

Treaty: South Australian Government enters historic discussions with Aboriginal nations

By Caroline Winter
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South Australia is making history, with the State Government entering treaty discussions with Aboriginal nations to help address past injustices.

The Government has set aside \$4.4 million over five years to support the treaty process and the appointment of an independent commissioner for treaty. At this stage it is unclear what the treaties will cover or whether compensation will be included, but South Australian Indigenous leaders said the process would set a positive course for the future.

Major Sumner, a Ngarrindjeri man at the Murray mouth, said the word treaty alone has important meaning.

"Even just with a mention of treaty, that opens up a different world for us to talk and put things in place, do all sorts of negotiations around how we structure our lives," he said.

Mr Sumner joined other Aboriginal elders at the start of historic negotiations between the State Government and Indigenous communities.

The chairman of Narungga nations on the Yorke Peninsula, Tauto Sansbury, wants an open, transparent process about everything that has affected Aboriginal people.

"I think it's going to mean the satisfaction of acknowledging that Australia was basically invaded," he said.

"And that the process of sitting down and negotiating a final outcome for us - because we've been totally dispossessed of everything - and coming up with a good solution that could move our community, children and families forward."

The South Australia Government said negotiations would be open-ended, but what form any treaty would take or whether compensation would be included, is not yet clear.

The State's Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Kyam Maher, said it was hoped a treaty would be signed off on by the end of next year.

"If it is treaties with Aboriginal nations in South Australia, we recognise that will take some time, but it's a process we're committed to and we'll get started from today."

He said they had no predetermined ideas about what a treaty might include or what form it would take.

"That will be part of discussions," he said.

"But there are some common things that Aboriginal people have talked about over the last couple of years about state-based treaties.

"They include things like providing a formal framework for Aboriginal people to be involved in designing and implementing policies in a whole range of areas that State Government provides services.

"Things like making sure that whatever levers or regulatory framework the State Government has at its disposal, we'll be using to provide economic development and independence for Aboriginal communities."

'Treaty should be for everyone'

Mr Sansbury said a treaty would make Australia more inclusive, both for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, but most importantly, help right many of the wrongs of the past and give first nations an important place at the table.

"Where we are at this present moment is because we've never sat down and negotiated a treaty and a good outcome for us," he said.

"If you look at the incarceration rate of Aboriginal people right across Australia, it's just growing bigger and bigger and bigger.

"Our suicide rate is one of the highest on the planet. Our homeless, everything, our education, the life expectancy.

"There are a lot of things we have to discuss in how to put them into the treaty so we can start making change."

Victoria is already on the path to becoming the first state in Australia to have a treaty with its Indigenous people, with consultations underway since the start of the year.

Mr Sumner said Victoria and South Australia were showing the way, but that there needed to be a nationwide effort.

"It's no good just having it here in South Australia and not the rest of the country, because it's the same old thing going on now, it's a divide-and-conquer thing," he said.

"Today, this treaty, it shouldn't be about winning or who's going to lose or who's going to miss out. Treaty should be for everyone across this country, negotiations set in place.

"You've got the treaty that you're going to set up here in South Australia and Victoria and the rest of the country miss out. That's going to be bring animosity between different groups and that shouldn't happen."