of ordinary people, Aboriginal or otherwise.

That has been further underscored by the trajectory of its chief advocates.

Academic Marcia Langton, who authored a report that formed that basis of the Voice proposal, has combined frothing denunciations of the population as backward and racist with equally frothing support for the Israeli regime’s genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. Her co-author, Tom Calma, accompanied Albanese on a pro-militarist visit to Washington last October and was given an audience with “genocide Joe” Biden.

Noel Pearson, another central Voice advocate, was appointed last week to the board of Fortescue, describing the mining conglomerate as a “proud Australian company that is led by its values from mine site to boardroom.”

In the wake of the Voice defeat, there have been bitter recriminations among its advocates and divisions have opened up. Some are angry that Albanese has now settled on a local “truth-telling” approach, backing away from a previous pledge to establish a Makarrata commission, which, like the Voice would have been an unelected body of the indigenous elite, and for a Treaty arrangement with this same grasping layer.

The divisions are tactical, with all sides committed to big business, their own selfish interests and a rabid racialism.

As the Socialist Equality Party insisted when it called for an active boycott of the Voice referendum, the oppression of indigenous people is a crime of capitalism and a class question. It can only be fought by uniting the entire working class, regardless of race, in a common struggle for a socialist alternative to the profit system and all its representatives.



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