
The Yoo-rrook Justice Commission: some facts about truth-telling

By Tony Wright
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What does Yoo-rrook mean?

In the Wemba Wemba language Yoo-rrook means “truth”. The Wemba Wemba, also known as the Wamba Wamba, are a people from north-west Victoria and the NSW Riverina.



The five commissioners will operate the inquiry independently of government.

What is the justice commission?

It will be the first “truth-telling” process of its type in Australia, charged with investigating both historical and ongoing injustices committed against Aboriginal Victorians across all areas of social, political, cultural and economic life, starting with colonisation. It is specific to the state of Victoria. The process is partly modelled on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up by Nelson Mandela in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as those that have been held in New Zealand and Canada.

Who will run the inquiry?

Wergala/WambaWamba elder Professor Eleanor Burke, YortaYorta and DjaDja Wurrung man Dr Wayne Atkinson, Wurundjeri and Nguralillum Wurrung woman

Sue-Anne Hunter, Palawa woman Professor Maggie Walter and former Supreme Court judge Professor Kevin Bell have been appointed to the commission.

The commissioners will operate independently from government, and will be afforded the full power of a Royal Commission, with powers to compel government and others such as churches or schools to appear or produce documents and to answer questions.

Though the commission will be able to make recommendations for reform, it will not have the power to order reparations, punish individuals, or implement reforms.

Why is it important?

A statement prepared by the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria declares that truth-telling is critical for developing an official record and shared understanding across the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in Victoria of post-colonial history, so it cannot be denied or minimised.

“The colonisation of the Australian continent began over 250 years ago. Since this time the First Peoples of our continent have been systematically murdered [and] dispossessed of their lands, natural resources and cultural practices, with disastrous and ongoing impacts.

“Truth-telling will:

Recognise the injustices that have been largely ignored and actively hidden from the Australian consciousness and will change how the history of Australia is viewed.

Empower individuals to openly share their own stories and have their truth acknowledged.

Expose what has happened as a result of colonisation, what the causes were, who is responsible, the harm that was caused, and how these structures continue to impact the First Peoples of Victoria.“

What can the commission do?

The commission will be able to make broad recommendations about practical actions and reforms required to redress and confront systemic injustices.

These include recommendations about cultural restoration and healing, public awareness and education, law and institutional reform and subject matters that should be included in Treaties.

What is its relationship with a proposed Treaty with First Nations people?

Although the commission begins ahead of Treaty negotiations, its recommendations are expected form a basis for any such negotiations in Victoria.

The Victorian Government committed in 2018 to address historic wrongs and ongoing injustices specifically through the treaty process.

The Yoo-rrook Justice Commission was announced on March 9 this year in a joint statement by the Premier, Daniel Andrews, and the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, the state's first and only democratically-elected body for Aboriginal people.

In doing so, Victoria became the first and only Australian jurisdiction to embrace the Treaty and Truth elements of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which calls for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution. The joint statement declared that "without truth, without justice, there can be no Treaty".

How long will the inquiry take?

It is expected to begin in July 2021 following the issuing of letters patent under the Inquiries Act 2014, with its final report due three years after establishment. An interim report is expected to be made in the middle of next year.