NT royal commission welcome, but only part of abuse fix

A quarter of a century ago, after a four-year investigation, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody delivered a report containing 339 recommendations. The commissioners described the report as "an indictment of the operation of the legal and corrective services system in respect of the most disadvantaged group in Australian society". Their recommendations included legislation to ensure imprisonment was a sanction of last resort and that police took all possible steps to eliminate violent or rough treatment of Aborigines.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called another royal commission. This one is in response to facts, testimonies and images in an investigation by the ABC's Four Corners program showing incarcerated children, most of them Indigenous, being abused and even tortured in the Northern Territory. The failure to right fundamental wrongs officially detailed so long ago is a terrible indictment.

After disturbing vision emerged of boys being tear gassed and one restrained in the Northern Territory's Don Dale detention centre, Malcolm Turnbull says a Royal Commission into youth abuse is needed. Courtesy ABC News 24, 4 Corners.

Mr Turnbull declared the revelations "shocked the whole nation". Perhaps. They are indeed shocking; but they are not surprising. After all, we know the incarceration rate of Indigenous people has doubled since that royal commission 25 years ago. We know the outcomes Indigenous Australians experience across a range of key measurements, including life expectancy, health, employment and education, are starkly below those enjoyed by the rest of the community. This multifarious gap is arguably the biggest blot on our prosperous nation.

The Age supports Mr Turnbull's rapid decision to hold the judicial inquiry, and we urge that it examine the situation nationally, not just in the NT. It is crucial the terms of reference be developed with the opposition, so that the commission has bipartisan support. We do, though, sound a note a caution. Evidently, royal commissions do not necessarily solve problems. Worse, they can be used as a political fix; they give the impression action is, or will be, taken and problems solved. That can be a cruel ruse. For example, the facility involved in this latest scandal, Don Dale detention centre, had been officially investigated twice in recent years. It is disgraceful that appropriate action was not taken.

Mr Turnbull says the inquiry will start in September. Fine, but The Age believes immediate action is required to safeguard children. The NT Corrections Minister has rightly been sacked – but, amazingly, retains other ministerial responsibilities. The footage suggests children have been criminally abused. There must be an immediate – and openly reported – police investigation. The detention centre workers shown to have behaved so unconscionably should be stood down pending that investigation.

In 2007, after making a historic apology in Parliament to the generations of Indigenous children stolen from their families, then prime minister Kevin Rudd established a campaign to close the gap between health and education outcomes experienced by Indigenous Australians and the rest of the community. The annual reports from that process show improvement in some areas. So, there are reasons for hope, and for redoubling efforts to improve the lives of these citizens. When it comes to incarceration there is not a gap, but a chasm. Imprisonment rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have soared by almost 80 per cent in the past 15 years. Only a third of the NT population is Aboriginal, yet 97 per cent of juveniles in detention there are Indigenous. That largely reflects the failed policy of mandatory sentencing, also in operation in Western Australia.

Mr Turnbull's royal commission can at best only be part of a far broader effort to redress the plight of Australia's first peoples.