

OPINION

All Australians must seize chance for fresh start with First Nations community

By Rona Glynn-McDonald
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Did you hear the counter tick quietly over again on Wednesday, from 438 to 439? Not many did. That's the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody since the Royal Commission in 1991.

Number 439 was a 47-year-old man near Broome. Earlier this month number 438 was a 19-year-old Noongar man, the youngest child of six, who died alone, without mental health support, his first stint in an adult jail and only months away from release.

Yet for all the blanket coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement and the "racial justice reckoning" it is bringing in Australia, another young black life with hopes and dreams has been forgotten.

You'd be forgiven for thinking more deaths in custody, right on the heels of the groundswell of outrage triggered by the murder of George Floyd, would have grabbed headlines. But this sort of injustice is not newsworthy in Australia. And with the announcement of the new Closing the Gap targets – a woeful goal of 15 per cent reduction in Indigenous incarceration in 11 years time – we should be bracing for many more black lives lost before any great reckoning comes.

Black Lives Matter led to an uprising of people standing in solidarity with black, brown and Indigenous lives across the US and the globe. Within days, a wave of Australians attended protests and created a collective re-posting frenzy on social media. It took the murder of a black man in America for Australians to notice that the same injustices exist in our shores.

But also within that lies a hope I have not felt before, that this is the beginning of a reckoning in Australia unlike those that have come before. Whether or not we see that reckoning will depend on what happens next.

While my organisation, Common Ground, experienced an unprecedented amount of traffic to our website, the trend of supporting black lives in Australia is already fading. With it will fade an opportunity to couple the movement with

substantive changes in our systems, to truly recognise historical and current injustices, and support a movement towards a better future.

Over the past month we have seen organisations across every sector in Australia rapidly launch diversity and inclusion strategies. But for all the good intentions, changing a face means nothing if we don't also change our hearts and minds, and the actions that underpin our everyday lives.

Unless these gestures are accompanied by the harder task of a national truth-telling, we can never truly recognise the injustice faced by First Nations communities.

The first truth we must tell is hard for many to hear: Australia is built on stolen wealth, profiting from stolen lands and the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The figure is \$1.376 trillion in GDP as of September 2019, that has accumulated over generations of colonisation. Your bank balance, your Child Care Subsidy, your negatively-g geared investment property – none of these would have been possible without the theft of our land and the dispossession of our peoples.

Once we recognise that injustice, and sit with it regardless of how uncomfortable it may be, then comes another hard truth: true allyship must come with just compensation.

As an Aboriginal woman I have watched my family held back within every system and sector within Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait people are deprived of the ability to build wealth and determine our own futures in the same way other Australians are afforded. Our people experience over-administration by government and we are forced into systems designed to hold us back. These systems, built on racial injustice, perpetuate the gaps we see across society.

Stolen wealth, stolen futures.

While the truth rings hard, there is also hope: there are hundreds of First Nations-led organisations working to restore justice. None of them are adequately resourced. All of them could use your financial support.

To shift this moment into lasting change and move to a place where we are actively backing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, your outrage needs to turn into active support.

This is just the beginning of our national reckoning, to look at our past and back a better future. Sitting in outrage isn't a way forward. For this movement to transcend a moment, allyship must be coupled with compensation.

Rona Glynn-McDonald is a Kaytetye woman from Central Australia and founder of Common Ground, an Aboriginal-led organisation capturing and sharing First Nations culture to educate wider Australia.