
Indigenous leaders and Amnesty International criticise Indigenous Affairs Minister over statement

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KIM LANDERS: The **Indigenous** Affairs Minister has drawn criticism from Indigenous leaders and Amnesty International over a statement he made in the lead-up to the 25th anniversary of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Nigel Scullion has sparked an unhappy debate over whether there's been a reduction in deaths in custody since the report was released.

From Canberra, *Anna Henderson* reports.

ANNA HENDERSON: On the lawns outside Federal Parliament early this morning, eucalyptus leaves were lit in a traditional smoking ceremony to mark a quarter of a century since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

JACKIE HUGGINS: And a generation on, we are still lacking the national leadership that requires us to take us to a place where we can say we can truly have confidence in the criminal justice system.

ANNA HENDERSON: The much publicised inquiry investigated 99 Indigenous deaths in police and prison custody.

This morning 99 hand prints were laid on the grass, signifying the lives that had been lost and Jackie Huggins from the Change the Record Coalition reminded mourners there have been many more deaths since then.

JACKIE HUGGINS: Successive government policies have failed us, they've failed a generation or two. So it's been a lost generation with broken promises and hopes that have been dashed.

ANNA HENDERSON: The Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Nigel Scullion, issued a statement ahead of today's events saying it was important to acknowledge the progress that has occurred to reduce Indigenous deaths behind bars.

It said:

STATEMENT FROM NIGEL SCULLION (voiceover): At the time the royal commission was established in 1989, First Australians were more likely to die in custody than non-Indigenous Australians. This is no longer the case.

Over the past 15 years, in all but one year, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person has in fact been less likely to die in custody than a non-Indigenous person.

The success in bringing down the rate of deaths in custody for First Australians should bring hope that through the collective efforts of all governments and the wider community, we can reverse the trends.

ANNA HENDERSON: Amnesty International says the minister is wrong.

JULIAN CLEARY: It's a really disappointing comment because it's an attempt really to disguise the fact that there has been no drop in the number of Indigenous deaths in custody and also that Indigenous incarceration has escalated to unprecedented levels and is much higher than it was back then.

ANNA HENDERSON: Amnesty Indigenous Rights campaigner, Julian Cleary, has also taken issue with Senator Scullion's further statement that many of the 1991 recommendations have actually been implemented.

JULIAN CLEARY: Absolutely not. The very first recommendation of the royal commission was that the Commonwealth government had a really important role to play and needed to report annually on progress in implementing the other recommendations.

A lot of those recommendations were directed towards stopping the massive over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system and the Federal Government continues to shirk responsibility.

ANNA HENDERSON: Julian Cleary says despite making up less than 3 per cent of the general Australian population, today Indigenous Australians make up almost 30 per cent of the prison population - that's twice the figure in the early '90s.

Amnesty and the Change the Record coalition have continued to call for justice targets to be created and included as part of the Closing the Gap report, so the Federal Government is accountable to the Parliament for the figures each year.

Labor and the Greens back that position, along with many Indigenous and human rights groups, but the Minister is standing firm. He's resisted pressure to add those targets to his list.

And while the Prime Minister did not address the issue of justice targets in his Closing the Gap speech this year, he did say he'd tasked the Indigenous Affairs Minister and the Employment Minister, Michaelia Cash, with putting together a program to get Indigenous prisoners into work.

Senator Cash was questioned about progress towards that proposal today.

MICHAELIA CASH: I'm working closely with Senator Nigel Scullion, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, on this matter. We are currently having a whole of government review, but certainly I don't think you get anyone that is more committed to getting Indigenous people into jobs than Nigel Scullion.

He has worked and lived you know in Northern Australia now for the majority of his life.

We are looking at what programs we can put into the prisons to ensure that the prisoners get the assistance, the intensive employment assistance they need so that when they do come out of prison, there is a job available for them.

ANNA HENDERSON: Senator Scullion's media release recognises the Federal Government's responsibility for addressing underlying causes that lead Indigenous Australians to come into contact with the criminal justice system, including lack of work and drug and alcohol addiction.

He says the figures are unacceptable.

He's also highlighted the need for the states and territories to take responsibility for directly running prisons and police watch-houses in their jurisdictions.

KIM LANDERS: Anna Henderson reporting.