

‘No peace without truth’: Victoria to launch Indigenous reconciliation inquiry

By Paul Sakkal
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An Australian-first inquiry backed by royal commission powers will investigate the ongoing effects of colonisation on Victoria’s Indigenous community and chart a path to reconciliation.

The Andrews government will on Tuesday launch a “truth-telling” commission that will help guide the state’s treaty negotiations and potentially examine how reparations could be paid to Indigenous people for past injustices.

The Truth and Justice Commission – modelled on the commission set up by Nelson Mandela in post-apartheid South Africa as well as those that have been held in New Zealand and Canada – will be run by eminent commissioners who will recommend reforms to improve Indigenous people’s quality of life.

It will host public hearings about social, economic and health disadvantage and the role colonisation and discriminatory government policy have played in fostering that disadvantage.

The commission will listen to Indigenous stories from the time of colonisation through the stolen generations up to the present day detailing the treatment of Indigenous Australians. It will aim to educate the public and generate momentum for legislative and cultural change.

Michael Bell, a Gunditjmara man and member of the First Peoples’ Assembly – the elected body established to drive Victoria’s treaty process – said Indigenous Victorians continued to experience the “direct” effects of colonisation.

He said these included the over-representation of Indigenous people in jail, the high proportion of Indigenous children in foster care and the constraints on older Indigenous women, who he said often never had jobs and performed family care work.

“[The commission] will mean people understand and reflect on our history,” he said. “We had a society, it’s how we lived, we had structures. There was something here before 1770 and that story hasn’t been told.”

Victoria is the only state or territory that has enacted both the treaty and truth elements of the Uluru Statement from the Heart – a 2017 manifesto that called for an Indigenous “voice” in the constitution and a truth-telling commission to enable agreements between First Nations people and the federal government.



Anti-apartheid leaders Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, pictured in 1998, led South Africa's "truth" commission.

The Morrison government rejected constitutional change but hopes to legislate a voice to Parliament. It would be the latest move by an Australian government to right the wrongs of the often violent dispossession by British settlers from 1788 and the treatment of Aboriginal Australians who were not recognised as citizens until 1967.

Truth-telling commission

- Backed by royal commission-style powers.
- Will not report until after the November 2022 state election.
- Public hearings to examine lasting effects of colonisation on social, economic and health outcomes.
- Developed between Andrews government and First Peoples Assembly, the democratically elected voice for Aboriginal people in Victoria's treaty process.
- Assembly called for commission to be independent of government, hold public hearings and be culturally sensitive to First People's trauma.

The Andrews government declined to confirm if the inquiry would have the same power to compel witnesses and make recommendations as a royal commission but four sources in the Indigenous community and state government confirmed it would have those powers. The inquiry will not conclude before the November 2022 state election.

Premier Daniel Andrews and his cabinet signed off on the commission's terms of reference last week and the government is expected to announce the terms of reference for the commission on Tuesday.

The scope of the commission was developed in partnership with the assembly, which called for the inquiry to have royal commission powers, be independent of government, make recommendations for reform and be culturally sensitive to First Peoples' trauma and methods of story-telling.

Greens Senator Lidia Thorpe said the "historic" announcement could pave the way for a "genuine" treaty process in Victoria but criticised the Andrews government for its "token gesture" treaty process so far. She demanded that all 38 Aboriginal nations in Victoria be represented at the commission.



Firebrand Greens senator Lidia Thorpe.

"When the colonisers invaded, there was a war on these lands – a war that hasn't ended. But we won't achieve peace without truth," she said.

Multiple sources with direct knowledge of the commission's development, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the government had not yet launched the inquiry, said commissioners would probably seek to recommend a model to pay reparations to Indigenous people.

Last year, then-Aboriginal Affairs minister Gavin Jennings announced \$10 million would be spent on compensating members of the stolen generations.

After a meeting last month, the First Peoples' Assembly issued a statement saying: "It is important that the hunger for knowledge by the public and the willingness of Aboriginal people to tell their stories, despite the pain it will cause, be given the best possible setting for the truth to emerge."



Co-chair of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, Aunty Geraldine Atkinson.

The Assembly's co-chair, Aunty Geraldine Atkinson, said in the same communique that the commission could "reset relationships between Aboriginal people and the wider community".

Marcus Stewart, her co-chair, said "there's been a deliberate covering up of the long-held trauma of past events or policies and how they continue to affect" Indigenous Australians.

Melbourne University Professor Marcia Langton said on Monday that the commission would be a significant "step forward" in educating the broader community about Indigenous history.

She said she was pleased the process was modelled on the South African and Canadian versions.

"There is so much of our story yet to be told and Victoria was one of the earliest frontiers and the wars here were brutal and devastating," said Professor Langton, who emphasised she was not a Victorian and did not speak on behalf of Indigenous people in this state.

“This is not about blame or prosecuting. The truth is always about healing, for everyone involved.”

Gunditjmara man Damien Bell from the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation in south-western Victoria said Indigenous people telling their stories at the commission would be reliving deep trauma, but he hoped the process would spark a community conversation similar to the Mabo decision.

“It will be like our own royal commission about what’s happened since invasion and colonisation. It will take us through to land dispossession and stolen generation and look at how the Crown has treated Indigenous people in this state,” he said.

“You’d want something stronger than recommendations at the end of it. You want the power of the truth-telling forum to cause Parliament to respond appropriately without mitigating circumstances.

“It’s exciting and frightening at the same time. We’re talking about changing the world and people, both black and white, get scared of that.”