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## **We must embrace Indigenous issues**

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How will our children judge the strength of our nation? Will it be through the mighty defence of our borders, or the vitality of our engagement with the world? Will it be measured in terms of economic output or the strength of our financial markets, by the accumulation of personal wealth or the diversity of cities we have developed?

Will future generations see this as a generous period? Or will they consider it yet another long and inexcusable era of procrastination and apathy, a period in which Australia, its federal and state governments, failed to make headway on what we, at The Age, consider one of the profound and pressing issues facing the nation: the multi-faceted disadvantage affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

We raise these questions because rarely do Indigenous issues come to the fore in election campaigns. They might light the agenda for a day, trigger a flurry of ping-pong responses from political leaders, and fill a few lines of small print in budget papers. But too soon, eyes turn away, hearts grow cold and the inequity rolls on. Such apathy has festered in Australia for more than two centuries, and it cannot and must not continue.

Like it or not, Australia is judged by the world in terms of how it treats its first people, and on so many levels we are failing. The evidence is abundant. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face a deficit of economic opportunities, as well as below-average outcomes in life expectancy, general health and education.

The Closing the Gap report, released this year, showed the Indigenous child mortality rate is improving but efforts to narrow the gap in life expectancy have fallen behind. That the goals in terms of literacy and numeracy are pitched in terms of halving the gap, not closing it, underscores the enormity of the task.

And then there are the imprisonment rates. It is 25 years since the royal commission examining Aboriginal deaths in custody exposed the travesty of disproportionate rates of incarceration. Yet the situation has worsened dramatically. A person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background is 15.5 times more likely to end up in detention than any other member of the community (compared with seven at the time of the royal commission), and Indigenous children aged 10 to 14 are 30 times more likely to be incarcerated.

Thirty times. You read that correctly. The Commonwealth spent millions of dollars on a commission that came up with powerful findings and hundreds of potentially game-changing recommendations. Why has this nation not improved on those awful lessons?

Indigenous disadvantage is a reality that must be confronted and owned by the entire nation. But we perceive a real danger in this election campaign that the many issues

affecting Indigenous people will be swept aside or tritely agglomerated into a single issue - recognition in the constitution. Recognition is a worthy aim, and The Age supports it. But it will not and cannot, by itself, resolve practical disadvantage.

Mandatory imprisonment in Western Australia and the Northern Territory for offences that could be managed through alternative methods of justice is contributing to poor social outcomes. Imprisonment destroys a person's hope and hardens their grievances. It exacerbates underlying mental health issues. It erodes families and, thus, contributes to social dysfunction. As the royal commission urged, jail must be the last resort.

Incremental advances are being made, but progress is slow. It is imperative in this election that the major political parties elevate the issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to a leading priority and not render them a patronising afterthought.