

# One year since the defeat of Australian Labor's Voice referendum

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It is now one year since the Labor government suffered a severe blow from the defeat of its referendum last October 14 to insert an indigenous Voice assembly into Australia's colonial-era 1901 Constitution.

In his election night victory speech in May 2022, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese had made the proposal central to his government's entire agenda. He pledged to hold a referendum within Labor's first term of office to establish and constitutionally entrench an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisory body, called the Voice, to parliament and the executive government.

Twelve months on, it is increasingly clear why this project was so crucial to Albanese and his government, and why the defeat was such a blow, from which Labor has been unable to recover.

The Voice project was an attempt to exploit the widespread popular support for measures to address the appalling conditions of most indigenous people. It was intended, in fact, to advance a key part of the Labor government's pro-war and pro-business agenda.

One of the Voice's primary purposes was to further integrate an elite indigenous layer, such as land council CEOs, top government officials, academics, politicians and business operators, into the corridors of power, to provide a humane veneer to justify the intensifying exploitation of workers, indigenous and non-indigenous alike.

A related purpose was to fully draw this privileged layer into the Albanese government's transformation of Australia into a platform for war against China, with military bases being upgraded and opened to US access from Cape York to Darwin, the Pilbara and the Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean. These areas include many indigenous-controlled lands through Land Councils and native title.

For these reasons, the Yes campaign was heavily backed and financed by the corporate boardrooms, from Qantas and the big banks to the mining giants like BHP and Rio Tinto. They also backed the Voice as a more reliable vehicle for pursuing mining and other corporate projects, which have often become embroiled in legal disputes with indigenous land claimants.

Other layers in the business and political establishment, including indigenous representatives, backed the official No campaign, as did the Liberal-National Coalition. They voiced concerns about disrupting the existing constitutional set-up that has served the Australian ruling class well since 1901, while pitching to growing social discontent and seeking to mobilise a far-right constituency with dog-whistle appeals to racist elements.

These were tactical differences only, over how best to preserve the interests and rule of the capitalist class. There were no differences at all over the underlying program of corporate profit, war and class war

at home.

Based on this understanding, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) called for an active boycott campaign to oppose the referendum itself. We said it was a "political sham" that had nothing to do with rectifying the historical injustices inflicted on the indigenous people, which are the result of more than two centuries of capitalist rule.

We urged workers and youth to reject both the Yes and No cases, which were presented by rival camps within the ruling political establishment. We explained that both camps were committed to US militarism and the austerity measures needed to pay for the hundreds of billions of dollars to be spent on the AUKUS military buildup against China.

The referendum defeat did not reflect mass racism or "misinformation," as many Yes campaign leaders and supporters have alleged. In reality, there was initially strong majority support—more than 60 percent—for the referendum, the result of the mistaken belief that it would in part rectify the gross inequality and poverty among indigenous working-class populations.

This support imploded as the date drew nearer. First, there was growing distrust among broad sections of the population in claims that the Voice would address these conditions when the entire working class was experiencing a devastating cost-of-living crisis, soaring mortgage payments and rents, and a deepening cut to living standards under the Labor government.

The final nail in the coffin of the Voice referendum was the Labor government's line-up behind the US-backed and armed Israeli genocide in Gaza from last October 7, a week before the vote. This barbarism and Labor's backing for it shocked and horrified workers and young people, indigenous and non-indigenous alike.

Conclusions were drawn: If Labor backed the massacre of Palestinians, already reaching more than 2,000 deaths by October 14, including hundreds of women and children, how could it claim to be defending the interests of Australia's indigenous people?

In echoing the Biden-Harris administration, Labor's support for the massacres in Gaza, including the bombings of refugee camps, schools and hospitals, also began to lay bare the brutal character and wider thrust of the plunge into a three-front world war against Iran, Russia and China.

## What the past year has shown

These assessments have been confirmed over the past 12 months,

not least by the trajectory of some of the most prominent indigenous figures in the Yes campaign, such as Professor Marcia Langton and ex-Labor Senator Nova Peris, who emerged as vehement supporters of the Israeli mass killings in Gaza.

Langton denounced any suggestion that “Indigenous Australians feel solidarity with Palestinians” and perversely blamed the Gazan population for the genocide because 44 percent had voted for Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian Authority elections. Peris put out a social media video, defending Israel and slandering any opposition to it as antisemitic, followed by a media interview in which she called for pro-Palestinian activists to be imprisoned.

In backing the Israeli regime, Langton and Peris erased the history of more than seven decades of Israeli occupation, mass displacement, invasions and war crimes in Palestine, as well as the violent record of US imperialism across the Middle East and globally, with which they have aligned themselves. By denouncing the resistance of the long-oppressed Palestinians, they echoed the accusations made against all colonised populations, including indigenous people in Australia. All acts of opposition to British rule were depicted as primitive savagery.

Other key indigenous Yes advocates have turned to alternative means of pursuing their interests, particularly via big business. Noel Pearson, one of the architects of the Voice, personified this response in August by joining the board of Fortescue, billionaire Andrew Forrest’s mining conglomerate. Fortescue has a record of trampling over Aboriginal spiritual sites, such as those of the Yindjibarndi people in Western Australia, while exploiting indigenous workers in its operations.

Like Langton, Pearson has been a decades-long advocate of supposed indigenous economic “empowerment.” This essentially consists of pushing indigenous people off welfare benefits and into either cheap labour employment or into setting up their own businesses to exploit the labour power of other indigenous people.

The reality of Labor’s program was underlined by the latest annual government “Closing the Gap” report, issued in August. It showed a further deterioration in the economic and social conditions affecting indigenous workers and youth under the Albanese government, accompanied by significant expansions in indigenous acquisition of land and sea legal titles.

The most damning social indices—incarceration, suicide and indigenous children taken from their families and placed in out-of-home care—continued to rise. Such reports provide only a limited view of the social crisis affecting the workers and their families as a whole, including indigenous workers and youth, who are among the most oppressed and vulnerable members of the working class.

At the same time, the report revealed a 7.8 percent increase in the area of land subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal rights. And the target of a 15 percent increase by 2030 of the sea covered by indigenous titles was met six years ahead of time.

Clearly, the benefits of the expanding legal titles have gone to a privileged layer, not working-class indigenous people. Under native title laws, introduced in the 1990s, indigenous leaders sell access to Aboriginal land to businesses, for fees or royalties. Almost half the strategic Northern Territory (NT) is now subject to such arrangements.

These indigenous land and sea tracts, mostly controlled by officially sponsored land councils, are also expanding sites for military operations. And there is a growing relationship between Aboriginal businesses and the military. The Department of Defence has become the largest procurer of goods and services from indigenous-owned companies.

This month, the Albanese government announced that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned businesses have been granted more than \$10 billion in contracts since 2015 under the Indigenous Procurement Policy, which was initiated by the previous Liberal-National government and extended by Labor.

The value of such contracts in the 2022-23 financial year jumped to more than \$1.4 billion, with almost half—over \$680 million—coming from Defence, that is, the military.

Since the referendum’s defeat, the Labor government and the indigenous leaders have accelerated the Voice agenda, only by other means. In August, Albanese used the annual indigenous Garna Festival in the NT to announce new measures to facilitate agreements with hundreds of native title bodies.

At the same time, the war drive has intensified. With the Israeli pulverisation of Lebanon and plans to attack Iran, the Gaza genocide has expanded monstrously. It has clearly become a war to reorganise the Middle East under US domination, even as the US-NATO powers escalate their proxy war against Russia, threatening a nuclear conflict, and Washington ramps up its economic and military provocations against China.

These developments, both domestic and global, further underscore the fraud of the claims that the Voice would redress the historic crimes and overcome the terrible conditions of many Aboriginal people, any more than all the past “reconciliation” programs, going back for decades, and “Closing the Gap,” launched in 2008 with a parliamentary “apology” by the Rudd Labor government,

The past 12 months have shown the importance of the active boycott campaign conducted by the Socialist Equality Party. We warned: “The Voice campaign, and in this the Yes and the No camps are united, is to conceal the reactionary agenda of this government and the ruling class for war abroad and class war at home.”

We concluded: “Decades of false and broken promises have proven that ending the atrocious situation facing the vast majority of indigenous people requires a unified fight by the working class, across racial and ethnic lines, to abolish the socio-economic order that has produced it. That means overturning the capitalist profit system as a whole, and replacing it with a socialist society, based on genuine social equality and democracy.”



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