

Indigenous deaths in custody have received just a fraction of the media coverage of the death of an elderly prince

Paul Daley

Next time you're urged to ponder how far we've come as a nation, remember the 474 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have died in custody



'The 474 is the number of individual Indigenous people who have died in custody since this nation turned its back on the recommendations of the royal commission report, delivered 30 years ago this Thursday.'

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Of course, this proposition is laughable. Not least in Australia, where the long arm of colonisation reaches far into the federation and its continued oppression and maltreatment of First Nations people.

For all the acres of media space media space and political deference thrown at the death at 99 of a privileged, white prince in the old country, but a fraction has recently been dedicated to the anniversary of what I'll call The Great Forgetting.

I'm referring to perhaps the most shameful act of wilful official inhumanity and negligence in the federation. I'm talking about the failure of federal and state governments, police forces and prison authorities over three decades to fully implement, as a priority, all - including some of the most critical - of the 339 recommendations of the 1991 royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody.

It was 1968 when William Stanner evoked the “great Australian silence” and a “cult of disremembering” regarding Australia’s brutal history. Stanner might have hoped that 23 years later, in 1991, the scales might have shifted from the nation’s eyes and that institutional change might have led to better Indigenous outcomes.

The true history, of course, was slowly being written. A shocking history of Indigenous repression involving the attempted genocide through frontier murders of tens of thousands of Indigenous people and the stealing of the children, the cruelty of the missions and the “protectors”, the rapes, the dispossession, the disease and the chain gangs.

Now, draw a line from the generational trauma and disadvantage stemming from this colonial and postcolonial crime scene to the massive disparity in imprisonment rates of Indigenous Australians, often for crimes that most white people would never be jailed for. Non-payment of fines. Driving offences. Public drunkenness. Vagrancy. Identify the problem. Ignore the recommended solutions in the full national knowledge that to do so would lead to more Indigenous deaths in custody. Forget about it. Move on.

In that context, it is chilling to read aloud a couple of numbers.

The first is 474.

The second: five.

The 474 is the number of individual Indigenous people who have died in custody since the royal commission report, delivered 30 years ago this Thursday. Five, the number of those individuals who have died in custody since the beginning of March 2021.

Would the nation tolerate this if those who died (each with their complex human experiences, their pasts and their lost futures, with their dreams and disappointments and their loved ones as important and precious as those of any prince) were non-Indigenous and white-skinned?

The answer, of course, is as discomfiting as the worst of this nation’s history.

No.

At certain times of the year, usually around commemorations of war and nationhood – which tend to be pretty much the same thing here – Australia’s leaders like to ask rhetorical questions about who we are and how far we’ve come as a nation.

Many sidestep, with a few bow-headed sentiments, the extreme violence and the colonial land grab upon which the colonies, the white federation and the nation were built. Yes, yes, they’ll say – we “share” a “difficult”, a “painful”, past. But we all move forward in a spirit of reconciliation.

As Henry Reynolds, the living Australian historian who perhaps has done more than any other to illuminate this nation’s violent genesis, wrote of “reconciliation” in *This Whispering in Our Hearts Revisited*, “The word itself was problematic. It is an old word derived from Latin meaning ‘restoration’, which usually referred to the

restoration of previously good relations. It is difficult to see how this could possibly apply to Australian history.”

Indeed.

Next time we are urged to ponder who we are and how far we've come as a nation, remember the 30-year-old report of the royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody and its shelved recommendations.

Remember the 474 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have died because the nation institutionally turned its back on most of what it advised.

And remember that the past is not another country. In Australia, it feels ever present no matter how much so many try to forget.

For that is where we live. And that is who we are.