

## Truth-telling should take up to a decade, says Indigenous leader



*Geraldine Atkinson and Marcus Stewart, co-chairs of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, outside the Yoorrook Justice Commission in Fitzroy on Thursday.*

By Jack Latimore  
May 5, 2022

Achieving a statewide treaty between First Nations people and Victoria's government could take up to a decade, one of the state's Indigenous leaders believes, but he says the process is necessary to shake off the grip of colonialism.

Appearing before the Yoorrook Justice Commission in Melbourne on Thursday, Marcus Stewart, co-chair of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, said that "without treaty, what is now called Victoria will remain – in our people's hearts, minds and reality – the colony of Victoria".

"First Peoples in Victoria live in the shadow of colonisation," Stewart said, a situation that could only change with "profound structural change".

The inquiry is scheduled to conclude with a final report delivered by June 2024, a timeframe Stewart described as "too short".

Stewart agreed with a suggestion put to him by counsel assisting Tony McAvoy, SC, that the Yoorrook inquiry was constrained by a three-year timeframe under its letters patent.

“How in a three-year period do you unpack 200-plus years of the impacts of colonisation?” Stewart said. “Although we held the pen ... at no point in time did we have any decision-making over how long this should run.”

Stewart said seven to 10 years would be a more appropriate timeframe for the truth-telling process.

Under questioning over his witness statement – or balert keetyarra – Stewart told McAvoy that “there will be an evolution of negotiations” once the assembly had delivered a treaty negotiation framework that could result in a comprehensive treaty process continuing “for another 10 years”.

The inquiry heard that some potential reforms delivered by a statewide treaty could involve the provision of dedicated seats for First Peoples representatives within the Victorian parliament, while treaties with traditional owners could provide economic empowerment.

On Wednesday, the opposition’s Aboriginal affairs spokesperson, Peter Walsh, said a state Coalition government would support advancing the treaty “in a way that supports self-determination and reconciliation while strengthening community and connection to country”.

The Mathew Guy-led opposition had previously argued that the treaty must occur at a federal level. The change in policy from the opposition was significant and came as a surprise, Stewart told the inquiry.

“I never thought I would live to see the day ... we would have bipartisan support for treaty, but the productive working relationship that we’ve had from both sides so far is critical to success,” he said.

The commission has so far heard submissions from First Peoples elders Uncle Jack Charles, Uncle Johnny Lovett, Aunty Fay Carter and Aunty Alama Thorpe, who each shared their personal and family experiences of the impacts of colonisation and racially discriminatory government policies, and the trans-generational trauma that stemmed from the processes of colonisation.

The first block of the inquiry’s public hearings will conclude with Aboriginal Affairs Minister Gabrielle Williams, who will provide evidence on Friday. The commission will resume its inquiry with a second block of hearings later this month.