

Aboriginal professor awarded an “Order of Australia” promotion

By Mike Head
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In last week’s Queen’s Birthday Honours List two prominent people were given “Order of Australia” awards for services said to benefit indigenous people. One was Marcia Langton, a long-time Aboriginal university professor. The other was former Liberal-National Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

The question must be asked: How did Langton, who began her political life in the 1970s as a leader of the Communist League, purporting to fight for the overthrow of capitalism, become, at the age of 68, the beneficiary of a Queen’s Honour alongside Abbott?

In fact, this is Langton’s second such award. She was made a “member” of the Order of Australia in 1993. Last week, she was promoted to an “officer” of the order. Her citation read: “For distinguished service to tertiary education, and as an advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

Abbott was lifted to the order’s highest rank, that of “companion,” “for eminent service to the people and Parliament of Australia, particularly as prime minister, and through significant contributions to trade, border control, and to the Indigenous community.”

Abbott is a widely reviled right-wing figure who lost his own parliamentary seat at last year’s federal election. Among other things, he is notorious for stripping \$600 million in funding from indigenous organisations, including health, legal and language support services, in his government’s 2014 budget.

One of them was the Aboriginal Medical Service at Mount Druitt, which had been trying to address the many health needs of Australia’s single largest Aboriginal community—the more than 32,000 indigenous people living throughout the working class suburbs of western Sydney.

Abbott’s government also drove, via funding cuts, moves to shut down hundreds of remote settlements in Western Australia and elsewhere, seeking to force their residents off traditional lands in order to slash social spending and clear the way for unhindered mining and agricultural operations.

Langton has played a different role, but with similar results. A leading figure in Aboriginal politics since the 1970s, she is currently an associate provost at the University of Melbourne and has held its foundation chair of Australian Indigenous Studies since 2000.

Langton welcomed her latest award. She told the media she was especially proud of helping achieve a significant increase in the numbers of indigenous Australians with PhDs. “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with higher degrees are among that small percentage of our people who have closed the gap,” she said.

Langton noted that among these graduates are a number of university pro vice-chancellors. Such people are on annual salaries of more than \$250,000, placing them in the wealthiest 5 percent of the population.

Langton’s comments point to her part in the deliberate cultivation of a privileged strata of indigenous academics, politicians, lawyers and business operators. This “small percentage,” which includes Langton, has certainly “closed the gap” with their non-indigenous counterparts. Yet the

conditions for the vast majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have gone backward.

As one of the most impoverished and vulnerable layers of the working class, indigenous workers and youth have suffered some of the most severe impacts of the decline in social conditions driven by the pro-business restructuring of the economy over the past four decades.

Even by the limited measures of the “closing the gap” program initiated by the last federal Labor government in 2008, the health, social, education and employment conditions of most indigenous people remain shocking. For example, according to the latest 2020 Closing the Gap report, the child mortality “gap” has not narrowed but widened. The indigenous rate was 141 per 100,000—more than twice the rate for non-indigenous children.

But these “gap” statistics hide a deepening social polarisation among indigenous people themselves. Alongside terrible poverty, an indigenous capitalist class has emerged. According to Creative Spirits, a website promoting indigenous entrepreneurs, by 2016, there were more than 16,000 Aboriginal-owned businesses. The top 500 “Aboriginal corporations” employed over 15,000 full-time employees.

No statistics exist on the number of Aboriginal millionaires, but reporting on a 1,000-strong indigenous business conference at Sydney’s Darling Harbour in 2017, indigenous broadcaster Stan Grant enthused: “In one room was probably assembled the single largest collection of indigenous millionaires ever assembled in one room. They were there to celebrate black business.”

These corporate entrepreneurs have benefited from government and big business contracts. Government procurement spending with indigenous-owned businesses has exceeded \$1 billion annually since mid-2015. Last year, the Business Council of Australia pledged another \$3 billion in such contracts over five years.

This is an “indigenous empowerment” policy, pursued by successive governments. In the words of a federal government web site: “Indigenous Business Australia’s (IBA’s) Equity and Investments program aims to promote self-management, self-sufficiency and economic independence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.”

Langton and other indigenous figures, such as former Labor Party national president Warren Mundine and Cape York program director Noel Pearson, have been among the most prominent advocates of this “economic independence” program, which has “closed the gap” for the wealthy few.

Another widening “gap” is that of incarceration. Although indigenous people make up about 3 percent of the population, they account for 28 percent of prison inmates. That ratio has roughly doubled since 1991, the year in which a Hawke Labor government royal commission handed down its report into 99 black deaths in custody over the previous decade.

That report was a whitewash. Not a single police or prison officer was charged for causing any of the deaths, effectively giving a green light for the killings to continue. In fact, the rate has increased—there have been

434 indigenous deaths in custody in the 29 years since 1991.

After her award, Langton told journalists: “There have been ... no convictions of any police officer ever for killing or assaulting Aboriginal people.” But Langton worked on the royal commission herself from 1989 to 1990. “I also contributed to the national report,” she told Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio last week.

The Hawke government’s employment of Langton in the royal commission was part of a broader turn to head off the public outrage over the killings by integrating indigenous leaders into the state apparatus and the political establishment. Many of the commission’s recommendations focused on drawing indigenous figures into police and prison operations, as consultants and monitors, as well as “retraining” police.

Two years later, Langton was given her first Order of Australia award. She was made a “member” in the 1993 Queen’s Birthday list for “service as an anthropologist and advocate of Aboriginal issues.”

In last week’s ABC radio interview Langton advanced, yet again, the call to “retrain the police force.” This only serves to hide the reality. Police violence is not simply the product of racism. Indigenous people, together with immigrant youth and workers, are particularly targeted for police harassment and abuse. But police killings are rising more broadly, especially in working class areas, where social distress and discontent is mounting.

As the Marxist movement has always explained, the police, together with the military-intelligence agencies, are the “bodies of armed men” on which the capitalist class relies to enforce its rule, especially when social and class tensions explode.

Langton’s ideological role

Stripped of its rhetoric, the “economic independence” program championed by Langton and her co-thinkers consists of creating a layer of “black capitalists,” at the expense of Aboriginal workers and the working class as a whole.

In her pursuit of this agenda, Langton became infamous for supporting the Howard government’s militarised intervention into Aboriginal townships in the Northern Territory in 2007. Significantly, Abbott, the government’s health minister, also strongly backed the military-led operation, as did the Labor Party, then the official opposition.

Contrary to Langton’s claims, the real goal of the intervention was not to protect Aboriginal children or families from domestic violence. It was a punitive expedition, conducted on the pretext of combating alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence 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.

To achieve these ends, authoritarian measures were used. Indigenous township councils were ousted, government managers were installed and police patrols were boosted, backed by troops.

The intervention also pioneered welfare-cutting measures for use against other working people around the country. Wider trials of “cashless welfare” systems soon followed in selected working class areas.

Supposed “economic independence” also involves facilitating projects by mining conglomerates on “native title” land in return for the establishment of investment funds for Aboriginal business owners.

Langton’s delivery of the 2012 Boyer Lectures, hosted by the ABC, sought to develop the ideological justification for this program and the elevation of affluent indigenous leaders. Her selection to give the prestigious annual series was a measure of the value placed on her role.

Under the title of “The Quiet Revolution,” she proclaimed 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.

During her five lectures, Langton hailed the big mining companies that had struck “native title” deals with indigenous claimants. These deals have allowed the mining giants to reap billions of dollars in profits while allocating sums of cash to Aboriginal corporations and exploiting the labour of indigenous workers. Langton lauded Rio Tinto, Fortescue Metals Group and BHP Billiton for employing “Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in larger numbers than ever before in Australian history.”

More recently, since last October, Langton has been co-chair of the Morrison Liberal-National government’s senior advisory group on options for an “indigenous voice.” This is a proposal for an indigenous council to advise governments on all parliamentary legislation—a potentially lucrative source of employment for aspiring Aboriginal politicians.

Langton and her co-thinkers falsely present this “voice” as a means to redress historic injustices. They appeal to widespread sentiments of revulsion toward the more than 200 years of massacres, epidemics, removals and separation of children.

In reality, these were the methods that British imperialism and the emerging Australian ruling class used to devastate the indigenous people and clear the continent for capitalist exploitation.

The historic crimes of this diseased social order can be rectified and overcome only through the unified struggle of the working class, indigenous and non-indigenous, in Australia and internationally, to overthrow the capitalist profit system as a whole, and replace it with a socialist society, based on genuine equality and democracy.

Langton’s political evolution

Despite Langton’s previous apparent, and seemingly short-lived, adherence to socialism in the 1970s, this has never been her perspective. Her insistence that race must be elevated above class as the determining factor in society is both bound up with her rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class and the justification for her own political and social trajectory over the past four decades.

Langton’s history is especially significant. It illustrates a parallel process to the cultivation of a favoured indigenous layer—the rightward shift of ex-radicals from organisations that once claimed adherence to Marxism and posed as representatives of Trotskyism.

Langton first became known, in the mid-1970s, as a member of the national committee of the Communist League, and later the Socialist Workers Party, into which the Communist League merged in 1977.

At the time, these formations falsely presented themselves as representatives of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution established by Trotsky in 1938 to overcome the betrayals of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. This had an appeal to students and workers who were radicalised by the horrors of the Vietnam War and the upsurge in global working class struggles from 1968 to 1975.

In reality, these organisations were based on Pabloism, which sought to effectively dissolve the Fourth International. They dismissed the very conception that the international working class is the only force that can overturn capitalism and reorganise society along socialist lines, that is, in the interests of all, instead of the financial oligarchy.

Instead, the Pabloites promoted an alignment behind other class forces, and various forms of identity politics, such as feminism and black nationalism, which elevate gender and race above the fundamental divide in capitalist society—that of class. As a young Aboriginal woman, Langton epitomised their orientation.

Above all, these outfits vehemently opposed the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), formed in 1953 to defend and develop genuine Trotskyism, and the establishment in 1972 of an Australian section of the ICFI, the Socialist Labour League, the forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party.

The end of the Vietnam War and the betrayals and defeats suffered by the working class worldwide, followed by the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, led to a wave of renunciation by the middle class-based membership of the Pabloite organisations of any, even formal, adherence to the revolutionary socialist perspective of Trotskyism.

This helped paved the way for followers such as Langton to more openly adapt themselves to the requirements, and blandishments, of the capitalist profit system. Exactly when and how Langton left the Socialist Workers Party remains unclear, but her evolution flows from the class logic of rejecting any perspective based on the working class and socialism.

Today, indigenous leaders such as Langton speak on behalf of a very well-off and aspiring layer. They seek to suppress the fact that the historic oppression and social blight afflicting Aboriginal communities is a product of the private profit system and that the majority of Aborigines are part of the working class.

Assorted pseudo-left groups—the successors of the Pabloite formations—as well as black nationalist groups, pursue a similar line. They all insist that racial identity, not class, is the most important issue in society. In response to the eruption of mass multi-ethnic protest demonstrations throughout the United States and internationally against police violence, they seek to introduce racial and other forms of identity politics to bury and suppress the fundamental class issues at stake.

In fact, the more diverse and global the protests have become, the more these groups blame “white people,” not the capitalist system, for the oppression of indigenous people. The Socialist Equality Party opposes all such attempts to divide the working class along racial lines. The only means of resolving the deplorable situation confronting Aboriginal workers and youth is through the mobilisation of the entire working class, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, to end the socio-economic order that has produced it.

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