

Australian government appoints indigenous bureaucrat to juvenile detention inquiry

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Less than four days after appointing former Northern Territory (NT) chief justice Brian Martin to head a royal commission into the sadistic abuse of boys inside the NT's juvenile detention centres, the Liberal-National Coalition government was forced to replace him yesterday.

The inquiry will now be conducted by two co-commissioners, notably top-level indigenous bureaucrat Mick Gooda, who has been the federal government's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner for almost seven years. He will front the inquiry alongside another senior ex-judge Margaret White, who was a member of the Supreme Court, the highest court in the state of Queensland, for more than 20 years.

The government was confronted by widespread hostility to the inquiry, which Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced last week. Its obvious purpose was to try to defuse public outrage over the physical assaults, tear-gassing, illegal solitary confinement and other abuses committed against children as young as 10, mostly indigenous, that were broadcast on the Australian ABC's "Four Corners" program last week. Protests in cities around Australia last weekend, denouncing both the abuses and the royal commission, provided a glimpse of the widespread anger and disgust.

Gooda's appointment is an equally blatant bid to head off that hostility by putting an indigenous face on the royal commission, whose assigned task is to whitewash the abuses and protect those politically responsible. Above all, it is to cover over the basic class issues involved in the brutal treatment of some of Australia's most impoverished and oppressed layers of the working class, both indigenous and non-indigenous.

Having presided over the NT's highest court for six

years, from 2004 to 2010, under an NT Labor government, when some of the broadcast abuses occurred, Martin was too obviously associated with those responsible. In resigning, he cited perceived bias and conflicts of interest.

But Gooda is no less responsible for the abuse that pervades the entire juvenile detention and prison system, and not just in the NT. As social justice commissioner—one of the nine heads of the official Australian Human Rights Commission—Gooda's job was supposedly to monitor the human rights abuses being perpetrated against indigenous people.

During Gooda's tenure, the sickening treatment of boys in the NT facilities, and similar brutality in other states, was already publicly documented. Most recently, a report by the NT children's commissioner into the solitary confinement of boys for up to 17 days and the tear-gassing of six teenagers was presented to the NT government last September, as reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Gooda is part of a thin layer of Aboriginal bureaucrats, academics and business people who have been integrated into the state apparatus and political establishment to suppress any opposition by indigenous people to their appalling social conditions. As social justice commissioner, he has been paid between \$247,810 and \$339,460 per year, putting him in the top 1 percent of income recipients in Australia.

A vast class gulf exists between "indigenous leaders" like Gooda and the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who live in poverty-stricken working class suburbs, rural towns and remote settlements without access to jobs and proper social services.

Imprisonment rates are soaring as governments and their police, prison and judicial apparatuses respond to

the worsening social problems and deepening discontent with increasingly repressive laws and brutal policing and sentencing practices. Another member of the well-off stratum of indigenous leaders is NT Chief Minister Adam Giles, who is a vehement proponent of the “law and order” agenda.

Gooda has a record of serving in top government jobs for more than 30 years, during which time the conditions of life for indigenous people and the working class as a whole have deteriorated. Before being appointed by the Rudd Labor government to the Human Rights Commission post in 2009, Gooda was the CEO of a federally-funded Aboriginal health research centre. Before that, he was the CEO of the now defunct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission established by the Hawke Labor government in 1990 as a token form of indigenous representation.

Gooda previously co-chaired the “Close the Gap” program, launched in 2008 by the Rudd government, officially aimed at raising the employment, education, health and life expectancy of indigenous people. Most of the seven limited targets are not being met, and indigenous employment levels have fallen further, from 53.8 percent in 2008 to 47.5 percent in 2012–13, because Aboriginal youth and workers are among the worst affected by the ongoing destruction of jobs in mines and other basic industries.

Labor Party leader Bill Shorten immediately welcomed the revamping of the royal commission, as a means of overcoming the “great scepticism in the community” about it. Shorten’s response underscored the underlying bipartisan effort to employ the royal commission to head off the public outrage. “Labor is more confident about this inquiry now the government has decided ... to include now an Aboriginal co-commissioner,” he said. Shorten last weekend proposed the appointment of indigenous co-commissioners so that the inquiry would not be perceived as a “con job.”

Black nationalist groups also rushed to praise the appointment of Gooda and White. Jackie Huggins, the co-chair of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, said she was “delighted.” She told the *Guardian Australia*: “I know these two people personally and I know they will bring to the inquiry the experience, rigour, and integrity that is required to do this.”

The enthusiastic support for Gooda, a tried and trusted functionary of the state apparatus, is an attempt to divert the anger and outrage over the abuse of Aboriginal juveniles along the lines of divisive black nationalism. The organisers of last weekend’s protests, the so-called Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance, blamed “whites” for the brutality, and depicted the violence as a purely racial issue. In reality the treatment meted out to indigenous youth is part and parcel of the increasingly repressive measures used against working class youth regardless of their skin colour, language and cultural background.

Gooda’s appointment recalls that of a similar figure, Pat Dodson, now a Labor senator and shadow junior minister. Dodson was one of the five commissioners on the Hawke government’s 1987–91 Aboriginal Deaths in Custody royal commission, which ensured there were no prosecutions for 100 killings at the hands of police and prison officers over the previous decade. That inquiry brought down more than 300 recommendations that strengthened the powers of the authorities, while adding a layer of indigenous officials to the regime. Since then, the number of Aboriginal deaths in custody each year has only increased, and the rate of indigenous incarceration has more than doubled.

Turnbull’s royal commission debacle has heightened concerns in ruling circles over the capacity of his fragile and faction-riddled government to deliver the far tougher measures, including sweeping budget cuts. In today’s *Australian Financial Review*, chief political correspondent Phillip Coorey said the first cabinet meeting for three months had both bungled the royal commission and “mishandled” the rejection of ex-Prime Minister Rudd’s bid for nomination as UN secretary-general.

Far from the July 2 federal election resolving the crisis facing the government and political establishment as a whole, it has set the stage for an even more explosive one.



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