Confronting images from juvenile detention go round the world
Bruce Duncan

Not only have Australians been shocked by the cruel behaviour against Indigenous children in the Don Dale juvenile detention centre in the Northern Territory, but also images from the Four Corners program have stunned TV audiences around the world. How could children be subject to such appalling treatment in government institutions? Some 97 percent of those in juvenile detention in the NT are Indigenous.

The Four Corners images were particularly shocking for Indigenous people. In a painful lecture at the University of New South Wales on 29 July, Stan Grant spoke of his “pulsating rage” at the events, and how it recalled how his own family and people had suffered over two centuries. He called for a truth and reconciliation commission that would fully remember the truth about white settlement and its continuing effects, the “endemic child suicide, intractable disadvantage, and choking jail cells” today. What is recognition, he asked, without truth?

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull immediately called a royal commission into the conduct in the Northern Territory. Calls for the terms of reference for the commission to include other States would have extended the timeline for the enquiry, and the Commonwealth Government argued that it needed a speedy result for the NT situation, and that further enquiries could follow in other States as needed.

Two new people have been appointed as co-commissioners to head the royal commission into NT juvenile detention – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner, Mick Gooda, and Margaret White, a former justice of the Supreme Court of Queensland. They replaced Brian Martin, who stood down lest there be a perception of a conflict of interest in his role.

Answers needed about systemic abuse

We need answers about why earlier reports about human rights abuses of children in NT juvenile detention were not acted upon by the NT government. Why were prison staff using practices akin to torture, such as children placed in solitary confinement for long periods (without even water, at times, despite the heat), and being strapped to restraint chairs?

The NT children’s commission earlier found that children as young as 14 had been tear-gassed, had hoods placed over their heads, or were kept in solitary confinement without water for up to 72 hours. The commissioner recommended Don Dale be closed. Why was this report ignored?

Why were children as young as ten placed in such a severe and frightening environment? The NT government has now banned the use of the restraint chair, but only for juveniles.

The shock of the Don Dale exposé has torn from our hearts the delusive complacency that Indigenous Australians have a fair go like others, and that giving them recognition in our Australian Constitution will make a meaningful difference. Certainly, recognition in the Constitution could make a significant symbolic statement of reconciliation in Australia, but it must be coupled with real outcomes in health, education, opportunity, and participation.

It is well past time that Australia took the reconciliation process forward, recognising the tragic consequences of white settlement on Indigenous peoples, and doing the right thing by their disadvantaged descendants today. The truth will help set all of us free – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – from the injustices and trauma of the past.
Heartlessness versus homelessness
Tony French
Over the last few months, I have been walking regularly at night down Swanston Street in the City. What is noticeable is the great number of people, invariably male, with blankets and bags, sleeping rough in doorways and on the pavement. This raises the question, why so many now?

Should we be locking people up in prisons at all?
Rob Hulls & Elena Campbell
Footage aired last week of children being abused in a Northern Territory prison sent shockwaves around the nation. These images forced us to grapple with the problem as if it were breaking news, despite the fact that so many people knew so much about it for so long.

Food insecurity: a view from the soup van
Livia Carusi & Danusia Kaska
Among the various church and community groups helping support disadvantaged groups in Melbourne, the soup vans of the St Vincent de Paul Society have for over 40 years been feeding people who are down on their luck. Livia Carusi and Danusia Kaska explain why.

Why the debates about Islam have gone off the rails
Allan Patience
Modernity’s blindsiding of in-depth analyses of humanity’s great religious traditions has plunged the world into a crisis of devastating dimensions. Globally, coalitions of the willing and the cajoled are being pushed into endless wars against terrorists, which in turn provoke organised and ‘lone-wolf’ terrorist reactions, often on an apocalyptic scale. No one seems to realise this is rapidly becoming a case of the crazily blind leading the crazily blind.

Pope Francis in Poland: on immigrants & Islam
Bruce Duncan
Given the widespread feeling in Poland against Muslim immigrants and recent Islamist terrorist attacks, Pope Francis undertook a tricky trip in July for World Youth Day. As Bruce Duncan writes, Pope Francis did not resile from his insistence that Europe must open its borders to people fleeing persecution, war, and acute hardship.

Submission by Michele Houllebecq
Reviewed by Jamie Pearce
If, like, Jamie, you are interested in what is happening to religious affiliation in the twenty-first century, then consider reading this novel. The author, Michele Houllebecq, has renounced his former atheism, and now describes himself, as agnostic. He says that he is showing the disasters produced by the liberalisation of values, and chronicling the return of religion to contemporary European politics. This novel, Jamie says, is clearly a story of that return.