

A royal commission isn't enough

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August 8, 2016

Canberra must show bold leadership rather than continuing failed policies.

The royal commission on youth detention in the Northern Territory represents the last in a long string of opportunities for state, territory and federal governments to take action to reform the relationship between themselves and the Indigenous Australians that have been neglected for generations.

The claim by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion, that he didn't know about the abuse of young men in the Don Dale detention facility, whether credible or not, is damning of his competence as the federal minister responsible for the welfare of Indigenous people.

But regardless of Scullion's level of plausible deniability with regard to the latest cases of mistreatment, no government minister, state, territory or federal, can credibly claim to be ignorant of the plight of Indigenous people more broadly.

There have been multiple reports, at all levels of government, indicating that there is a significant gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across a range of issues, from quality of life to support from the state.

But these reports have gone unheeded by Scullion and the territory government. The evidence has always been available, if only it had piqued Scullion's interest.

This year we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Wave Hill walk-off, a decade-long strike by Indigenous cattlemen and their families against unfair treatment and appalling living conditions on the Wave Hill cattle station in the territory.

It was, and continues to be, a deeply significant gesture of resistance to the discrimination that was embedded in the law of the time. It also, importantly, kick-started the land rights movement and brought about great changes for Indigenous workers.

It is therefore rightly claimed that Indigenous relations have come a long way since the open discrimination that precipitated the Wave Hill walk-off.

But, despite these gains, every day Indigenous people are forced to deal with government policymakers who are seemingly indifferent to their circumstances and who have introduced policies that are actively discriminatory.

While the federally mandated maximum wage that oppressed the workers at Wave Hill is gone, the Community Development Program (CDP) remains, mandating that the people in remote communities work longer hours than people in metropolitan

areas for the same welfare payments, or risk months cut off from government support.

White pastoralists no longer keep Indigenous workers in similar conditions to animals, without any running water or power, but we have all seen in recent weeks that Indigenous people are still subject to discriminatory treatment and violence tinged with racism.

Certainly the royal commission on the mistreatment of youth in detention is warranted, but more than any new inquest or report we need a new approach that affords Indigenous issues continuous consideration and action, rather than waiting for "solvable" crises to present themselves.

We need to ensure that consultation with Indigenous people is the norm, in depth and ongoing, rather than post hoc performance art by a disinterested minister, meant to create media coverage rather than change.

The federal government must show bold leadership rather than continuing the failed policies of the past.

It must go beyond the royal commission and examine the extremely high rates of youth suicide in Indigenous communities and over-representation of Indigenous people in our prisons. The federal government must also look at its own policies, and the impact that they are having on Indigenous people.

Policies like the CDP do not assist Indigenous workers to break out of the cycle of poverty and make a better life for themselves and their children, in fact they further entrench reliance on a system designed to punish rather than assist.

The widely criticised CDP must be overhauled, we need legislative changes that make the cost of living more equitable, such as stopping price gouging in remote communities, and changes to end the cruel reality of Indigenous people being locked out of their retirement savings by the fact that their median age of death falls below the retirement age. Changes such as these would make a considerable impact on the ability of Indigenous workers and their families to build better lives.

The union movement has stood shoulder to shoulder with Indigenous workers for decades. We stood with them through Wave Hill and will continue to fight for equality before the law and in the workplace for all Indigenous people.