

Media Release

The Hon James Merlino MP
Acting Premier
Minister for Education
Minister for Mental Health



Friday, 14 May 2021

HISTORIC TRUTH-TELLING COMMISSIONERS APPOINTED

Today marks the beginning of a stronger future for Victoria, as we take the next step in an historic journey towards truth, justice and healing for Aboriginal Victorians.

The Aboriginal-led Yoo-rrook Justice Commission has been established as Australia's first truth-telling process. Five Commissioners have been appointed to begin examining current and past injustices against First Nations people— and charting the course for a new shared future for all Victorians.

The Commissioners have been selected by an independent panel and carry knowledge and experience across the fields of law, sociology and systemic disadvantage, land rights, history, trauma and healing.

Respected Wergaia/Wamba Wamba Elder Professor Eleanor Bourke has been appointed as the Chair of the Commission – bringing with her decades of outstanding leadership and tireless dedication to advancing Aboriginal education and cultural heritage. She is joined by Commissioners:

- Dr Wayne Atkinson – a Yorta Yorta/Dja Dja Wurrung Elder and Traditional Owner and accomplished academic with substantial knowledge and experience in human rights, land justice, cultural heritage and Koori oral history programs.
- Ms Sue-Anne Hunter – a Wurundjeri and Ngurai illum Wurrung woman recognised as a leader in trauma and healing practices.
- Distinguished Professor Maggie Walter – a Palawa (Tasmanian Aboriginal) woman descending from the Pairrebenne People of the North East Nation, and a Distinguished Professor of Sociology, and leading expert in systemic disadvantage, inequality and Indigenous Data Sovereignty.
- Professor the Honourable Kevin Bell AM QC – the Director of the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law in the Faculty of Law at Monash University and a former justice of the Supreme Court of Victoria.

Acting Premier James Merlino, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Gabrielle Williams and co-chairs of the First Peoples' Assembly Marcus Stewart and Geraldine Atkinson today announced the Commissioners and released the letters patent at Yarra Bend Park, a site of sorrow and assimilation for First Nations people.

The site was the location of the Merri Creek Protectorate State and Merri Creek Aboriginal School, where state-sponsored practices saw many Aboriginal communities moved off their lands, often cut off from culture, family and kinship connections.

The work of the Commission will be backed by more than \$58 million in *the Victorian Budget 2021/22*. This investment will support extensive and culturally-safe listening processes across the state, ensuring all Victorians are able to participate in this nation-leading process.

Yoo-rrook is the Wemba Wemba/Wamba Wamba word for 'truth', because without truth, there can be no Treaty. And without Treaty, there can be no justice. It is only by shining a light on our greatest shames – both in the past and importantly those that live on in the present – that we can work towards healing.

The Commission has been tasked with investigating two broad streams of work: both the contemporary and historical injustices committed against Aboriginal Victorians since colonisation – across all areas of social, political and economic life.

Independent of Government and with all the powers of a Royal Commission, the Yoo-rrook Commissioners will make recommendations for institutional and legal reforms to address these injustices, as well as providing an interim report with initial findings that should be considered as immediate priorities through the Treaty making process.

The Commissioners were appointed following an Expression of Interest process and assessment by an independent panel, which made recommendations to the Acting Premier and were this week approved by the Governor of Victoria.

The elected First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria has played a critical role in the process to this point, including in developing the Commission's remit, and ensuring there has been consultation with Aboriginal communities about the planning and design.

Victoria is the first and only jurisdiction to have actioned the Treaty and Truth elements of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The Yoo-rrook Justice Commission builds on the state's nation-leading work on Treaty.

It will deliver an interim report to Government by 30 June 2022, and a final report by 30 June 2024.

The Letters Patent are available at www.aboriginalvictoria.vic.gov.au/truth-and-justice

Quote attributable to Acting Premier James Merlino

"The appointment of the Yoo-rrook Justice Commissioners and the establishment of Australia's first truth-telling Commission is an historic day for Victoria and all Australia – and the beginning of a fairer Victoria for all."

Quote attributable to Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Gabrielle Williams

"The Commissioners bring enormous knowledge and experience and are empowered by comprehensive terms of reference to examine the injustices of today and those that came before – they will now begin their work charting a path towards justice and healing."

Quote attributable to First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria Co-Chair Marcus Stewart

"The Yoo-rrook Justice Commission demonstrates what can be achieved through a true and genuine partnership between the State Government and the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria. The future is bright for Treaty in this State."

Quote attributable to First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria Co-Chair Geraldine Atkinson

"I never thought I'd see a truth-telling process in my lifetime. This is a testament to our elders and ancestors who have long fought for our rights and today is a significant milestone on our journey towards Treaty in Victoria."

Quote attributable to Yoo-rrook Justice Commission Chair Professor Eleanor Bourke

"The important and historic work of the Yoo-rrook Justice Commission will be a step towards creating future generations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians who can benefit from a truthful education about our State."