

The royal commission into the Northern Territory's youth detention and child protection systems has had a shaky start. The Four Corners program that spurred the federal government into action has also raised questions about its previous knowledge of reports of abuse at the Don Dale detention centre.

Chancellor of the University of Canberra Professor Tom Calma, who is co-chair of Reconciliation Australia and a Northern Territory Aboriginal elder, tells Michelle Grattan that there was "little to no interest" by the federal government and Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion into the numerous reports of abuse leading up to the Four Corners program.

He says it was "pretty much swept under the carpet at the Northern Territory level" and that the Northern Territory government should not be co-sponsors of the royal commission.

"You don't get the opportunity to have an independent royal commission very often and to have one where one of the major defendants is going to have to be the Northern Territory government ... in all consciousness they should just withdraw from the process and leave it up to the independent commissioners," he says.

Calma questions Scullion's level of interest in his portfolio and calls for the appointment of a new minister.

"His [Scullion's] interest in Indigenous affairs has really got to be questioned - and why he doesn't take note of the various reports that are out there, why he limits his consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to a small handful of people who aren't representative," he says.

"From an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective our hand is extended to government. It's not being embraced and that's what's got to change. And if that means we've got to change ministers to somebody who's going to be much more responsive, who's not going to have an attitude that consultation is about telling people what the government wants to achieve...the current minister is really not doing a good enough job."

Politics podcast: Tom Calma says Nigel Scullion should go

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Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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