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Charges welcomed over Palm Island death in custody

The decision by the Queensland Attorney-General to lay manslaughter charges over the death of Palm Island man, Mulrunji Doomadgee would help restore public confidence in Queensland's legal system but not its police force, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) said today.

A report by former NSW chief justice Sir Laurence Street handed to the Government yesterday found there was sufficient evidence to charge the police officer involved in Mulrunji's death with manslaughter and to secure a conviction.

This is believed to be the first time in Queensland's history that a police officer has been charged over the death of an Aboriginal person in custody.

ANTaR National Director, Gary Highland said Sir Lawrence's findings vindicated the actions of thousands of Australians who took to the streets late last year seeking a review of the original decision not to press charges.

"Indigenous and non-Indigenous people around Australia were outraged at what they felt was a denial of justice. But now the police officer involved will have to account for his actions before a judge and jury," Mr Highland said.

Mr Highland said that while the Queensland government's decisions to lay manslaughter charges and change investigation procedures over deaths in custody were welcome, this was far from the end of the matter.

"There are still unanswered questions about the inadequate initial police investigation into the death and whether any action will be taken against the police officers responsible," he said.

"In addition, the thuggish and insensitive behaviour of the Queensland Police Union has undermined those decent police men and women who are trying to develop better relationships with Indigenous communities."

Mr Highland repeated ANTaR's call for the Beattie Government to commission an independent, public inquiry into the relations between police and Indigenous people in Queensland and how these can be improved.

ANTaR also supported Indigenous Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma's call for an urgent audit of the extent to which the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody are being implemented in both policy and practice in Queensland.

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“The inquiry shouldn’t be a witchhunt. Instead it should be an objective look at what is working and what isn’t in terms of police relations with Indigenous communities and how they can be improved,” he said

Mr Highland said that other parts of Australia had seen dramatic improvements in relations between police and Aboriginal communities over a relatively short amount of time.

“It would be hard to envisage a worse situation between the police and Indigenous people than the one in the Sydney suburb of Redfern after the tragic death of TJ Hickey. However, strong leadership from the local police commander and Aboriginal community representatives was able to turn this situation around significantly,” he said.

“We need to build on this kind of success. If it can be done in Redfern, there’s no reason why it can’t be done in communities across Queensland.”

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