

Victorian government promises change will come from work of Yoorrook truth-telling commission

Aboriginal affairs minister, Gabrielle Williams, says some previous inquiries, reports and reviews were disappointing



Victorian Aboriginal affairs minister, Gabrielle Williams, told the Yoorrook commission that it could recommend extending the deadline for its final report.

Australian Associated Press

Fri 6 May 2022

The Victorian government has acknowledged some reviews of how Indigenous people have been treated were “disappointing”, while promising Aboriginal people will be properly listened to during the state’s landmark truth-telling commission.

This came after the commissioners of the Yoorrook Justice Commission said they faced push-back from Indigenous communities over the inquiry into the devastating effects of white settlement on Aboriginal people, after several other reviews have taken place.

On Friday, one commissioner, Prof Kevin Bell, said Aboriginal people were severely fatigued by having to retell their stories.

“The question that’s been asked of us by so many of these people [is], why should this make any difference and why should we participate in this process?” Bell said.

Speaking before the commission the state's Aboriginal affairs minister, Gabrielle Williams, said previous inquiries, reports and reviews were siloed to specific issues and government portfolios. She said some of them were disappointing.

"Certainly, as a representative of the government, I don't have a right to expect that there should be automatically faith in us. That is something ... that needs to be built," Williams said.

"The difference in this opportunity is the recognition that ... there is something quite fundamental, foundationally wrong that is preventing us from being able to achieve better outcomes.

"I want to reassure any Aboriginal person tuning in ... that there has never been – and there isn't through announcing this process – any doubt that you've been telling the truth. We just want to be a part of a listening exercise and change."

Yoorrook is establishing an official public record of Indigenous experiences since the start of colonisation and began public hearings with elders last week.

On Thursday, First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria co-chair Marcus Stewart called on the state government to extend the Yoorrook Justice Commission to run between five and 10 years.

Its final report is due in June 2024, with the findings to guide Victoria's Treaty negotiations. Williams said the commission could itself recommend an extension.

"I suppose what was appealing about a royal commission as a structure for this particular phase was around the ability to compel information and the like," Williams said.

"However, it needs to be said it was always open to the commission itself to make recommendations around any need to have an ongoing or extended truth-telling process."

Williams said there were two parts to the inquiry's terms of reference – to create the record about Indigenous people's experiences, and then to look at contemporary injustice and how reforms addressing it could fold into treaty negotiations.

It is up to the commission, she said, to determine how much it delves into each part with the time allocated.

She also suggested the inquiry might look at how the historical aspect folds into "any future processes that you deem are necessary to do it justice".

Yoorrook will hand down an interim report next month.