What does wage justice look like?

The Northern Territory class action, though not the first such case, is still a landmark, putting the federal government in the dock.

It's safe to assume the government will want to settle. The only question is for how much. For a just settlement, compensation should be more than the money owed.

In other areas of compensation, courts award "exemplary damages" to punish a wrongdoer for perpetrating a deliberate and egregious harm and send a message to others.

Justice must also reflect the "transgenerational disadvantage" arising from this systemic wage exploitation. It has also impoverished workers' descendants, just as the profits of the Vesteys have benefited their descendants.

Which raises the issue of whether only governments should be paying compensation. Should corporations that owe their current fortunes to past exploitation not also be expected to redress injustices committed in living memory?

Indeed Samuel Vestey, the "British Lord Vestey" referred to in From little things big things grow, died only in February.

"Good ownership is good for business. Good for everyone," says the website of Vestey Holdings. "Our business is a partnership between the family and colleagues, with everyone fairly rewarded for their contribution to our collective success."

It (and other corporations) may yet be required to put its money where its mouth is by compensating generations of Aboriginal people for their unpaid, involuntary contributions to those companies' success.

Correction: this article originally stated the Whitlam Government passed the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act in 1976, however it was passed under the Fraser Government. The Whitlam Government proposed the legislation but the bill lapsed with its dismissal in November 1975. The Fraser Government then reintroduced the bill, which passed with bipartisan support in December 1976.

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Indigenous focus

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