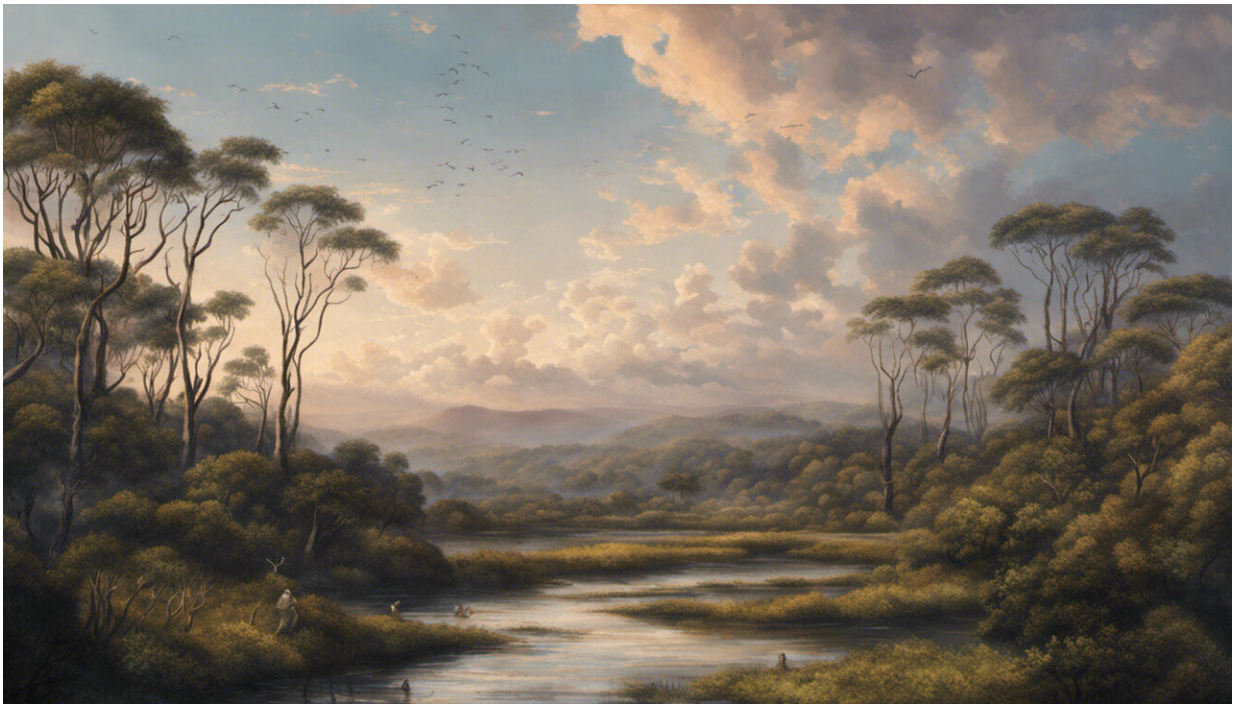


Human trafficking, over-incarceration in Australia an ongoing concern

June 17 2020, by Fiona McGaughey, Amy Maguire, Dani Larkin



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In the charged atmosphere of Black Lives Matter demonstrations, Prime Minister Scott Morrison recently made the mistake of stating there was [no slavery in Australia](#). Morrison later [apologized](#) for causing offense. He clarified that his comments related specifically to the colony of New South Wales.

The relevance of [slavery](#) to the experience of First Nations and other communities was quickly and forcefully addressed. Robust evidence demonstrated that, of course, slavery did exist in Australia.

[Research at UWA](#) is exploring Australian links to historical slavery through the [Legacies of British Slave-ownership \(LBS\)](#) database.

Academic Clinton Fernandes has [revealed](#) the British Parliament granted compensation in the 1830s to former slave owners for the loss of their slaves (but not to those who had been enslaved). Some former slave owners used this compensation to settle in Australia.

It is hardly surprising, then, that First Nations peoples in Australia were forced into indentured servitude and had their [wages stolen](#).

Another example of slavery was the practice of "[blackbirding](#)" Pacific Islander people for work on Australian sugar plantations. Today's [South Sea Islander](#) community in Queensland have asked the prime minister to familiarize himself with their experience and its legacies.

Slavery subsists

Global efforts to confront "modern slavery" challenge understandings of slavery as a purely historical experience. Modern slavery is an umbrella term used to describe human trafficking, slavery and slavery-like practices. It includes bonded labor, forced marriage and forced labor.

Just like historical slavery, modern slavery is a multi-billion-dollar industry. An estimated [40.3 million](#) men, women and children are subjected to modern slavery around the world.

In Australia, we can look to contemporary labor mobility schemes to see the continued [vulnerability](#) of Pacific Islanders to modern slavery.

Stories continue to emerge of [worker exploitation](#) in Australia.

About [15,000](#) people are subject to modern slavery in Australia, including sex trafficking, forced marriage and forced labor. Cases of forced labor predominantly occur in [industries such as](#) agriculture, construction, domestic work, meat processing, cleaning, hospitality and food services. Even more people are enslaved through the supply chains of Australian companies operating overseas.

The [Modern Slavery Act 2018](#) marks an important development. It requires large businesses and Commonwealth entities to report on risks of modern slavery in their operations and supply chains, and actions to address those risks.

The first reports under the act are expected to be published this year and will be available for public scrutiny. Unfortunately, there are no penalties for non-compliance. An [advisory group](#) established to support implementation of the act lacks civil society and survivor representation.

Domination and exploitation.

Racist ideologies reflected in current events find their roots in colonization and slavery. The broader issue of the over-incarceration of Indigenous peoples in Australia is gaining renewed attention through the current protests. Indigenous Australians make up [28% of the Australian prison population](#), meaning they are the most incarcerated people on Earth. The high rate of Indigenous deaths in custody has also gained renewed attention.

Experiences of over-incarceration and slavery are distinct and important in their own right. Yet such experiences are linked in how they reflect ongoing limitations and violations of civil and citizenship rights for First Nations and other communities in Australia.

For example, the over-incarceration of First Nations peoples contributes to their political disenfranchisement, as Australian electoral law politically silences those in prison.

Similarly, Pacific Islanders and others subject to modern slavery in Australia are often kept silent for fear of losing work and residency rights. The marginalization of their experiences implicitly authorizes their continued exploitation.

The capacity of our democracy to function equitably for disadvantaged communities is compromised by their lack of equal representation or involvement in law and policy-making.

Where to from here?

It is evident the scourge of racism and slavery is not confined to the past. Nor is it an issue that only affects other countries. It is here, it is now, and it must be tackled.

Political and legislative responses to [modern slavery](#) are encouraging. But significant gaps remain in the promotion and protection of Indigenous rights.

This is why the Uluru [Statement From The Heart](#) and its constitutional reform proposals are so important. The Uluru Statement calls for the constitutional protection and entrenchment of a Voice to Parliament and a [Makarrata Commission](#) to supervise treaty-making processes and truth-telling initiatives.

The Voice to Parliament is in its design phase with Australian government and elected First Nation representatives. Now, more than ever, First Nations require a Voice to Parliament and for that voice to be heard, respected and protected. Its constitutional entrenchment would

signal a momentous shift in Australia's engagement with the justice demands of First Nations people.

Meaningful reconciliation is impossible while Indigenous rights and perspectives are oppressed. True progress calls for learning from the world's oldest living cultures. Healing requires learning from the past and present.

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