

‘Woke tokenism’: Victorian MP Tim Smith to defy Liberal party support for treaty authority

After weeks of prevaricating, state’s opposition expresses support for independent body to oversee treaty negotiations



Outgoing Liberal MP Tim Smith says he cannot condone the establishment of a treaty authority in Victoria.

Benita Kolovos

Tue 21 Jun 2022

The Victorian Coalition has announced it will support the establishment of an independent authority to oversee the state’s treaty negotiations, although outgoing Liberal MP Tim Smith has vowed to cross the floor to vote against the bill, describing it as “woke tokenism”.

The state’s opposition leader, Matthew Guy, and Nationals leader, Peter Walsh, confirmed the Coalition’s position on the Treaty Authority bill after a party room meeting on Tuesday.

“The Liberals and Nationals are committed to advancing the treaty process in Victoria in a way that supports self-determination and reconciliation while strengthening community and connection to country,” Walsh, the party’s spokesperson for Aboriginal affairs, said in a statement.

It took the opposition several weeks to firm its position on the treaty bill, which allows for the establishment of an authority with the legal powers necessary to act as

an independent umpire between the government and traditional owners as they work through treaty negotiations. It will be debated in parliament's lower house on Wednesday.

Earlier this month, the shadow treasurer, David Davis, suggested negotiations should be handled by parliament rather than an independent authority.

Smith, who will leave parliament at the upcoming state election after crashing his luxury car while under the influence of alcohol, said he will be crossing the floor for the first time in eight years to vote against the bill.

The member for Kew said he was not the only Coalition MP to hold concerns about the bill, which he described as "woke tokenism that is set to divide Victorians based on race".

"It won't close the gap in any way, shape or form. You don't enter treaties with your own fellow citizens. Treaties are entered into between nation-states," he told reporters outside parliament.

"Aboriginal Australians are my fellow Australian citizens. They are our brothers and our sisters. You don't enter into treaties with your fellow citizens."

Smith there should be recognition of Aboriginal Victorians and their distinct culture and history in the state's constitution, rather than by treaty.

"We can't turn back the clock, bad things, horrible things happened and you can't change history. You've just got to learn from it," he said.

Following the party room meeting, Walsh said all Australian states, including Victoria, were falling short of reaching Closing the Gap targets on a range of measures, including health, education, housing, employment and incarceration rates.

He said these issues needed to be addressed as Victoria worked through the treaty process.

"They all lead to an Indigenous person not having the same life expectancy of other Australians and we need to improve that," Walsh said.

He refused to say whether Smith or others spoke out against the bill in the party room.

"Tim, as an individual, is entitled to his opinions," he said.

Guy said he hoped debate on the bill would "respectful and reasonable".

The bill comes after the government struck an agreement with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, the body elected by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to help develop a treaty framework.

The First Peoples' Assembly co-chair, Geraldine Atkinson, a Bangerang and Wiradjuri elder, welcomed the opposition's support for the bill.

"Treaty is about driving fundamental outcomes for our community by putting Aboriginal people in the driver's seat. This is the right side of history," she told Guardian Australia.

Victoria's premier, Daniel Andrews, said bipartisan support for the bill was important given its significance.

"Victorians are always stronger when we stick together," he said. "They're really important arrangements for the future."

Smith has been increasingly outspoken since returning to parliament after the crash, declaring himself "uncancelled" on Sky News' Outsiders program last month. Following the federal election, he wrote for Spectator Australia that the Liberal party should "stop obsessing with the woke causes of inner-urban elites" and focus its efforts on the outer suburbs.

This is despite his own seat of Kew falling within the inner city.

"I've got five months left and to some degree, the shackles are off, so to speak and I can say exactly what I think," Smith said on Tuesday.