

Where are all the dollars stolen from Aborigines?

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Illustration: Tom Jellett

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What if I was to tell you about stolen wages? No, I'm not talking about some employer underpaying their workers.

I'm talking about the wages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians being taken by governments and never paid back.

During the "Protection era", the period from about the early 1900s until the 1970s, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians lived under various "Aborigines Protection Acts" and equivalents in each Australian state and territory. These acts were abolished after the 1967 referendum.

Under these regimes, wages of Indigenous workers were paid to government-administered accounts, controlled by protectors or superintendents of Indigenous missions and reserves.

It was believed Indigenous people wouldn't be able to handle their money, so governments had to look after it for them. Some people had all wages taken and others were paid only a fraction of their income. Other payments were also taken, such as child endowment and pensions. Most never saw the money again.

In theory, the money was supposed to be spent for the welfare of those people. In fact, most of it was swallowed up by governments, spent on general public projects and infrastructure and funding budgets of government departments. Some even went into consolidated revenue. Proper records weren't kept or they disappeared. Money was misused or unaccounted for. Research by historian Ros Kidd estimates the Queensland government took between \$200m and \$500m this way and found evidence of misuse of the money, including fraud. And in any case, these wages were usually lower than non-Indigenous people earned for the same work.

This is a dark part of our nation's history. It's a basic human right — and a fundamental principle of the liberal democratic system Australia inherited from Britain — that a person should be paid for their labour. It's a principle of the free market that people are entitled to earn wages and to choose how those wages are spent, not have them paid to someone else against their will.

Those principles should apply equally to all Australians. I don't think anyone in this country, whatever their politics, would disagree.

So why are governments finding it so hard to resolve and pay Indigenous people the money they are due?

Indigenous people talk about unfinished business. This is a major area of unfinished business in this country: the recovery of wages earned by Indigenous people but never paid to them. Indigenous Australians have for decades been battling for these workers and their families.

Indigenous wages and savings reparation schemes have been set up by various governments, but the conditions of these schemes and the payouts available have resulted in people receiving well below what was taken from them.

An example was the Queensland government's Indigenous Wages and Savings Reparation Scheme set up in 2002. The conditions of the scheme included the claimant being alive as of May 9, 2002, and releasing the Queensland government from any future liability. People could only apply for \$2000 or \$4000 capped payments, depending on their age. Top-up payments of \$1500 and \$3000 were offered later. About a quarter of the estimated number of people whose wages were taken and who were eligible received payment.

A scheme in Western Australia, which ran from March to November 2012, was significantly less generous again, paying only \$2000 per claimant. About 2000 applications were received but only about 1200 approved, with total payments \$2.5m.

A few thousand dollars for a lifetime of work. It's pathetic.

So a class action was launched in Queensland in 2016. The proceedings were settled in 2019 for \$190m. The class consisted of almost 12,000 claimants with about 70 per cent being claims on behalf of deceased estates.

Some people might question whether payments should be made when the worker is deceased. Why shouldn't they? The great Australian dream is to earn a living, buy a home and pass it to your children. Many Indigenous people were denied this opportunity, unable to build up a nest egg for their children like other Australians. Why shouldn't the descendants of workers whose wages were stolen be able to recover those wages? And this isn't compensation, or even reparations. It's paying back wages that were earned.

Last week a complaint on behalf of about 20,000 First Nation Australians was lodged in the Australian Human Rights Commission, claiming in the vicinity of \$400m from the West Australian government. Future actions are also likely in NSW and the Northern Territory.

We might expect a private company to resist large claims, but these are governments. The same governments who talk about closing the gap and ending Indigenous disparity. Why is it so hard for them to pay people money they took through discriminatory and immoral laws?

Many Indigenous Australians died before seeing justice, as negotiations and court cases were drawn out over decades. It doesn't have to be like this.

It's time for negotiations between Indigenous Australians and the state and territory governments to be expedited so we can put a dark period of our history behind us. It's time those who worked and contributed to the building of our nation receive the just rewards of their labour.

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