

A Victorian treaty must deliver economic independence for First Peoples

Indigenous disadvantage has compounded in Australia over generations. That's why a self-determination fund is key



Yoorrook chair Eleanor Bourke (left) and co-chair of First People's Assembly of Victoria, Aunty Geraldine Atkinson, during launch of Yoorrook Justice Commission, 24 March, 2022.

Marcus Stewart
Mon 25 Apr 2022

At the heart of Victorian efforts to negotiate a treaty with Indigenous Australians is a commitment to ensuring First Peoples have the freedom and power to make decisions that affect our communities, our culture and our country.

Yes, we want to enjoy, celebrate and share our culture, but treaty needs to be more than that. It also needs to deliver to our people the economic independence required to achieve self-determination.

That's why a self-determination fund is a key component of what the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria is pushing for, as part of the "architecture" for treaty-making.

The self-determination fund will do two key things. It will enable traditional owners to enter treaty negotiations with the state government on a more level playing field. Beyond negotiations, it will also empower our communities to build wealth and greater capacity for future generations.

Importantly, we will be in control of it, not government.

The economic disadvantage caused by invasion isn't magically dissipating over time. On the contrary, it's been compounding over generations – with interest.

Think of running a race where not only has your opponent stolen your shoes, but they've also constructed a series of obstacles in your path. Our people were forced off their ancestral lands and faced discrimination and numerous disadvantages. Of course we couldn't keep up – we were too busy surviving. Those that reaped the benefits of that stolen wealth were able to accumulate greater wealth and pass this down to their descendants. What we were passing down was our intergenerational trauma.

Treaty is our opportunity to clear the obstacle and catch up – on our own terms. The self-determination fund will allow us to stand on our own two feet and build economic freedom and power for our kids and grandkids.

After many discussions with communities across the state, our elected assembly members have developed a preliminary proposal for the fund. Following further feedback, we will put a refined plan to the state government in coming months.

What we do know is the fund would need to be completely independent from government. It would need to be controlled by First Nations peoples. And it would need to be grounded in our culture and our way of doing business.

We're also keen for the fund to support innovative processes and programs so that First Peoples in Victoria can prosper in the modern economy. Ultimately, the fund will be a shared resource that First Peoples in Victoria can access in line with their priorities and aspirations.

The fund is just one element of the treaty framework we're currently negotiating with the state government.

In addition, the nation's first truth-telling process is already under way with the Yoorrook Justice Commission examining the many injustices inflicted on our people since invasion. This commission is tasked with offering solutions that can dismantle the structural racism that continues to hold our people back.

The government has recently given in-principle agreement to the creation of a completely independent and First Peoples-led "Treaty Authority", which will act as an independent umpire to facilitate negotiations and resolve disputes. Importantly, the authority will sit outside of the usual government bureaucracy. This function is the first relinquishing of power by the state as part of the journey towards treaty.

Another part of our treaty framework is the hybrid model. We're talking about treaties, plural. This means we're pushing for both a statewide treaty as well as traditional owner treaties, negotiated by traditional owner groups and the government.

The final pillar of the treaty framework is ensuring First Peoples have a meaningful voice and political representation here in Victoria. Community discussions are still under way to determine exactly what this might look like, but it will likely involve a

permanent representative political body. This could mean a “Blak parliament” and/or reserved seats in the Victorian parliament for traditional owners and First Peoples.

These are bold and ambitious ideas. They are discussions that are long overdue. The ability to determine our own affairs – to have the freedom and power to make the decisions that affect us – is an internationally recognised human right that has been denied to us since invasion.

The journey won’t be easy but it will bring many joys and opportunities to learn. We each have a chance to share in and celebrate the oldest living culture on the planet.

Whether your family has lived here five years or 50,000 years, treaty will bring us closer together. Let’s get it done.

- **Marcus Stewart** is a proud *Nira illim bulluk* man of the *Taungurung Nation* and co-chair of the *First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria*