



Noel Pearson: Royal commission won't fix problems facing Indigenous Australia

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Indigenous leader Noel Pearson has made an impassioned plea for Australians to channel their outrage into more than just another royal commission into Indigenous incarceration.

Key points:

- Pearson says royal commission won't make a difference
- He calls for Australia to focus on drivers of Indigenous incarceration
- Pearson says calls for Aboriginal treaties are unnecessary because of Native Title

One week since the Prime Minister announced a royal commission into the Northern Territory's youth detention system, Mr Pearson told Lateline he did not think it would make a difference.

The royal commission comes after a Four Corners report aired shocking images of young detainees being mistreated in Darwin's Don Dale detention centre.

A royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody was held 25 years ago and Mr Pearson says like that one, this one will not address the forces driving Aboriginal people into incarceration in the first place.

"We can't allow our outrage to be selective. We should be outraged about those things that are driving the large numbers of those tragic juveniles, who were once little babies, who were once little toddlers and who have ended up with a bag over their head being abused in an institution," he said.

"I'm interested in the question of how do we stop these children from entering that system? How do we make sure that the children are protected at the earliest of stages from ever leading that kind of life?

"I can tell you those kids with a bag over their heads in the institutions that are coming in and out of Townsville and Aurukun or Don Dale and Yirrkala, those kids are going to end up in prison as sure as night turns to day."

'Blackfellas have to take charge'

When asked about the cases of abuse aired on Four Corners last week, Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion initially said they had not previously "piqued" his interest".

Mr Pearson described the comment as unfortunate.

"It spoke to the tenor of the times. I think we've grown so immune to the Indigenous problem here, this outrageous overrepresentation. You could have an inquiry into any of those three subjects; child protection, juvenile detention, imprisonment, the story leads from one to the other," he said.

"Australians have become so inured to this problem that it is literally something that unless you see very graphic images in television, we are largely unmoved."

Mr Pearson said instead of a royal commission, more should be done to empower Indigenous communities.

"Blackfellas have got to take charge and take responsibility for their own children. That part of the message really struggles to get traction," he said.

"We're united in relation to the outrage about the end consequences, but we're divided over the question over whether Indigenous responsibility is a crucial part of the solution. And I say it is."

Pearson says Native Title is 'architecture for treaty'

Mr Pearson also said Australia should not let the Indigenous constitutional recognition debate be derailed.

He said while recognition was purely symbolic, it should be seen as an "enabler" for further reform.

"I call it putting a little plaque into the constitution. A plaque's not going to do anything. Rather I propose a modest enabling clause, one of which I've been championing over the last few years, which is an advisory body, a voice to the Commonwealth Government and the Federal Parliament," he said.

He said that on the issue of a treaty, Australia had provisions for such agreements under the Native Title Act.

"We have agreement, a quasi treaty-making process going on under Native Title. The city of Perth, that whole south-east corner of Western Australia, is now the subject of what in another language might be called a treaty," he said.

"Essentially we have an architecture under the Native Title act that allows these types of agreements to take place, and they're happening all over the countryside."