



(IMAGE: Gunnar Ries, Flickr)

## Amy McQuire On Don Dale: 200 Years Of Trauma Through A CCTV Lens

By [Amy McQuire](#) on August 3, 2016 New Matilda [Aboriginal Affairs](#)

The *Four Corners* revelations are disturbing but not shocking. They are the product of a system that has continually excused the perpetrators of violence, writes **Amy McQuire**.

Aboriginal affairs moves at a glacial pace – and the vast majority of problems are always under the surface. The mainstream media only sees what is easily visible to them, the clichéd tip of the iceberg.

Last week, however, the nation swam below that surface, and was outraged. For once, the violence rort on our people was given the attention it urgently needed. There was shock at the brutality meted out on vulnerable Aboriginal children, locked up in conditions not fit for animals, treated as sub-human, relegated to nothing.

The pain of our people, built upon 200 years of trauma, bleeding through each generation, compounding and reproducing in complex ways, suddenly culminated in the CCTV images that slowed a nation down until you could hear the pulsing, hidden heartbeat of Aboriginal Australia.

*Four Corners*' shocking report came after an election campaign in which Aboriginal issues were rubbed off the agenda, after an Abbott and Turnbull government that slashed \$500 million from the black budget – including to crucial legal aid services – after under-the-radar attacks on land rights throughout the country, after the WA government's threats and then roadmap to shut down hundreds of remote communities, after draconian and punitive attacks on the welfare state using Aboriginal people as guinea pigs for the rest of the population, after exponential rises in the numbers of Aboriginal children ripped away from their families, and the corresponding explosion in the jailing rates of not just Aboriginal men but women and children, the lifeblood of communities.

None of these disgusting, disgraceful, genocidal policies and positions led to the level of outrage we are now seeing. They should have, but as usual, they didn't. Aboriginal media – including Tiga Bayles at 98.9 FM – and outlets like the Guardian and the ABC's NT branch, also had reported on the violence, and had been completely ignored.

Regardless, last week's *Four Corners* seemed to be a turning point in the way Australia sees Aboriginal people. There seemed to be a concession that finally, First Nations mob could be

believed over the lies of the authorities. For a white population who don't often experience the contact with the justice system that our communities do, it was easier, until last week, to confine the reality of state-sanctioned violence to a memory, consigned to a past before the Apology.

But it is not in the past. It is here, before your eyes, and you can no longer get away with the question 'Why Weren't We Told?'

This time around the media seems to understand, albeit shallowly, that racism is not some aberration confined to the jurisdiction of redneck areas like the Northern Territory. It is not a problem of the individual, but deeply engrained in Australia's institutions and propped up by power.

A compliant media, so used to swallowing the propaganda of politicians and police and correctional service media releases painting over their crimes, have been, for once, an asset to our people. The fact Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion is finally being held accountable for his many transgressions in the portfolio has been phenomenal to see. I don't recall another time in Australia's history where the abuse of Aboriginal people has led to the dumping of a minister (albeit, sadly from only one portfolio) and even the potential downfall of a government. Usually the abuse of Aboriginal people does the opposite and leads to promotions and praise, which is why 'bashing the blacks' has always been such a popular electoral tool. It's also ironic that the CLP broke 11 years of ALP stronghold in the Territory by targeting predominately Aboriginal bush seats in 2008. Now it is Aboriginal affairs that could signal their demise, and push them into the political wilderness for hopefully another decade.

But now, of course, the outrage is slowing. The narrow Royal Commission – first headed by a man who showed leniency to five white kids convicted of bashing an Aboriginal man to death in an Alice Springs riverbank – has resigned, to be replaced by Mick Gooda and Justice Margaret White. Kamilaroi woman and deputy CEO of Legal Aid ACT Louise Taylor [writes in the Guardian](#), "Gooda in particular might have some work to do. He's not legally trained, is known for his consensus style of operation, and could yet face a challenge to his role from Territory lawyers about his very public call for the NT government to be sacked."

There is a feeling among our mob that the Royal Commission was a convenient way for Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to be seen to be doing something, without actually doing it. This cynicism is well founded in history.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, despite investigating 99 individual black deaths, found no person accountable. Not one, despite the black death toll.

In the aftermath of last week, and the debate over the Royal Commission, I spoke to Jan Mayman. Mayman is a freelance advocacy journalist who won the Gold Walkley in 1984 for her reportage on the Death in Custody of John Pat, an Aboriginal child who died of horrific injuries in a Roebourne cell after being bashed by off-duty police officers.

Mayman was able to produce that journalism with the backing of the *Age* and its editor Mike Smith. A picture of John Pat's friend Peter Coppin, who was arrested with the teenager, was published on the front page. It showed him brutalised, with patches of hair missing. We later re-published that photo in the NSW Aboriginal Land Council's magazine Tracker. Mr

Coppin later died mysteriously in 1991 in the bush – and Mayman to this day remains suspicious about it.

Mayman relied heavily on sources within Roebourne and prominent Aboriginal activists like Rob Riley, and the academic nun Dr Veronica Brady, who pushed for *Four Corners* to investigate the death and others around the country. The subsequent broadcast ‘Black Death’, by David Marr, not only delved into John Pat’s death, but also Lloyd Boney in Brewarrina and Eddie Murray in Wee Waa. The report helped bolster the calls of Aboriginal people for action, which would later culminate in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

By that time, the four police officers and police aide charged over the manslaughter of John Pat had been acquitted. It was the first time in history that police had even been charged over a black death in custody. After the *Four Corners* report went to air, the WA Police Union launched a defamation action against the production team, including Mayman. It was later dropped after the Royal Commission published its report which included the investigation into John Pat’s death in 1991.

The RCIADIC didn’t lead to any prosecutions of police or prison officers, and only two commissioners actually recommended further investigation.

To this day there has only been one other occasion in which a police officer has been charged over the death of an Aboriginal person – the case of Mulrunji Doomadgee in Palm Island, and only after an uprising from Palm Island residents, two coronial inquiries, an independent review, strong media backing, rallies from Aboriginal people across the country, and continual public outrage. The man acquitted, Snr Sgt Chris Hurley, is now stationed on the Gold Coast and has been in and out of court for other matters. He is due back in court in November over assault charges.

Meanwhile, Aboriginal people, including women [like Ms Dhu](#), continue to die in custody. Once again, no one has ever been held accountable. No one has ever been convicted. Very few have even been charged.

That is why the violence we saw on *Four Corners* last week was not shocking to our mob, although it was still deeply distressing and painful.

It is also why a Royal Commission seems ultimately about placating white outrage, rather than actually providing justice for blackfellas. Until someone is held accountable, until this is seen as an option when an Aboriginal person is brutalised in custody, it will continue to happen.

Maybe a Royal Commission is not the obvious step.

While Aboriginal children continue to fill the nation’s juvenile justice system, many of them on remand without ever being charged, maybe we need to apply the same standards to police and prison staff.

Why should they get away with acts of violence Australia would never accept from others?