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Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Inquiry into Truth and Justice Commission Bill 2024

Dear Committee Secretariat,

My name is Jennifer Jill Gordon, and I live on Gadigal Country.

Growing up in the 1950s and '60s, I learned in primary and high school about the arrival of Captain Cook, the First Fleet, the penal colony, and the privations of the early settlers.

Much later I was able to find out that my great, great, great grandfather came here as a convict in 1831, and to find out more about him. His record shows that he was convicted in London of a minor theft, but that an additional penalty was added to his sentence in the colony because of his mistreatment of some of the aboriginal inhabitants of the area. That demonstrated to me that, even in the 1830s, the authorities understood that this behaviour, whatever it might have been, constituted a crime. There can be no special pleading of a different time and different mores to justify what followed on a national scale.

In my teens I had a regular school holiday job, waiting on tables and cleaning rooms, in the guest house that my aunt and uncle owned in the Blue Mountains. They were good Christian folk, and they always employed, in rotation, two young women, around 16-18 years of age, who came for a few months and were then replaced by two more. These young women were indigenous. They were always quiet, hardworking and almost completely silent, except when speaking to each other.

Looking back, I can't understand why I was not more curious about who they were, and why they were working there. Later I realised that they must have come from an institution in which they were being trained for a life of domestic servitude. My aunt and uncle no doubt thought that they were doing good, but I don't know whether those girls were paid, how much they were paid, who received any payment and whether they girls ever had any choice in the matter. I don't really need to ask; I'm sure they did not.

From such tiny and confusing fragments I began a long journey of discovery about our shocking past, beginning in the days of the first settlement. The unfolding of our true history leaves me to ask why people of my generation were served lies upon lies in the classroom. It is not surprising that many Australians have never left those lies behind.

As a medical practitioner, I have seen the deep harm that those lies have caused. Few people really understand what intergenerational trauma means. Few people really understand how sickness and early death have dogged indigenous communities. Few people understand how malnutrition and alcohol and drug dependence were facilitated by white people. Undoing the damage done by those classroom lies requires new generations who have the opportunity to learn the truth, beginning in the classrooms of today. How lucky are our grandchildren, with access to facts and teachers to guide them.

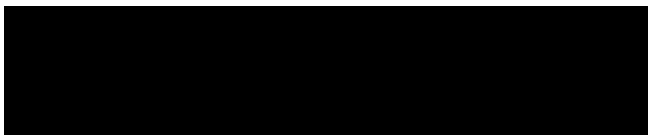
First Nations Peoples and all Australians need truth-telling processes on which to base a better understanding of our shared history. These are vital in establishing processes of justice and greater self-determination for First Nations communities.

There are models in other countries, notably South Africa, to guide a shared and active process between everyday Australians where First Nations Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians engage as equal partners. They involve truth-listening as well as truth telling to bring about transformative change.

I wholeheartedly support the Truth and Justice Commission Bill 2024 and I thank you for inviting submissions to the inquiry. Like many other Australians, I look forward to the establishment of the Commission and its recommendations to Parliament on particular matters relating to historic and ongoing injustices against First Peoples in Australia and the impacts of these injustices on First Peoples.

We will all be enriched by understanding that, in the words of Thomas Hardy ***“If a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst”***. A full look, undertaken with kindness, understanding and a forgiving heart, promises to enrich us all.

Yours sincerely

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(Jennifer) Jill Gordon