

Victoria moves towards treaty

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Victorian Aboriginal people have taken the first step toward reaching a treaty or treaties with the state government, in a move that could reverberate around the nation.

After two days of discussion in Melbourne, tentative agreement has been reached on the process that on some assessments could lead to an agreement within two years.

"Today marks the end of phase one," declared Jason Mifsud, executive director for Aboriginal Victoria, who moderated talks. "We've come an enormous way and we've got a long way to go."

After an initial meeting 120 days ago at regional forums in Bairnsdale, Shepparton, Horsham and Mildura, the group decided to move toward appointing a steering committee and agreed to meet again in six months.

The consensus came as Opposition leader Bill Shorten declared that inequality, injustice and a post-Constitutional settlement deserve to be in the "centre square of national politics".

"They might not change an election - but they could well change our nation," Mr Shorten told a recognition dinner in Melbourne. "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be equal, empowered partners in deciding what such a settlement should look like."

Mr Shorten said; "the insidious nature of stubborn racism" was still a reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals - regardless of the status and stature they achieve in our society.

"Every generation of Aboriginal athlete, from Doug Nicholls to Nicky Winmar to Michael Long to Adam Goodes has known this," Mr Shorten said. "And this sense of discrimination percolates down to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the street every day."

The progress in Melbourne toward a treaty, or set of agreements, came as Tanya Hosch, one of the most prominent campaigners for constitutional recognition, elevated the possibility of a treaty between Aboriginal people and Australian governments, rejecting the "false" idea the country must choose between the two options.

Ms Hosch, joint campaign director of Recognise, also expressed optimism that a referendum on constitutional recognition could still happen in 2017 as new polling reaffirms overwhelming support for change.

"For me and so many other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples who support treaty and constitutional recognition, we know that this is not an either/or

choice," Ms Hosch, a Torres Strait Islander, told a Reconciliation Week breakfast on Friday.

Natalie Hutchins, state minister for Aboriginal Affairs, was among those overwhelmed by the sense of optimism at the treaty talks and told the gathering they should be in no doubt about the government's commitment to the process of self determination.

"A marathon starts with one step and the state government has made that first step and so have we as traditional owner groups," declared Kutcha Edwards, the Indigenous artist, musician and activist.

Gary Murray applauded the Andrews government for its leadership and said a treaty could be better than land rights because it could address so many issues.

Stan Grant, who also helped moderate discussions, said the process could empower communities, resolve big historic questions, build an economic base for Aboriginal communities and "add to the completion of a sense of nationhood".