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Reconciliation is still not on the horizon

Opinion

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It's now been 24 years since what was called Australia's unutterable shame, the legacy of dispossession, degradation and devastation of Indigenous people, in the High Court's reversal of the legal fallacy that this was an empty continent.

Since Mabo, we have failed to achieve much in redressing it. It is our continuing shame. Despite the strenuous efforts of some, the gulf between the hope of reconciliation and the reality of mass incarceration of Aboriginal people is growing. Racism is perpetuated, not eliminated.

During the past weeks, we have heard of a Melbourne taxi driver who refused to pick up esteemed Aboriginal actor, 72-year-old Jack Charles. The cab stopped to pick up his mate, but on seeing Charles get in the car the driver claimed he had "knocked off" and drove away.

We heard of a policeman who stopped a 20-year-old Aboriginal man running down the street in Waterloo, the constabulary clearly on to a young crook. Except the young man had just left work and was running for the bus.

For one officer, seeing someone black and quick was suspicion enough to stop him. We heard that a singer of international fame believes he received poor treatment at a Darwin hospital, seemingly because of the colour of his skin. Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu's specialist and manager worried as he waited for hours to be treated for internal bleeding because staff assumed he was just another drunk Aboriginal man.

True or not, and the hospital insists it is not, rather than properly investigating a serious allegation of malpractice the NT health minister accused him of staging a publicity stunt to sell records.

We heard of the Environment Minister, Greg Hunt, refusing to stop the ritualised disrespect of the continent's sacred heart.

The government will not close the Uluru climb, surely as offensive as a climb over a cathedral altar would be to Christians, 30 years after Uluru was supposedly returned to the Anangu people.

As is made clear to visitors - patiently, repeatedly and politely - walking up the rock offends Anangu traditions. You don't need to walk on Uluru to be profoundly moved by it, just as you don't need to jump on the altar of St Paul's to be deeply affected by Christopher Wren's architectural mastery.

But still we allow the disrespect of its traditional owners. And Pat Dodson reminded us that Australia locks up Indigenous people at a greater rate since the report of the

Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991, which aimed to reduce it. The rate is 27 times the rest of the community. We've gone backwards. Even more shamefully, given our supposed care for children, of all the juveniles in custody, 59 per cent are Indigenous, despite being about 3 per cent of the population. Dodson is the incoming Labor senator for Western Australia, his admission delayed by the tardy departure of the unmissed Joe Bullock, who abandoned the ALP for its commitment to marriage equality. No one wants to be a one-issue politician, but Dodson could do worse than demand Australia deal with this one.

If we are ever to get close to true reconciliation with our past, if Australia is ever to allow its Indigenous people to develop a fitting future, we need determined, persuasive, single-minded people inside Parliament House. Dodson's is a great responsibility, to wake Australia from its sleepy acceptance of this continuing shame. For those who have largely ignored the royal commission's report, its introduction remains a forceful explanation of how the deliberate and systematic disempowerment of Aboriginal people extended from the theft of a continent and murder of masses, to the control of every aspect of the lives of those who survived.

Two and a quarter centuries on, too many Indigenous people are still treated abominably. Too many have to suffer the faint reek of superiority that permeates attitudes of some non-Aboriginal people, well intentioned or not. Too often white Australia still thinks it knows best for Indigenous people, despite Australian history suggesting the reverse is true. European control resulted in two centuries of disaster for a culture that had lasted millennia without interference. As the royal commission found 25 years ago, to eliminate disadvantage, Aboriginal people must have control of their lives and their communities.

It is true now, as it was when Dodson said it as one of the commissioners, that others should not impose on Aboriginal people their ideas of what is good, wise or moral, but let Aboriginal people feel their own way. Indigenous Australia is still waiting for the rest of us to get out of the road so the first peoples of this continent can determine their own future. Allowing the owners of Uluru to decide how it is treated would be a good start.