



TRANSCRIPT OF DAY 5 – WURREK TYERRANG

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DAY 5

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Yoorrook Justice Commission

CHAIR: Good morning. Good morning. We welcome everyone here today at Charcoal Lane, especially welcome you, Aunty. Today, we are continuing Yoorrook's wurrek tyerrang or public hearings at which we are receiving truth-telling from Elders and, later this week,
 5 some contextual evidence from the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and also from a representative of the Peoples' Assembly of Victoria. Before we get started, I would just like to invite Dhamangalnya Atkinson to say a few words acknowledging where we are.

COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Thank you, Commissioner. On behalf of Commissioner
 10 Hunter, who is on screen with us, who has been - is in recovery for a health issue, she has passed on the protocol acknowledging - making a general acknowledgment on behalf of the Traditional Owners in recognition of all of the Traditional Owners of the country that we are on today and pay respect to all of those past and present and future generations to come. Also to welcome one of our senior Elders here today in a place that I'm sure she knows very
 15 well. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Commissioner Atkinson and Commissioner Hunter, for enabling that. Thank you, Counsel.

20 MS FITZGERALD: Good morning, Commissioners. This morning I'm calling Gunditjmara Elder Aunty Alma Beryl Thorpe. Aunty Alma is here today with two of her support people, her grand-daughter, Lisa Thorpe and Meghan Fitzgerald. Aunty, the fellow over here, our ceremonial officer, will ask you to give the affirmation.

25 <AUNTY ALMA THORPE, AFFIRMED

ALMA THORPE: I didn't have a Bible. I didn't have to have that, did I? No.

MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, you have spent a lot of time with the Yoorrook lawyers and a lot
 30 of time with your support person telling your story and your truth, and that has all been written down in this witness statement which is in the folder in front of you.

ALMA THORPE: Okay.

35 MS FITZGERALD: You have been through that witness statement with your support person. Is what you have put in that witness statement the truth?

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

40 MS FITZGERALD: If we were going to say what your profession is, Aunty, you like to be known as a Gunditjmara activist?

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

45 MS FITZGERALD: And you've worked without pay in many Aboriginal services throughout your life?

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

MS FITZGERALD: You've had a very rich life, though, even though you were the poorest of the poor?

ALMA THORPE: I didn't hear that.

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MS FITZGERALD: You've had a rich life, even though you've worked without pay.

ALMA THORPE: Yeah, yes, yes.

10 MS FITZGERALD: You've had a life of service to the Aboriginal people of Victoria.

ALMA THORPE: Yes. Yeah. I have to say one thing there. I've been a worker all my life. Whether you get paid or not, that doesn't matter, but I'm a worker.

15 MS FITZGERALD: In fact, there's a place in Preston called Aunty Alma Thorpe's Gathering Place.

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

20 MS FITZGERALD: What's that place for?

ALMA THORPE: God, how do I explain it? Because it's been set up through the men's group of - help me, Lisa - Dardi Munwurro has set up a men's group of - and trying to reconnect men to - back to their - who they are and dealing with drug - alcohol and drugs and all that type of thing. But it's a reconnection place, and they - the people that run that, out of respect for me as a person of Fitzroy, 40-odd years ago in this country and they were the lane people and the people who lived in the lanes and they were the alcoholics.

30 And they wanted to appreciate me by having Aunty Alma's Place, which was a bit embarrassing, but it's beautiful. And it's a place where it's a market. They have a market. You can have a film night if you want to go and - or certain things you can have there that - a concert or that type of thing. And it's - it was very special to me because I didn't expect that. But they were the men of Fitzroy that lived in the lanes and 40-odd years ago, these lanes here.

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MS FITZGERALD: I will come back to those lanes. But first, Aunty, could you tell us about your childhood and growing up?

40 ALMA THORPE: Probably a stunted child life because I don't think I was a child in my time. I was born in 1935, and that was during - during the beginning and the end of the First World - the Second World War. So we lived in Fitzroy in the very hard situations. And Aboriginal people were moved around too and lived in Fitzroy. But in my day as a child, I suppose my mum worked hard. She was a worker. My dad was a - men never got jobs, so he was a white man, but he was an alcoholic. But he was a - also a - a rag - a rag - what do they call them? We survived in Fitzroy in that time.

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MS FITZGERALD: I think in your witness statement you call him a rag and bone man.

50 ALMA THORPE: Rag and bone man. And they went around and gathering or getting food or doing what they could do to provide a meal. And food was very important in that day, so

you had to find out where to get food. I mean, I think in Gertrude Street here, one of those places before the flats, there was a place that was a butcher, but they had horse meat. I remember that. Horse meat was sold in that day. But in my day my - sort of rabbits or the offal of things, you know, very, very poor.

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But as a child I went to George Street State School, until I was 11 - 12. And that was very hard because it was hard for black and white. And in that day you were poor, ragged people. You were lucky to have shoes on your feet. I mean, I - we used to row over who had a sand shoe, and they were called sand shoes in my day, not runners, sand shoes. But as a child, I had - I had to make sure - my mother worked so I had to make sure my brothers and sisters were ready for school.

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So I was always a worker, even then. And I can remember the day of - when I was 12, I said I wanted to go to work, and I went into a shoe factory. Just before that, I was 11, so I had to put my age up until I was 12. But there was no others -- but at that time my mother and my brothers and sisters, they could move to Moe in a housing - there was housing available. So my brothers who - my two brothers and my two sisters moved away from Fitzroy and left me in Fitzroy. And I continued to live in Fitzroy in rooms and whatever.

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But it's pretty - it wasn't tough, because we had aunties, a lot of aunties and uncles around and - so she left me in care of the people of Fitzroy. That's what I believe anyway. And, I mean, I can remember the names. I can remember - even Eleanor will probably look - the Peppers and all Sammy Peppers and that, he was my best - when I got married, I mean, they were my support. The young - it was the Connollys, the Peppers, the - all these people of Fitzroy cared for you.

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So you - you had sort of a connection, I suppose you could say. But you didn't have anything. I can remember one Christmas, I - I tell my kids this. We - we thought it was great. We got an orange for Christmas. And I'm talking about how poor it was. An orange. But fruit was very precious. And I can't say much about my childhood because that was then and I worked.

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MS FITZGERALD: And you were in rooms with your sister?

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ALMA THORPE: With my cousin.

MS FITZGERALD: With your cousin.

ALMA THORPE: Dorothy Lovett, it was. And we lived together and we worked together, and her mother was Gertie Lovett and she was always around, you know. And Hannah Lovett who was Beryl MacDonald's mother, Beryl Booth's mother. So, yes, you had all these people around. There was Auntie Jessie Taylor, who was a King. I can remember all - I remember and knew all those old people, that you had someone to care for you.

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And, you know, you had the fellas sitting in the street like Vincent Ardern and that, that's there and say to me and Dotty, "What are you girls doing out? Get home." So you weren't allowed to wander around the streets. So you had the little black cockatoos watching you all the time. And they were. And so you weren't allowed to wander. Very, very, very strict it was, in my day. Very strict.

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MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, I wanted to talk to you about your mother, Edna Brown. First, though, I wanted to ask the Solicitors Assisting if they would show us the photo at Annexure F, which is your - your mum and her mum, Granny Lovett.

5 ALMA THORPE: She - yes, I just made a mistake. It's not - she was - she married a Clarke. So she was Mary-Anne McLennan Lovett who married George Clarke, and she was a brother of all the Lovett boys from Lake Condah. There were seven boys and three girls. And Aunty - all those boys went to war. They were very famous. But her mother was Hannah Lovett from Condah, and she married George Clarke from Framlingham. Actually, that
10 photo was taken in Kent Street Fitzroy, our first house-type thing we had. No electricity, no - we had candles and gas. Very hard.

But we also - was a place where people pass through all the time. Everybody moved from one place to the other so you had - we had a movement of people from the missions or
15 wherever they were coming from. So it was a gathering-type place, you know. My dad was a non-Aboriginal man, very rich in his character. He was an atheist and a communist, he called himself but he allowed church - we had church every Sunday in the backyard or somewhere. So we had church come to your house. So we are Christians. Very Christian. I don't know if you remember those days, but those - we were Christians. And you had to it be
20 a Christian.

And those ladies, my granny, Granny, they called her Clenny. And she used to travel back from Framlingham to Melbourne a lot on the train with her string bag and her bunions. She had bunions. If you don't know bunions, she used to have shoes that you used to cut a hole in
25 so she could - the bunions would stick out. And I inherited it and my mother inherited bunions, let's put it that way. But Granny was very quiet lady. A very caring lady and she died in - when she was about 50-something.

But at the time of her dying in Framlingham, she had in her care about 10 to 15 children that were children of her - like, Aunty Ivy and Aunty Doris, the Lovetts and the Wrights. And so
30 when she died, those kids were just - they had to come to Fitzroy again. They were born around Fitzroy, she took them in, and then when she died, they came back. And that's sort of like was a hard time in the 50s for the women of that day and the men. It was really terrible under the Act. And that - - -
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MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, where did those children live after she died?

ALMA THORPE: Well, I can - I can remember we might have had three or four, because my dad used to guard the gate so you weren't allowed out at night, of course. But three or
40 four came and lived with us for a while until they can move on. And they tried to find aunties and uncles who would take them in and that was like Lorraine Wright, Bunta they called her. And she worked with my mum for years. But they had no - nowhere to live. You lived in rooms if you got - or you lived with a family. So there was a lot of them. I can remember my cousins. So they became more or less the street people and the street - the
45 people had to do their best. No work.

MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, I wanted to talk - ask you a bit about your - your mum. You describe her in your witness statement as a free spirit.

ALMA THORPE: Well, free spirit. She was a free - she was a very strong woman. I know when she - she was - moved off Framlingham and came to Fitzroy when she was 13 or 14, because - because of the *Half-Caste Act*, and she travelled - my pa got a ride with a truck driver who bought her and old Bobby Lovett down. They were cousins, Bobby Lovett. And they came to Fitzroy, and Mum worked in - she worked - the first job she had was in the Customs House.

She was a cleaner, a cleaner all her life. So she worked as a cleaner and when she - when we started Health Service, she cleaned the health services. So she was a worker. And she never stopped working - ever stopped working. So she would go to work at 5 in the morning until 8 in the morning, back again to work at 5 and then finish at 8 again. So we were contained - contained. It was very hard, because you weren't allowed to walk around either, as children. We weren't allowed to move around. So you - people were frightened to - to move around.

MS FITZGERALD: Why did your - why did your mother need to leave the mission when she was 14?

ALMA THORPE: Under the - when the *Half-Caste Act* came in, I think was in the 1930s, and probably she - that lady there would know, she had written that thing. But in the 1930s, before that it was the *Assimilation Act*. Then they found it was getting a bit out of control, the *Assimilation Act*. Then they start to think, in the 1930s, they changed it to the *Half-Caste Act*. So that meant that, then, the people who were born on missions, like my mother was born - she wasn't born there but she was - lived there and her grannies - under that Act, they - they would not provide.

So there was no provisions for the people under the *Half-Caste Act* like they did like for the - as they termed the "full blood Aboriginal", they got food and all that type of thing. But under the *Half-Caste Act* you didn't get it. Because I remember that my grandfather, George Clarke, and all his brothers, they used to have to cut wood to earn money to pay - pay for food, but they didn't get free food. And if - if the full-blood lady up the road give you food they got - they got taken off them. You weren't allowed to - - -

MS FITZGERALD: No sharing.

ALMA THORPE: No sharing. You weren't allowed to share, even though it did happen, you know. But under that Act. So therefore they moved the people who they termed as half-caste - and they could be black-looking people, black. And - but I don't know how they termed half-caste but once you were a half-caste, you were not entitled to support. I can't put it any way - I mean, Lake Condah was pretty tough and - I don't know about the other - Lake Tyers was pretty tough and - but they were - I seen the missions as concentration camps.

And they - and that's how they gathered up the Aboriginal people from around the country who were just - who were lost and put them into concentration camps. And under those - under those terms of living on a mission, you had to - you weren't allowed to visit anybody. You had to carry a card to say who you were, and you could not walk off the mission without permission. And so you were curtailed on that type of thing.

Framlingham was a little bit freer, and I think they were called the naughty - the naughty people's country. A bit freer. So the black fellas, when they played up, they could run to

Fram, because on Condah you couldn't even have - well, Condah was very strict. If - Aboriginal people wanted to have corroborees and all that type of thing, but the - the ministers or the preachers, they were very strict, and if they did a corroboree, they were worshipping the devil. So that was a very - you weren't allowed to be. So that was cut out.

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So we never knew nothing about who - who our - our tribal people were, and that's why it's very hard to even talk, even on this Commission, is about being an Aboriginal person, because we are termed in this thing of who we are and how - everybody has got a different story. And I mean, I just know that so many lost people, that never had a - who didn't know anything about their tribal people, and that's what we can't find. And it's been - the massacres.

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And I think this truth-telling Commission, I would like it to look at the massacres that went on in that time because at a time of those massacres, it must have killed so many people that left the residue, as you would say, of people who didn't know who they were. So, I mean, I've been trying to work with people - I can't say I'm - I - I can't say that I'm culturally - they have taken my culture. So I haven't got that to look at. And I know I travelled around this country here, and I went to Uluru once and I went up to - when we were setting - I mean, until 70s we didn't have a voice. Then we started to have a voice.

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I went to Uluru, but because I was fair, they said, "You can't talk, you're a yellow fella." And I went as a part of our national body, which was a health workers - you know all about the yellow fellas. And so you had the - I just said to the old fellas, I said, "Old man," I said, "I'm an Aboriginal woman from Gunditjmarra, and I've got permission to talk. And I would like to talk." I was very respectable about whose land I went on and always had permission. I would never go on anyone's country without permission. And that was one of our things that we did. You just didn't barge in and say who you were or whatever.

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But it was an eye-opener, because I know I was a yellow fella, but when I talk - when I sort of met all of the Top End people and got - they're full bloods and all that, and I had one old man come up to me and said, "The Victorian people protected us. They bore the brunt of -" and turned us into half-castes. But what's happened in the Top End now is very bad. It's not good.

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MS FITZGERALD: And, Aunty, in your witness statement, just you were talking before about the massacres and now about the Victorians bearing the brunt. You give some evidence about the massacres in the western district and some kids hiding. What do you know about that story?

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ALMA THORPE: Well, I don't know of the massacres. I know that the Mortlake tribe, which was my great grandmother's tribe, was the Mortlake tribe. I don't know nothing about - I'm trying to find out the Aboriginal name that she had, but I know in the - in the Gippsland mob, when that - when the massive massacres were happening there, two brothers were kids there and were watching the massacre in a log. They were hiding. And they turned out to be Elsa Thorpe - old Bill Thorpe. They named him Thorpe and another fella they named Thomas, but they were two brothers. But they seen massacres. They seen the killing of their people.

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But to identify a massacre site - and I don't know, I would like evidence of the massacre sites that - and I think that our responsibility is that - as this Justice Commission is to find out what

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really happened in those 1800s, early 1800s of the massacres. And Victoria would have copped the most massacres. So if you've seen a map of the massacres, Victoria is covered massacres. So there is a history. You know, like the sort of - the Wotjobaluk people, they were the top of the - I can't even think of the country. I've only been there once or twice.

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But they had - a lot of the people from the Wotjobaluk people, and you mention the name Harrisons and - I mean, I've known people - I just know names. But you know all them names are names that were given to us, given to us by white people, land-owners, cattle owner, sheep owners. And Dixons in Framlingham were the biggest sheep owners of all times. Dixons. And we got the old - my great grandmother got the name Dixon. Then you find out that - that great grandmother Lovett got the name of McDonald. And the McDonald's were the biggest cattle owners around Lake Condah and all of that.

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So they gave them the names of white men to protect those half-castes. And that's what happened, is that the half-castes got a name so they would be protected. And I don't know how we were protected, but you got a name because that - your Aboriginal name was thrown away. You didn't know it. So I don't know. I am still lost.

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MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, you also give some evidence in your witness statement about slavery. Now, some white fellas say there has never been slavery in this country. What do you have to say about that?

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ALMA THORPE: Well, I suppose it depends on what they would call slavery. And I can quote one - one lady, and she was born a Wotjobaluk woman actually and married an Austin. And her and her sister were taken into a farm from the early ages and they were - they were slaves to the owner. And she works at the - she's still around. I can tell you her name is - is - it's Tricia - no, I can't give her name. But she married - she had a child.

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She's still - she's still fighting that in court years later, had been taken away and being reared on this place as labourers, as workers. And they were - of course, it was to do with taking of - rape and all that type of thing. And she's my cousin. But she went to court and she was stolen - stolen, as they say, they were stolen and made to work. That happened in Lake Tyers, that people were taken away when they were children, put into workforce in cattle farms or wherever.

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And I can't say, but I know there was one - I was told that there was a - there was a slave place at the base of the Grampians and that - because they had - - -

MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, what time period was that?

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ALMA THORPE: The - it wasn't in the 30s, let's put it that way. 1800s. And it was the gathering up of black people and herding them into different places. So you had to - there must have been a lot of black fellas around, so they had to put them somewhere. They had to work them or they had to kill them. Because if they were doing - they were going for a massacre, yet there was the remnants of all those people. So what happened to them?

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And I still wonder today what happened to them. And we are still trying to find out who we belong to, but we can only go through a white man's name, and we can't go through - through our tribal names because they were really taken. They were really bashed and not there. Not in Victoria anyway, I don't believe. That's my opinion.

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MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, I wanted to go back just to talk about your mum a bit more. And in your witness statement, you give some evidence about how, over a time, she did - even though, those times, Aboriginal people, to a large extent, didn't have a voice, that your mother found ways to have a voice in her community. Can you tell us a bit about that?

ALMA THORPE: She was - it's pretty hard to sort of explain it because - but I just sort of - just May Day has just gone by. And I can remember the May Day was a very special occasion in my Mother's day. They always went on the march. So I think they must have been involved with the Communists, which I knew they were. But it was a Communist that set up these May Day marches, that involved the women at - in - I can remember my Aunty May and Aunty Annie, and there was Margaret Tucker and Geraldine Briggs, and I can remember all these women who were a big group of women. I tell you, the black women were amazing in that day.

And, you know. We never had to worry about, then, below the thing because the women were the toughest women you ever met. And I can remember the - the days of Aunty Marge Tucker and how she fought for the rights and they - all those women were taken away and put in homes in their young - young age. They had tough lives. And so Lake Tyers - when Cummeragunja had the walk-off, it's a lot more behind the walk-off and all of that, what happened to all those people. They were taken, kicking and screaming and taken away.

We - we had - like, the Aunty Marge and that they used to sing. They used to sing in concerts, and it always seemed to be a concert going on and Aunty Marge used to sing and I think they called her Princess Lilardia in that day. She was an amazing woman. And there was Aunty May Lovett and Aunty Annie Lovett, and they were singers as well. They were my Granny's sisters. My Granny never done that. My Granny never left the mission. But her sisters were domestics.

They came to Fitzroy and Melbourne as domestics, and that's where you found a lot of Aboriginal women became domestics, worked around or worked in hotels or whatever. But domestics, my aunts did. And they had a rich life, but they were - but they obeyed the rules too. They obeyed the law. But it's very hard to say, like, mum - mum and that, they - because I remember the days when that - when it was Eric Onus and Bill Onus, and they used to have concerts, and everybody used to be together. It used to be wonderful days.

MS FITZGERALD: And your mother used to organise those concerts?

ALMA THORPE: No, she would be in them. She would go in as a singer. She wouldn't be in it. Mum never came into - she was part of the group of people that were those women, and that was - that was set up later on as the - as the Protector - Aboriginal Protector - - -

CHAIR: Protection Board.

ALMA THORPE: Yes, that was an eerie time, that - when that was set up. I don't know much about it, Eleanor, how that was set up, but I think it was set up under the *Half-Caste Act*.

CHAIR: It was part of that Act, yes.

ALMA THORPE: Yeah, and it was part of how they watched over the people who lived as half-castes. And I know from - and they kept the watch on you, because what was going on, we had to be inoculated against tuberculosis, and all that type of thing. So they followed you around so you knew that they were watching. And I don't know if old Alick Jackomos and

5 Doug Nicholls and that, they all had this - they worked for that mob and we never trusted - we never trusted the government.

But, you know, that's what we had to live under. And I can remember how the - Alick Jackomos, they worked for the government, but he's got the most amazing picture gallery that

10 you would have and he took photos. He was a wonderful man. No doubt about that. People that worked for the government had to work. But under that Act - and I don't know much about it. I'm trying to find out more about that. I think it was set up to keep a watch on black fellas.

And if you were - I know my daughter - granddaughter has found they still watched us in the 60s, in the 60s. And I was living in Yallourn, they still got a little note saying, you know, "Thorpe did this and Thorpe didn't pay the rent or Thorpe didn't have his -" so you always knew you had someone watching over your shoulder. I don't know how they done it, but they did it. So I lived in Yallourn and so you were always watched. The only time that people got

20 a house in - from Fitzroy is when they moved to Moe too. There was no housing in Fitzroy until that flat was built there, until those flats were built. And not many black fellas went into the flats, and if they did, they couldn't take them in.

MS FITZGERALD: Why couldn't they take them in?

ALMA THORPE: The men were trouble, so they would take the kids if the men went to those flats. So that was part of that system.

MS FITZGERALD: Who would take the kids?

ALMA THORPE: The Department. Put them in the homes. And they're gone. And for a case is that old Bobby Lovett and his big family that he had, they all finished up in homes, except one or two. One was named Brian Lovett, and they called him Bunjil, Brian Lovett. And he didn't go into the homes, and I don't think old - young Bobby did. But most of them

35 were coming out after they were 18. They were probably the first - and that's what I meant about the lane people and that.

So if the mother got - if the woman got a flat, the man - the husband couldn't. I don't know if they were married or not. That wasn't part of - part of the thing, whether you were married or not. But if you had children, you had a family. So it's very hard - very distressing in that time. So you were - you never had anywhere to live. You never had a job, because there was no work. No way there was men's work. And I'm talking about the 50s. And then - I don't know, I feel distressed about that era.

MS FITZGERALD: In your witness statement, you describe it that you were nobody and you didn't own yourself.

ALMA THORPE: You didn't. You were watched and you still feel today that - I got a shock when my granddaughter showed me that little piece - and you can click on a computer, on

50 that type of thing. So I don't know. I'm not - I'm not of - not up with the modern ways of

doing things. But I wouldn't like to find out too much. But I know one thing, is that we weren't criminals, but if you were - if you were born an Aboriginal - and I'm only going to say just one thing, Talgum Edwards is still fighting a case in his court, that he was born a criminal and that's what you were born. You had a number, so you were a criminal. So if

5 you were born in that era type thing, you were born a criminal. And Aboriginal people weren't criminals. If they would have been criminals, they would been rich, but they weren't.

MS FITZGERALD: Why do you say in that period Aboriginals were born criminals?

10 ALMA THORPE: They were taken into homes. They were given a number, and they were taken, like, from the riverbanks, taken from the - from their mothers. Kids were taken at a very early age. And there must have been hundreds that were taken and lost in the system. And, I mean, you have gone through Jackie Charles' little story and you've gone

15 through - you know, there's a lot more than, say, a Jackie Charles. There's a lot more.

And I know when we first set up our first health service in Gertrude Street, just down the road, there's a old - just old vacant lot, the house, and the first people, they were coming out of the homes. They were - I remember the names. They were coming out of the homes at 15 and 16 and 17 and didn't know who their parents were. And what we formed in that day was

20 a home away from home. People could connect up and maybe find out who they did belong to or find out where they could find them.

But it was - it was - you know, I - I don't know. I think I - I'm talking too much there. I don't know how to explain it and I don't know - I just know I lived it. Let's put it that way.

25 MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, you are coming to the 60s and 70s, I think. And in your witness statement, you talk about what an amazing place Fitzroy was for black fellas in the 60s and 70s. Tell us about that time.

30 ALMA THORPE: Particularly, in the - well, I know - you know, I don't know. We were always there. In the 60s, I know that my mother was - was trying to bury people, type - and give people a dignified burial.

MS FITZGERALD: She set up the Aboriginal Funeral Benefits Fund; is that right?

35 ALMA THORPE: She did on her own - sort of it wasn't set up under - under a body. It was - that she took on and with people and would collect five shillings or 20 shillings, 20 cents - wasn't much money - and to put a deposit down on a burial. Because you couldn't get burials in the country areas unless you had - unless you took them back to their country,

40 whether it was at Framlingham - they got a cemetery. Condah had a cemetery. Lake Tyers has got a cemetery.

I know we - I know before the organisations were set up, my mum used to run - she used to have support from people like the painter, what's his name - Onus. Lin Onus. And they used

45 to have little togetherness and sing songs and then she would have a little collection. And she would have buried - this is before the health services was set up, or the organisations, I've got all the receipts of where she put - where she put her deposit down, all around the country, in a funeral service. So at least they could pay your own - they paid their own funeral.

Once you got the - got into the funeral business - once you got into the - to be buried, you had a bill to pay off there. But once you got and paid a deposit, you were allowed to pay off. And the family - families paid off their own funerals. But there was a big thing with my mother then because people were dying and not being buried proper. She had a thing about
 5 being buried with dignity, and it meant a lot when - a burial of a person.

And - and with her - I know when they first set up the first - when we first set up the first - Stewart Murray, Stewart Murray, got the first hearse. It's in the museum now, mind you. But the first hearse was that we would be able to take bodies back, but you would take
 10 them back in the back of a station wagon. And I had some wonderful workers working for the health service, like Jimmy Wright and - and - I can't think of the other names now. And Ben Peters and all that, they took bodies back to country. And that's what we tried to do, take them back to country.

15 MS FITZGERALD: And your mum demanded land from the government for the Weeroona cemetery?

ALMA THORPE: Yes. We tried to - what we found was happening - and I don't know if people know about burials, but they are - just had a death recently, but I don't like how - we
 20 set up a - we have got a funeral parlour in - it's been - it's a - there's a funeral service run from out of the League at the moment. We - it's separate from the - from the cemetery. The cemetery was a different thing again. And with the cemetery I know that Mum did write to the government, she wanted land to bury. And I've got the letter at home.

25 But they said it would have cost - they said it's \$60,000, they were giving her - they said - she said, "I'm not taking your money" like that. It was a bit of land at Coburg Cemetery. And, anyway, it came about that national park, the Gellibrand National Park, which is our country, and, Eleanor, you know about the national parks, that they are - they are part of their land rights, as they say. And so it was not owned - we got an abutment from the Gellibrand
 30 National Park to set up a cemetery.

That's how the cemetery came to be. Which we didn't have to pay - you know, that was our land. So I don't know how - it came about. It's a beautiful cemetery. It's doing a big
 35 overhaul now, and I think people, if they went out to Weeroona - we set up a committee of Weeroona. And Weeroona means resting place. We set up this committee, many, many years ago. God I'm old. When I think about the trusts we set up and the hard work we done, and Weeroona was part of - there's a - it's a Wurundjeri word, Weeroona means rest, because we wanted to have it done like that. It was a resting place.

40 The most beautiful bit of land, it is. There's birds, there's kangaroos and everything running around. But it's in disarray at the moment. So it's a big - big work going on. So the people - the people who has got people buried there are starting a new committee. So it's being redone. So it will be beautiful when it's done.

45 MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, I was asking you before about the 60s and the 70s in Fitzroy. And during that period not only in Fitzroy but after that, you set up about 100 health services across Australia, including one in this very building here in Charcoal Lane. Do you want to tell us about that time?

ALMA THORPE: This tells you how old I am, doesn't it? I've got to go back to the 70s. And, I mean, in the 70s, I came back to Fitzroy. I was married and lived in Yallourn for 10 or 18 years or something. In Gippsland, I lived, with my husband and seven children. I came back to Melbourne in the 70s, adopted another two children - one of them. So I was rearing
 5 nine children. I came back to Fitzroy in the 70s. In the 70s, I believe, is when - and I'm sure Wayne will talk about this - the 70s was when we had a voice.

And I felt like I was born in the 70s and that was being involved in being - in being - I can't think of the words how to say it. We were very - and I'm talking about the group of people
 10 that were the Bruce McGuinness, Gary Foleys, Geraldine Briggs and Margaret Briggs and a whole group of people that came together and was talking about Aboriginal affairs. And we were worried and the women - the women, actually, they were part of the - under the government, they had - I can't think what it was called, but the women's group. And it was a scabies outbreak in Lake Tyers and all around. So we found that we never had anything
 15 going for people of our people. We had to look after people.

MS FITZGERALD: In terms of health services?

ALMA THORPE: In health services. And so there was a - a formation in that time of these
 20 women and men and that, that we wanted a voice and to have a say. And we wanted it done on self-determination, land rights and sovereignty. And we had that little mantra. That's how we had a strength. And we wanted that voice.

MS FITZGERALD: What does it mean to do the health service from the base of
 25 self-determination? What did that mean for you?

ALMA THORPE: It meant that the people were doing it, they were doing it. And we actually - by 70 - I travelled around a bit then. I went to China, and we looked at the - the thing, like the barefoot doctors, and what we found was - we found that black fellas were
 30 would not go - didn't want to go into hospital. They were frightened of hospitals. They think when you go to hospital, you die. So there was a lack of medical - of people being cared for.

I mean, I know when we set up the first health services - this was the second one - when we set up the first one, it was two years before of they would even see a doctor, but they would
 35 go up and hang around and talk and yarn up and do all that. But until we had the - I mean, it was - there was a time of - people were thinking, "Hey, I want to talk and I want a say." And you had - these - and, you know, people like the Bruce McGuinness, they were amazing people and they were for the people. And they wanted things - you know, we believed in who we were and this is our country. They started to have a say and they started to speak up.

40 You had the influences say from - they reckon that we were communists and then they reckon we were Black Power and all that type of thing, but we weren't. We were very, very gentle people. There was no violence in us at all. We had the marches, to set up Canberra, the - it's 50 years old, the Canberra. It was set up through the 70s. The same as this - this health
 45 service is 50 years coming up. You know. So when you think about the times - and it was a matter of having a voice and saying, "Hey, this is my country, pay the rent." And, you know, "If you don't pay the rent" - I don't know what were we going to do - nothing.

But - and, you know, it was - it was a big struggle and, you know - but we found things, you
 50 know, and what happened, you know, there was - I always think of the lawyer. Michael

Mansell was a great man too in his thoughts and all of that. I always called him the lawyer man. But you had to argue the point with him a few times. But Michael Mansell, these people were being - wanted to be known as this is our country and we wanted a place in it.

5 And we wanted to look after our people. We set up over 150 health services all around Australia. And I know we never got no gratification through the government, but we did through the World Health Organization, that more or less there is something there somewhere that they recommended that there was one of the best systems of all times.

10 MS FITZGERALD: That model.

ALMA THORPE: It's based on that barefoot doctoring. And if they - I mean, I believe if they tried to use it now in the system, it would work very well because it means the whole of the person, would be the people looking after the sick people. You wouldn't have the things
15 like people dying in homes. You would have your own people looking after you, whether you are black or white. And it was a system that - you know, I wouldn't say I was - I wouldn't want to live in any country but my country. So - and I'm not a communist, and I'm not a Black Panther. But I believed in all that. That people had - - -

20 MS FITZGERALD: You went to China to look at how they were doing it over there?

ALMA THORPE: Yes, yeah. Yeah. And I went with a group of people in that day, but it was pretty hard to get in China in that time. It was only because in this street here, there was a Chinese - a Chinese place, and they allowed people to go to China. You didn't get into
25 China easy. But black and white went to China quite a bit in that era, in the 70s. But looked at - looked at - a different way of looking at health. And - - -

MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, that barefoot doctoring idea of looking at the whole person, why did you think that was particularly needed for Aboriginal people?

30 ALMA THORPE: I have to think about that. Because I did believe in it. Because I believed that it's - you know, because that's how we set up our services, and it looked at - you know, I'm not involved in services of the day because you are in boxes. And when you start to be put into boxes, you start to - this happened to me 20 years ago now, when I was - I've not
35 being part of the health scene for that long.

But when you had to conform to a government thing of being put into boxes - so when we did a review in - the first health service, and there's a book out called 'Home Away from Home' which clarifies every sickness that - black fellas never had many sicknesses. They looked at
40 two in the day. It was heart problems, and that was before they were 40. Heart problems and another - another one. It wasn't diabetes in our day, my day. That came later, and that was particularly - that wasn't - it wasn't that, because it was more involved in just being sick and being, "I'm sick" and it was a mental part of yourself.

45 And I know when the men - the fellas of Fitzroy, I know that they died of alcohol poisoning and all that type of thing. But never, ever took a pill in their life. I can remember one person that, in his 40s, he - well, I took him home and he was just bled. I took him to the hospital and he said, "I only wanted alcohol in my life. Now I want a drink of water and I can't have it." But he died. He died that day. But sickness, to me - it's not about sickness.

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It's not about sickness. It's about the whole person and being healthy and doing things and looking after yourself. You know, you didn't concentrate on a sickness. We were sick people but, you know, medicine is a strange - strange thing and I - I just see it now, I know that - I can't even get - what happened - what's happening today is that people have got no access to services unless you go to the hospital. We got a health service around the corner. It don't work because you - you are going back to the days of putting you in a box and you belong there.

You've been treated for a heart condition, or you're being treated for Diabetes and you're being treated - but no one is sitting - the ones who have being treated for a mental health - tried to set up - set up a mental health program within our health service too. And it was very important to have the mental health program. It's very hard to have - be in contact with psychiatrists, even though you think - you know, I've got my feelings about psychiatrists. But they just all don't understand it, being an Aboriginal, let's put it that way. So black fellas for black fellas. It's pretty hard to explain. I feel like I'm waffling a bit here.

MS FITZGERALD: You are not, Auntie, but I will - I would love to play - - -

ALMA THORPE: Yeah, stop me.

MS FITZGERALD: No, I would love to play a radio interview with you on 3CR explaining some of this.

ALMA THORPE: Would you? I will be happy for you to do that.

MS FITZGERALD: Yes, a former you explaining - - -

ALMA THORPE: I'm a bit cloudy, actually. A bit cloudy.

MS FITZGERALD: Your younger self is coming to the rescue.

ALMA THORPE: Good. What's that - - -

MS FITZGERALD: Now, this is the 'Yarra Elders Precious Memories' project from 3CR. I will find out what year that is.

ALMA THORPE: What was that?

MS FITZGERALD: You remember the 3CR radio program, the Precious Elders?

ALMA THORPE: Yeah, I do, but I don't know the year.

MS FITZGERALD: The year. Yes, we will find out.

(Audio of 'Yarra Elders Precious Memories' plays)
(Audio stopped)

ALMA THORPE: That was a beautiful song and when I think about it, it was young - that was Gary McGuinness was doing that program and getting people to talk up and - he's gone now, Gary. But he - he was - he was - he had this program, 3CR, and it's a wonderful

program, 3CR, and it gave people - it's been going for 50 years, I suppose, now. And it's still going. My son is still involved in it, Robbie. I mean, he's - but hearing that song, Koorie, brings back memories.

5 But, I mean, even me talking then, I feel like - geez, I - same old, same old. But it was very, very important in that day of - of the health scene. And, I mean, I can't say I'm part of it - I want to be part of that anymore because it is corporate - corporatised. Everything is corporatised. So it's a different scene all together. I don't - well, I'm too old to be worried about that sort of thing now, but I think in the future is - people have got to look back and
10 think how do we have a way of looking at health.

It's not - not looking and - and on that, I shouldn't be talking about health. But looking at health wasn't about just sickness. It's looking at health of - of who you were. And if you were an Aboriginal in this country, you were a sick person. So, you know, you had to look at
15 it in - in different ways of - of how to be able to exist in this world, and that's what I mean. We have got to exist, and the thing is that how do we exist under the same circumstances of - corporatisation - and, I mean, things did become corporatised very fast. It's a very hard scene to be able to be involved in.

20 MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, I want to speak to you in a little while about government and corporatisation. But before we move on, I just wanted to - you talk in your witness statement about how the health services at the time were based on self-determination and getting a way for people to connect to identity.

25 ALMA THORPE: Yes.

MS FITZGERALD: How did the health service work in that way?

ALMA THORPE: This is hard to - hard to explain that. And it was through - through going
30 to a lot of meetings. Alice Springs we had meetings of the health - Alice Springs, Queensland. We used to have meetings all through the country, and that was on the national level and we used to talk about those types of things on a national level. And it wasn't a matter of that we were controlling the people in other countries.

35 It was them coming up with their idea of how they wanted to run their health services, particularly when you went up the coast of Western Australia and Fitzroy Crossing and all those types of things. And we did visit Fitzroy Crossing. And the - most of the black fellas from Fitzroy Crossing moved inland because of all the problems. Western Australia is probably one of the most dispossessed mob in the world, as I would see it. And I went to
40 Western Australia.

But, you know, I can't talk for the Western Australian people and how - how the - but I did go to meetings in Western Australia, and particularly where they set up programs for - for black fellas in the south of the west - of Western Australia. But these black fellas were coming
45 from all over Western Australia and so - they were lost people. They come to Western Australia. That couldn't - and there was laws there, they couldn't live near one another or they - because there was the rules.

50 Western Australia was a tough place and I - I think there's - they've got to talk for their own country there, and the rules that went down in Western Australia were the shocking - we set

up the Broome Medical Service and we did it on - through German money. Money - I don't know what they're called when people give you money.

MS FITZGERALD: Was it aid?

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ALMA THORPE: Yes. It wasn't an aid - an entrepreneur. What are they called?

MS FITZGERALD: A bequest from an entrepreneur?

10 ALMA THORPE: Philanthropic. Philanthropic. And we started to do that type of - get sort of - had meetings and things like that because we travelled all around the country. But to set up a service like in Broome was set-up on - of German funding, and that was the beginning of the Broome Medical Service. Then they did their own business and they - it's a thriving - thriving place. Broome is a magnificent medical service there now, or whatever
15 they call it.

But then Broome was a different country again because, you know, because when you - when you go to different countries - and I'm talking a bit strange here - but a lot - a lot of Japanese influence and all of that. So you see the different mobs who married into black fellas. So
20 you've got that difference there. And then you go to Darwin and you've got a different mob again. So everybody has got a different way of - and I know - I'm just thinking of Darwin.

I just know the lady just passed away just recently, one of the ladies that was involved - and I mean involved in the early days when they set up organisations. And her name was - her
25 grandfather was called - her grandfather came from overseas, a white man, married a full blood Aboriginal, and he set up the organisations like the leagues and that was under communist - it's called Union Jack. Big family name up in Darwin.

But anyway, when - when you talk about black fellas and you go around the country, you've
30 got to be careful how you say certain things. And, you know, you - you've got to be very respectful how you - how you are with the different people, different mobs. But this lady was a wonderful lady. But they were half-castes. So Darwin was a half-caste country. A very, very hard place.

35 MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, you were just talking about the communists, and you talk about that a bit in your witness statement.

ALMA THORPE: Yes. Well, actually, that Union Jack that was part of that scene that set up that thing because he was called - he hated that name, Union Jack, but they set up the leagues.
40 They set up one in New South Wales. They set the one up in Melbourne. That was set up by that - that ideal of that time. That set up and time and era. It's changed over the times now. We've become government putties. We just become - you know.

Our organisations of the days - if I had - if I had a say in my life or what - I would be
45 destroying every organisation that is run today under Aboriginal - because not the true way. Because they have all become corporatised. They followed the thing of money, and it's caused - native title, to me, is a bad thing. It's a bad, bad thing and it's caused so much trouble in our - with our people and my people. I don't have nothing to do with them. I suppose I shouldn't talk about it because I don't have nothing to do with it.

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MS FITZGERALD: I would like to ask you some more questions about native title in a second, Aunty. But I wanted to stay with this idea that you're raising about money. And in your witness statement, you talk about that being the root of all evil. Why do you have that view?

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ALMA THORPE: As soon as money comes into things, you know - I know you've got - you've got to pay for whatever you get, and don't worry about that. I believe don't believe in getting nothing for nothing. You've got to pay. You've got to pay for - you've got to pay, and I don't mean by money and that sort of thing. Because you never - but when money comes in - I don't know, because I never handled money. I don't know about that.

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And - but money seems to be now - I'm being critical here. I just feel like that - that we've turned around on ourself and we are biting ourself on the arse, if you want to put it that way. A snake has turned. So whatever we set out to do in the 70s is turned around and is being - we've lost the war, let's put it that way. We've lost the fight. And - and I feel - I just hope the future generation have been a little bit more go in them and fight for their rights because it's a matter of rights.

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I mean - I mean, I'm anti-government. I have to say that. I'm anti-government. Because it's treated us - we are a tool in this country and that's - I suppose every person walking is a tool under a government, whether you're black or white. But we - where does - where does - where does humanity come in? Where does fairness come in? And where does the truth come in of who you are? And - and we are probably the most destroyed people ever.

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You know, they talk about the - the - the Jews and they talk about everybody else, but they don't talk about the Aboriginal people of this country, and they are probably the most destroyed people of all, of taken - what was taken from us was who we are. And, you know, Top End might be able to still keep their culture, but down the bottom we haven't got a culture. And it's all right. We have got our - move around with our possum skins and we do all the pretty work and all that type of thing, but there's - in - inner self, we lost who we are.

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And we haven't got the - haven't got the - what do you call it - we haven't got the guts any more to fight for our rights. And we will just bend the knee all the time, and that's all I can say. I'm pretty disappointed in this - in this era of organisations. And if I - if this - if I had a say, I would say every organisation should be put down. The Health Service is going on three months' leave and putting another person in charge and then they are sacking a health worker. How cruel can they be? They got no mental health facilities. They got no - I would rather go to the St Vincent's Hospital and see a doctor there. I don't care. I wouldn't go. But I have a nurse comes to visit me.

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CHAIR: Aunty, I can see you feel very strongly about this. How are we going for time? I'm wondering if we need to have a break?

MS FITZGERALD: We can certainly have a break now.

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CHAIR: Yes. Would you like a break?

ALMA THORPE: Yeah, I think I might be going a bit over the fence but I'm really - my heart is breaking when I know that - what - and I know - I know Wayne will say - back me up and say we went - went through a time in the 70s that gave us a voice. But it is starting to

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close down again. And, I mean, when are we going to get a voice again? We belong - this is our country. We don't have to beg - we don't have to beg for anything in this country. Pay the rent. You're on our country. Pay the rent. We don't - so we don't have to say, you know, you are a good boy and you will get enough to set up a health service. No way. That's not - we've got a right. And I think that's - - -

MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, after lunch, I would like to talk to you some more about - you touched on your views about corporatisation and government, and I would like to go back to that. You've mentioned a couple of times this phrase, "Pay the rent." Maybe just before we break for lunch, you can tell us what you mean by that?

ALMA THORPE: Well, living on somebody's - if you're sitting on somebody's country you must pay something for it, don't you? If we tried to sit on - a little story, I will tell you about the sheep owners around Framlingham. If we wanted to have a - I know one fella came up to my mother in Fitzroy and said, "Yeah, I lived in Purnim." And she - straightaway she said, "Don't talk to me. Youse owned all the sheep there and we couldn't get a sheep there to have a feed". And they were on our country and they were breeding sheep and they were - and we couldn't have a sheep.

I can remember - and this is clear, I can remember whenever a sheep was - every now and again, a sheep would be taken but Jesus, those black fellas on Framlingham were frightened, because you had to make sure there wasn't a bit of wool or what - anything left. Everything had to be hidden away. They call them a Nulli. A sheep was a Nulli. It was so secretive to go and steal a sheep. But if you caught - if were you caught stealing a sheep, you got shot. You know.

And for - I was nearly going to swear then. But for a sheep, for a bit of tucker. And, you know, and - but anyway I - it's our country and I think that - I believe it's our country and we shouldn't be begging for our - and we got proud young Aboriginal people coming up and they should have something to live for in the future. And it doesn't have to be welfare. And welfare became a big part of our life, is the welfare. We are not welfare recipients. We are landowners. Let's put it that way. If we want to put it that way.

The bloody - they stole our country, so there must be a way to - to be able to talk to our government, to come to some sort of proper talk about the rights of people. And it's all about the rights. How can you - how can a country - like the Australian Government - how can it take away a human rights of a person, of who you are? That's like saying, "You might have been born a German but you can't be a German because the war happened so you can't be a German anymore."

So how can that happen? You only have to look at the German psychiatrist, the big man. His sister went to England because she was ashamed of being a German. So - I mean, I've got - Germans done their business. They are sorry for whatever they did in the war because they had Hitler that charged in with everything. But when you come back to who you are, it's a very important thing of - of - of - of identity. And if we don't have identity, what are we?

And, I mean, I - I mean, Lisa is not going to be - she's not going to turn white, but what is she? Black or white? You know. It's bloody hard. And I look around here and I see - I've got red-headed kids. Red-headed and blue-eyed, you know. 10 years' time, they can pass as

white, you know. But Lisa is never going to be able to pass white. But anyway, I - I made sure we would never pass white. Because I married black.

5 MS FITZGERALD: I will ask you about those identity issues after lunch, Aunty. If now is a good time for you?

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

10 CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you.

ALMA THORPE: I apologise for being so outright.

CHAIR: No, it's what we want.

15 ALMA THORPE: But I'm broken. Yes. I'm broken.

COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Thanks, Aunty Alma.

20 <ADJOURNED 12:25 PM

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25 MS FITZGERALD: Before the break, we were talking about government and you were saying you are very anti-government. Once - one of the things you say in your witness statement is that once the government comes in, everything changes because you obey them and lose your autonomy. You also say that when Aboriginal people do the will of government, they lost the game. What did you mean by that?

30 ALMA THORPE: It's pretty hard to explain that. Because I can say I'm anti-government, but I always say that, and I never believed in the government because it controlled us. But when I say - we still didn't do as we were told, let's put it that way. But we acted like we did. But what did you say the next question?

35 MS FITZGERALD: One of the things in your witness statement you said was when Aboriginal people do the will of government, they lost - lost the game.

40 ALMA THORPE: Well, it was like a part of - and I'm sure the Commissioners can talk as well as this - about this, is that once you became a part of getting a job in the government, you became a coconut. I will say that word, a coconut. You did their work, not ours. So you were white - black outside and white inside, or whatever, how you wanted to term a coconut. But it meant you had to be - pretend to be a different person and take on a different - how do I explain that, Wayne? How do I explain a coconut?

45 COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: You have done a good job.

ALMA THORPE: I'm not making it up, I know that, because if - you know, we had wonderful people that worked in the government, but if you did the will of the government, you became a coconut. And so that was - how do you explain it?

MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, I might ask you another question about that, which might help you explain.

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

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MS FITZGERALD: You've said in your witness statement that government is innately racist.

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

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MS FITZGERALD: In a systemic way.

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

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MS FITZGERALD: Can you tell us how you think it's - why that is, how that is?

ALMA THORPE: Well, one experience - I will just put this - is Perkins. He was - Perkins was a government worker. And I know Charlie Perkins went through a horrid time. He had to - became a government worker. He had to abide by those rules. But he was born in a home - taken away from his people in Alice Springs and brought up in a home in South Australia. And so they became - when those people became - and there were a lot of men that were taken and became government workers.

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And I know Jack - old Charlie Perkins went through hard times with his own people because he - he was a government worker. And he could have become - he was a marvellous man, and he had the Freedom Ride and all that. He learnt a lot. But his life was controlled by being bought up in a home in boys' homes from an early age, taken off his people and raised. And so they raised - the government done this. They raised a community of people that became their workers, and what happened with us, we call them coconuts.

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You know, that meant that you weren't on the ground with the - you know, you had to fight - you had to fight one another. And Jack - I know Charlie Perkins went through a terrible - wonderful man, he was. He went through hard times. And there was quite a few of those men in the 70s. I don't know if you remember Charlie Perkins?

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COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: I certainly do.

ALMA THORPE: Yeah, but do you remember Charlie Perkins and all that.

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COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Yes.

ALMA THORPE: And there was other men too, and I can't - their names won't come to me, but they were all government workers.

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COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: John Moriarty.

MS FITZGERALD: Johnny Moriarty. And we worked hard with those. They were wonderful people, but they were - they had to work within that system and to make us - and I always termed it as they tried to make us into being good people and, you know, that's how it

worked. And I know with - and I only pulled out Charlie Perkins out of that scene - it is a different scene now with his children and that. They are different people.

5 MS FITZGERALD: Aunty when you say being "good people", do you mean being obedient people?

10 ALMA THORPE: No, I mean, they are wonderful people but you had a chance of getting a job and you were going up in the - up the ladder not under the ladder. Is that way of putting it?

MS FITZGERALD: Yes.

15 ALMA THORPE: Yeah. You had a chance to make money, I suppose, make a life, make a home, and the opportunities that were offered in working in the government was different than people working in - who were on the street. So it was - but you probably say it made a difference between black - Aboriginal people. You had a different mob, two different mobs.

20 MS FITZGERALD: And you've said in your witness statement that you - you do think that government should fund things, but you say that the services shouldn't be under the rules and regulations of government that don't work or mean anything in the black community.

25 ALMA THORPE: Well, it's become very corporatised now and it's very hard to wend your way through the system of that. Because I know when I was sitting there having meetings and that, and if you had someone coming in - came in with a - I'm trying to think of the word that they used. You had to incorporate different things within, otherwise you wouldn't get your funding. So it was a matter of how you - how you operated to getting your funding.

30 And I can think - I know - one time, we had - we got stopped our funding, even though our first funding - amount of money for the first health service was \$8,000. \$8,000, mind you, that was early days. But later on, you know, you got monies for the funding which you had to account for every cent and penny, which we did. And very honest, we run our organisations. But it meant you had to - I can't even think what it's called. They had another rule come in. I can't remember; it's been that long since I've been on a committee. And - but you were bound - you were bound by a contract of taking that money and how you run your organisation.

35 MS FITZGERALD: And did that include how you spent that money?

40 ALMA THORPE: Yes, yes. Yeah. Very much so. So I don't know how - I suppose it still operates that way, but you never got money for nothing, let's put it that way. So you had to be count for every - every cent that - - -

MS FITZGERALD: And did you get to decide how the money should be spent?

45 ALMA THORPE: You did it on programs, if you set up a program, which became a bit hard in the - as you went along because it wasn't willy-nilly that you do something. Like, we had a dental bus, and it used to go all around the country, a dental service. And Shepparton and western district and - a dentist, and we tried to get dental set up all around the country. But, no, we worked within the law. And that was reasonable. I haven't got no problems with that.

But, I mean, it did take on - growing up, you just were within a system. And then they become harder to overcome that system.

At first, you were sort of - we never got money for free, let's put it that way. And I can - the first - the first health service, as I said, we had doctors who worked for nothing. They came from out of a - Dr Janet Bacon was our first doctor, and she worked at the Children's Hospital, and she wanted to be part - through the women's group of Geraldine Briggs and all of that and knowing about the scabies outbreaks and all that, and she came and worked for us for nothing. And she would get medication from the hospital and bring to us. We never had that in the beginning.

But - that's when I - I mean, she was a real fighter, but she took her own life later on in life because it was too much. She was a - one of those people that fought hard for the rights of people. I'm trying to think. It's a long time, I'm going back. When I said - when - about money - because I never had nothing - I never really - we know we had - I know - because Bruce McGuinness was our chairman, and I know that he was pretty strict on how - I mean, he wouldn't allow - once we broke the law.

We refused to have Depo Provera provided - given to people, because it was a - stopped you having babies. And they pushed it on us. They put Depo Provera on, and we closed our service down over it and refused to use Depo Provera. I know they use it - I know they use it, but it was to stop you having babies. Now they use it for a mental health thing. So it's a very significant drug. But the research that went on, we tried to stop research because research coming through the health service caused a lot of damage. And I think that - and, you know, I can remember the people - Dr Ian Hunter, who's in the research world - is that Ian?

COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Anderson.

ALMA THORPE: Anderson, yes.

COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Yes. From Tasmania.

ALMA THORPE: Yes, from Tasmania. And they worked very hard and they were research workers, but I just wonder how they came about because - the drug that we - was to - stop people having babies, and they did it in Alice Springs. They were - they were doing it - sterilising women, let's put it that way, to stop them having babies. But it's done too sneakily. And that part worries me, is that - like the - the tuberculosis. They were doing you more than giving you TB. They were sterilising the people once they were hospital. Sterilisation.

I had a cousin that spent two years in the TB hospital, two years, mind you. TB. They chased her all around the place. But they put her in hospital for two years and sterilised them. Her husband rang me from Perth the other day - she's gone now. But he rang me - as a white man from Perth, he rang me and he said, you know, he said, they tied her tubes but they sterilised her.

MS FITZGERALD: And in your witness statement, you give evidence about policies involving sterilisation being a part of the broader assimilation policy. Would you like to say something more about that?

ALMA THORPE: Well, I don't know what they used, but we were frightened to - to - of injections. That's why it's been very hard even to have this injection now with the vaccinations and all that. It still worries me to bits because, I mean - because I've come from a family that's been live tuberculosis, and it doesn't matter whether you are inoculated or not, you are still there. It's something that never goes. And they followed my family around to have - and I've been inoculated from the age, and my kids have all inoculated.

But you still can get tuberculosis even though they say it's not one of our germs. They say it's an Aboriginal germ, like leprosy. Lies. And these things that went on in the remote areas, like in the - just out of Alice Springs, they were sterilising the women in a camp there in a remote area. So God knows where else they were sterilising. But we only - we assumed that and we stopped those - that's when the injections came in.

MS FITZGERALD: At the health service?

ALMA THORPE: Yeah, they wanted us to use Depo Provera, and, I mean, it probably was a thing, I don't know. Because we had a - a thing to say that we wanted to breed more Aboriginal people. Sterilisation was - because I can say 20 cousins - I will just put it in a little thing. I can say seven or eight of my cousins never were - had children. So that's only my close cousins. They never had kids. And - and if they did have children, they were taken away and put in homes. Because they had them out of wedlock, or they had children when they were 15 or whatever.

But I still worry about the sterilisation. I still worry about the injections, anyway. And I might be an anti-vaxxer, but I'm not an anti-vaxxer. But we was frightened of vaccines and they did vaccine you a lot.

MS FITZGERALD: And your witness statement talks a lot about those assimilation policies and the impact that the *Half-Caste Act* had, and some of the policies that talk about is your understanding that women were being sterilised against their will. Some of - you speak about your cousins. Part of your activism has been to strongly claim your Aboriginality, to fight that half-caste idea of breeding Aboriginality out. Is that right?

ALMA THORPE: Well, it is another form too. I mean, we weren't - we weren't - I'm speaking for myself. In Fitzroy, we were - and I'm talking about the 40s and the 50s. We weren't to marry black. We were to marry white and that was part of the process of marrying - other than Aboriginal. And it's pretty prevalent that a lot of our people didn't marry into Aboriginals. So, therefore, there was a big gap. I'm only talking about a group. I'm not talking about the whole of Victoria. I'm only talking about how I seen it at my time in my life.

But we were never - we were never - when you had to - when you - when you got married, you were supposed to marry white. You had to eliminate your blackness. And that's what it meant. I - I didn't know, because I said I was determined I was going to marry Aboriginal because I wanted my children to be Aboriginal. So it was a thing there, but there was no men to marry unless I married white. Most of the black ones were cousins or - you know, too close. And you never went with your closeness of your family. You never interbred. That was a dangerous thing you never did, though it did happen. I just wonder. I just wonder, though, talking to - from Tasmania how youse went with that *Half-Caste Act*?

COMMISSIONER WALTER: They just said we were all gone. We didn't need a *Half-Caste Act*. Genocide.

ALMA THORPE: With the assimilation they got - - -

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COMMISSIONER WALTER: And they refused to acknowledge that people were Aboriginal at all.

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ALMA THORPE: Yeah, but then they did bring in, in the 30s the *Half-Caste Act*. Did you avoid that in Tasmania because - - -

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COMMISSIONER WALTER: We did, but they - the people on Cape Barren Island and Flinders had special rules made for them even though it was never admitted that they were Aboriginal.

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ALMA THORPE: There you go. It was there. It's in there. It's in there. And it's so, so secretive and worrying, because you were being deprived of who you were. And I know - and I had a lot to do with the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, through Mansell. Mansell and the marches that we went through and the fight for our people. But there were these insidious things that you didn't really know about. So when I'm talking, I'm trying to tell the truth but, you know, I only know what I can talk about.

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MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, part of your resistance, you talk about in your witness statement, was to marry an Aboriginal man so that your family would be Aboriginal.

ALMA THORPE: Very much so.

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MS FITZGERALD: And, really, under the *Half-Caste Act* that was the antithesis of what they were trying to get you to do?

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ALMA THORPE: You were discouraged to marry into black. Very much so. Because it meant were you breeding another black fella, and they were rubbish. But - but - but you were - I don't know, because my mum married a non-Aboriginal. A lot of people married Greek, Italian, the whole bit. And I - I can remember all the marriages. But I was frightened to marry into white in Fitzroy because they were mainly criminals in Fitzroy too, the white criminals.

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So, you know, you never mixed with criminals, black fellas didn't anyway. I shouldn't say that. But that was part of the thing, because it was criminals, black fellas and then you tried to marry good. And I think Eleanor could say, you tried to marry good. You tried to be good always. You didn't buck the law. But I know when - and sort of when the people started moving around - and Aboriginal people couldn't move very much, very secretive how you moved.

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But I first - I knew that I couldn't marry a black fella because it was - they could have been related to me. So I had to make sure I had found another fella, and that was a Gunai man at Gippsland, and I knew he wasn't related. Hopefully not. But - but I was determined that I wasn't going to - to marry white, let's put it that way.

MS FITZGERALD: In the witness statement, you talk a lot about the *Half-Caste Act* and the huge impact it had on your life. And you specifically say that it has given you a sadness.

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

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MS FITZGERALD: And you use the phrase that there's a stricture within you that you can't let go. Can you tell us about that?

ALMA THORPE: Well, I don't know. It's funny, I was only just talking to my daughter-in-law the other day and said, very much the same as me - you can't let go and the sadness - the sadness is like we are a pole, a ridge that you - there is something - there's - the *Half-Caste Act*, I reckon - to me, anyway - it assaulted my - my mind and it made - made me - I'm trying to explain it. Because when I mention the half-caste, my family get upset with me because they would say, "Mum, you can't talk like that", you know.

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But we were made to feel that it was a - it was - you had to marry white or you never - you never could have a baby or you could never have an Aboriginal child. So you married white to delete your black blood. And it did work for years. But nowadays you find that Aboriginal people are marrying - remarrying one another. Before, you never married black fellas. Very, very few people married black fellas. And - unless were you on a mission or something and you were allowed to in that type of - you know, because there were laws against marriages too. You had to watch what you did.

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And I'm trying to explain it and I find it very hard to explain. But, you know, it's funny, you know. I was just thinking that my father was a non-Aboriginal. They're just finding out that - just now, my white family on his side are saying they have got Aboriginal blood in them. But that the old man, my dad's father, married a black woman somewhere along the line and that's - these kids are Russell, and Russell is an Aboriginal name. And so the Browns are apparently finding out they're Aboriginal.

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But as far as my father and that, they were white fellas. Scotchmen. And, I mean, their great, great grandfather married a Jamaican, so they had black blood in them anyway, but they - the family found out about the Jamaican side, now they are finding out about the Aboriginal side. But I was never a black fella. We were never connected with our white family, my dad's side. Only that they came to live with us, that they left the family - like my uncles, like Jackie Brown and Georgie Brown and Becky Brown moved over to the black side and lived with us in that day and age.

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And as a thing, Jackie Brown married Margaret McGuinness, and that's where the McGuinnesses come from. And it's very hard, it's a bit of a - I find is very much a shame job that I have to say that. Because I was never ashamed of my father, you know. You know, I was never ashamed of being a half-caste, because I was - I was an Aboriginal. So I didn't have that problem. But I have got - I have got a sadness within me and I think that - and I think if you spoke to people who ever came under the *Half-Caste Act* and in that day and age and the ridges - the rigid feelings that you could not - I mean, if you talk to someone in the street in Fitzroy and in the 50s, you got taken to jail.

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The black Maria would come along and take you off. You weren't allowed to communicate. And until you could start to communicate - not that it stopped Aboriginal people from communicating, because there was always - always people meeting up. There was always

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houses that you could go and have a sing-song or talk-up, and then they started bringing in the men from different country, you know. But I had my cousins watching whoever came in, because they weren't going to let me marry a wild black fella from outside my country.

5 So you had these type of things go on in your life that - but I was never - never ashamed of being a half-caste. I'm ashamed of the Act and what it done to the people, but what - what it made me is - and I know what I am, and I haven't got a problem. And it was the same with my mother. She knew who she was. And yet I got sisters, they all married into non-Aboriginal people. But, you know, they have got a strong connection now that I'm just
10 looking at people with these earrings on that my niece is the maker of them all.

Yes, but it's very, very hard to sort of define it. Am I degrading myself on it? Because that was how you feel about it. It's - and, you know, I just can think - my dad was an alcoholic, but my mother was a proud woman and so you just had that sort of - she didn't - never, ever
15 told me who I could marry either. But I think I was supposed to marry white. But there was no white men around to marry, only the criminals.

MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, I was going to talk about another pretty big topic, and you can - you can tell me if you want to talk about these topics or not. In your witness statement,
20 you talk about the lost boy, the lane boys, and you talk about intergenerational trauma. And that's - this idea of intergenerational trauma is a tricky one for me as a white fella to understand. Can you explain to me what that means?

ALMA THORPE: Inter - I think it's coming out now quite a lot more in Aboriginal people, inter - inter what you just said. I can't say the word. Inter - intergenerational trauma. And it comes back from a long time ago. And what's coming out - unless you've got an opportunity in this world, you become an alcoholic - not so much alcohol - a drug addict or you're lost. And you're - and it was the beginning of the lane boys and all of that but it's a different scene
25 again.

30 There's people - I mean, straightaway I think about Percy Love's wife who was just murdered recently in prison. And, you know, in Collingwood, from Collingwood. And that woman was murdered in prison because she was - had alcohol problems and all that type of thing. And that trauma sits with these people, never leaves them. So you can't get mental health help unless you go into - into a thing. It's very hard to fit into the system of mental health.
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And that's why I'm pretty proud of Dardi Munwurro because they're trying to work around the people, talk to them, and if they can get into a mental health and the trauma that is there, suffering - there's just been a fella that's died recently, his son - well, he's not my grandson,
40 but he - I'm his granny. But he's lost his father, but he lost a father who was an alcoholic and all that type of thing and are hard to live with. Inter - he's suffering up here.

And not only him. There's a lot of people are suffering that trauma and not being able to get on with life and sadness, anger. And they just - I just - just sort of just say, like, Collingwood
45 Flats has been a thing that's been - it's still there. 50 years ago they had problems and that problem is still there of the flats and the Aboriginal people that live in them flats. And it's a sad affair, and they don't move from one thing to the other. They are a lost lot.

MS FITZGERALD: In your witness statement, you say that, "If you can't reconnect to who you are and what you are, you can die very lost, hurt and angry".
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ALMA THORPE: Yes.

5 MS FITZGERALD: And you've spent - you've spent your life trying to help people build connection to identity and family and that if people can't reconnect to that, they haven't got a soul.

10 ALMA THORPE: Yeah. I agree. Well, I don't - I shouldn't say they haven't got a soul because - but I believe they are lost and so the - some people, you know, they are - it's still not much going for us. It's not much going for us. I mean, because there's more people involved in work, which wasn't around before, there's a little bit more opportunities but there's still a racist attitude to being Aboriginal and getting a job.

15 And it's in - it's in - in - it's inside you that the racism is - well I think it's generational racism that I don't know how you look at it. And I don't know - and we've got systemic racism within our organisation - within the government. The philosophy is a generation of -- they are trying to have - one thing coming up is a part in - in the system of Uluru Statement. I don't agree with it at all. A statement - it's just another bodgie job of going into government and saying you should be going this way. And we have been doing it for 40, 50 years.

20 It's saying to government, "Do it this way". And you didn't - you don't have to have a Uluru Statement. It's only one mob. I don't believe what they are doing. And it's really going to be a facet that's going to split our community again because it's government workers again. Because that's all it means, a statement of - in the government, what is it - to have a voice.
25 You can't have it through the government because look what they've done. Look what they've done to the people who have been in the government, in the past.

I remember the - remember all the organisations that we have had within government. Like
30 ATSIC. They were - but as soon as they start to do good, as soon as they start to make a hole, they got closed down. So straightaway, when you start to make inroads, you get pushed out. And that's what I mean, it's systemic within the government system, it's systemic. Unless they can learn that their racism is - they are racist, well, what are they going to do?

35 Because it's a multicultural world we are living in today, especially in Australia, because we have got all different lots of people. So how can they just pick on the black fella, say, "You're finished. Out." Not even have a place to stand on. Anyway that's my - that's my interpretation of a voice in the government. I don't believe in it.

40 MS FITZGERALD: You also talk about how you're not a fan of native title, that you don't want any part of the native title process. Why is that?

45 ALMA THORPE: Well, because I've just seen - I travelled - I remember when Whitlam was having his sand go through his hand there he is promising us land rights and poor old Whitlam got - he really got pushed out of the country. He really was beheaded because he went against the rule. He should give us land rights but he was working for the government so he couldn't give it to us. Who they gave it to was one person, and I don't - I don't deny those people getting their land rights, but that man was not even allowed on his island.

50 He was - he was a man that run around with all the black fellas in - around Australia, fighting for land rights. And they picked that man out, Mabo, who wasn't allowed back in his

country. Which is not my country. That's a different country altogether. So I was so disappointed. And that was in 60-something, when that Mabo came down and all the lawyers - I just think of all the lawyers that made their riches in that days. I shouldn't be saying that, but lawyers, it was the lawyers' heaven in the Mabo days.

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And I followed that - I followed that because old Whitlam was a good man, but he was - he was strapped to the - that Crown, and that controlled us. And we got nothing out of that. We got native title, which I don't know how it works. I really still don't know how it works. So I shouldn't be saying too much. But I know that I - I can't talk to my Geoff Clark cousin, I can't talk to the other Clarks up in the western district because I will row with them because they run a thing on native title. They're selling off our country.

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I don't know about Budj Bim in Portland, how they are running native title. I don't know. They are selling our soul from native title. And, you know, you see that net there, that's a eel net, you know, and how they caught the eels and that. And they are making a big thing in Budj Bim now, and this is in Portland, and this is my country, my people, of the Budj Bim people of Condah are doing it. I get their information they send me letters but I don't - I'm not on the board or anything. But they - we have been sold out and they are tourist attractions.

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Condah is just a - nothing - a place. And that's where we come from was the stones and all of that. It's very sad. I know I feel like those corporations, of course, people hate one another and I know my - I know the - they are fighting one another, and I know they are being corrupt too in some places too. And, you know, that's why they should be - should be pulled out. But lawyers have got a big show in this race, and, I mean, I just know when we set up the legal services many years ago - and it was Jimmy Berg and all that and we set up the first legal service in Gertrude Street.

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They stole our lives too. And I'm sorry to say that about lawyers, but they are in there. And that's fair enough. They are lawyers. I'm actually reading a bloody lawyer book anyway in America. I love lawyer books.

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MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, you say that you fought for land rights, not native title.

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ALMA THORPE: Yes.

MS FITZGERALD: What is land rights?

ALMA THORPE: Well, how would you say it?

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MS FITZGERALD: In your statement you said - - -

ALMA THORPE: Well, the land rights is not having to beg in your own country, to start off with. And not - not - and not - how would you say - we've got rights. I mean, if you - if you - if you own - own something, you've got rights to it, don't you? And if anything grows out of it or comes out of the ground, you've got rights to it, haven't you? Like the minerals and the - well, if it's a sheep or whatever. But if it's the gold and the oil and all that, that's ours. They should be paying us the rent.

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MS FITZGERALD: You also say that in your witness statement that "land rights meant to us that we never ceded our life, that it was hanging on to who we were." So there's an identity part of that too.

5 ALMA THORPE: And you never ceded your sovereignty. This is our country. And every black fella you meet will say that we never ceded our sovereignty. And whether he knows what he's talking about or he believes it, he does believe it, I tell you. You never ceded. So you will find that no matter who - what got black fella meet around, he believes this is his country, so you can't overcome that.

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And it doesn't matter that all the legalese that you use and all the ways you go through - well, I don't know how native title works but I just know - I know that western district, the one from Framlingham and that - I've been talking to Nikki and things like that. But, to me, they are not - they don't know what they are doing. Before long, they will sell the - well, they have done it now - they are selling the stones and all of those type things. I have to talk to - I have to talk to Belle. But I don't agree with it, let's put it that way.

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MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, we talked a bit before about your views about government, and I just wanted to talk a bit about truth-telling and then about this process. You mentioned in your witness statement that you were worried about doing your statement because you have been tricked by the government in the past. How - how do you feel that you've been tricked in the past?

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ALMA THORPE: How can I put it? And I'm sure that people who believe in who they are will say that we have been tricked for many years and it's - you've got - I call it smoke and mirrors. So you get an answer, but it will change because of the way you've got to wend your way through the system to get to that system - way to look at it. It might look great but the time you get to it, it's smoke and mirrors and it's not what you think.

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I would just like to see the government really look at - at their - and I don't know how the government works, actually. I, mean, I'm a bit worried about that, because look how they are talking today. Two parliament - two people running around the country now, ScoMo and whatever, they just cause bloody - so ridiculous how they are talking, and what is it about democracy? Where is the democracy of this country? You know, just hearing these people talk and slagging one another, so how can they talk about being - you know, running a good country? Isn't it time we looked at running a country properly? I don't know. I mean, I'm confused. And I - I can talk and talk, and I just don't agree with how the government operates anyway.

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MS FITZGERALD: Your witness statement talks about truth-telling because that's what we are here for. And part of that, you talk in your witness statement, about non-Aboriginal people coming to the truth about what happened. And you don't believe in vengeance, but you do want non-Aboriginal people to know the truth. Why - why do they need to know?

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ALMA THORPE: I think - and that's why I think the truth-telling - and I appreciate these people that are talking to the Commissioners, I appreciate you very much, because when you - when we want to talk the truth, I think the truth is important, but it's how it comes out, you know, we will say all these things and look at the papers that are in front of you. But the truth-telling is - is got to be connected to - how the government pick it up because it's a government thing, really, coming up with this truth-telling thing.

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It's not coming from the people. It's coming out of the government, a truth-telling Yoorrook. And I've got - you know, I've grandchildren on - on the - on the clan - setting up of the clan groups and all that, but if we come against - if it's innately within the government system of racism, how are we going to overcome the racist attitude that come out through the system? The system is systematic racism. Which is very hard to pull out and use, isn't it?

I mean, I can't pull a piece out, unless you see it direct and you are seeing someone do something right in front of you. But systematic racism is - is killing us. It's killing us now. And that's - it's taken away - why can't we be Aboriginal people in our own country? Why does it have to be that we are going to be absorbed? You know. You can still be good mates and friends and love one another, but be who you are.

If I was Italian or a Greek or something, I would want to keep who I was as a Greek or Italian. I wouldn't want to be absorbed. And I don't think they are. But I know - I've spoken to an Italian foot doctor many years ago and he said "I had to pretend I was white" and that's coming into this country. And to get on, he had to - he was Italian, a podiatrist. He had to pretend he was white to be - and this is an Italian doctor.

But it's just only that way - when you say, well, I was a bar maid for years, and they would look at me and say, "Oh, yeah, you'd be part - you look all right, Alma." You know, I've got a good colour. I look all right. And they say, "Are you Greek, Italian?" I said, "No, I'm black fella, I'm Aboriginal." "Oh, but you can pass. You could pass for a white." And I know I can. But why would I? You know. It's only who - it's who you are and how you are born.

And I know I was born to be an Aboriginal, so I don't want to - I want to die that way too. I don't want to die assimilated. And that's a very dirty word to me. The assimilation is very, very upsetting and mentally sickening, because it means you have got to wash it out. I think we've got to teach children in the schools today what assimilation means, what - we've got to teach our young kids from 3 years of age at the beginning, they've got to know who they are.

And that - some people trying to do that through our child care things. And kids are coming in from fractured homes not knowing - my daughter runs a child care, it's called Bubup Wilam. And she runs this child - but as soon as the kids come in from fractured homes, half - the mothers are white or fathers are white or part black, they don't know who they are, they are destroyed, and they come there and they just love it. They love to know who they are. And it's just a knowledge of that thing. It's very rich - very rich to be black, I tell you. To be Aboriginal. Not black, to be an Aboriginal. And I can't talk no more.

MS FITZGERALD: Aunty, can I ask you one more little bit of questions about Yoorrook. You don't need to talk any more, if you don't want to, but I was just going to ask you about you were originally - well, you were worried that this Royal Commission might be another trick by the government, more smoke and mirrors. And what - what do you think the trick might be? What's the - what's the - what is the bad thing that could happen?

ALMA THORPE: I think - if it's about the truth, I think it's very important and I appreciate the Commissioners who are involved in this, because it's not an easy job. But whatever comes out of this - this Yoorrook has got to mean something. And I don't know - it's got to mean something for our future. It's not - not now, but for our future children who need to

identify. So if we - if we came out of this Yoorrook with that feeling of being able to identify in our - in our future, I think it's so important for our younger generations to take on the fight and be who they are.

5 And, you know, I just know it's - to sit here and listen to sad stories all the time, but something good can come out of it, and I believe that's what you good people are about, is that you're going to try. You're going to try and be part of that. But we've got to combat the racist attitude and the system. And I think if we can overcome the systematic - systematic racism, we'd be opening up a few doors. And I think it will be a good education for the
10 whole of the people of this country.

It doesn't matter who you are in it, black or white or Greek or Italian or whatever. But just get enough - to me that means democracy, being a part of the country. But growing with it and knowing that you're not phasing out - you're not saying, "You're a black fella, you're not going to - worth being in this country. Get rid of you." You might as well hang you like they
15 did in America, hang you on a tree. They tried that a few times, I suppose, but you can't get rid of - you can't just delete us. And that's what I feel like with that *Half-Caste Act*, and it's - it had a big effect on me as a kid because they tried to delete who you were. It's all I can say.

20 MS FITZGERALD: So, Aunty, you said in your witness statement that you want the Queen and the British government to be told the truth about what they did, about what was done in their name. And you've also said you would like the Commissioners to look into sterilisations to find out what was happening with that back then.

25 ALMA THORPE: And also the - the killings.

MS FITZGERALD: The massacres.

30 ALMA THORPE: But also I think that from out of this group, you know, I think the people - it comes under the Crown, and the Crown needs to know, if they are still going to be part of our life. They are still ruling us, aren't they? So I think - I'm - and I admire the Queen, but I think that if they run this country under their law, they need to be told. Because they wouldn't know. And half their country came over there and - anyway.

35 MS FITZGERALD: Now, I was going to ask the Commissioners if they have any questions for you Aunty, and I know you had some questions for the Commissioners. And so that could happen in whatever order. If - - -

40 COMMISSIONER BELL: Yes, I have a question. As an example of racism, you referred to Uncle Doug Nicholls being a brilliant athlete and nobody being prepared to rub him down because he was Aboriginal. And you refer to your Pa. I think you were meaning your grandfather.

45 ALMA THORPE: Yeah. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER BELL: Could you tell us more about that?

50 ALMA THORPE: A lot of us went - first of all, he played for Carlton before he went to Fitzroy, and, you know, they had managers to rub them down and do all these sort of things.

And apparently they would not rub Doug down because he was black and hairy. But that was because he was a black fella, not because he was black and hairy. But because he was an Aboriginal. And because there is hairy white men too, I'm pretty sure.

5 And I can - I can remember - because Doug came into our scene in - before he was a pastor, he was an athlete and a footballer. And he was a magnificent sports person. I don't say the same when he became a pastor, because I don't believe in the - in the pastor bit because he became a goody goody, I'm sorry to say, old Doug. My - I've got grandchildren through - in that line. But it's - in that day and age and the - Sydney Jackson was another fella that went
10 through the scene, Sydney Jackson the footballer.

He - all the footballers went through the kick - they went through - and they're still doing through, going through that racism thing. And Adam Goodes. And Adam Goodes - and Adam Goodes tried to be a good boy and he was - he was probably born on the - on the
15 wrong side of the tracks, being born into white - you know, he was - he was on - it was better to be white than black and that's - he lost his thing there and then come back to it after he got accused of being black.

But they have all got a history, they've got a history that you lived white and you grew up
20 white - and I know Goodsey did - but if you didn't - if you didn't - you didn't survive on that outer reaches of being a black fella, if you didn't survive in the country, if you - because your mum was married to a white man, so you grew up white. That was a protection. You had to do it. Adam Goodes was one of them. But - but when you think about the racism that Adam Goodes came against, it made him go back to his country and find out his proper heritage and
25 from the - from the South Australian mob.

He - I think it made him a man, a man more than he was before. Even though football, to me, is you're a man one way or another - football don't mean much. But football, many - I can go right back to the early days of the great footballer from Western Australia, he used to play for
30 Geelong.

COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Polly Farmer.

COMMISSIONER BELL: Polly Farmer.
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ALMA THORPE: Polly Farmer. He had to act white most of his life, Polly Farmer. Always had to act - you know, that part of the *Half-Caste Act*, and it was all part of the assimilation process. So it's grown within. You asked about Doug Nicholls.

40 COMMISSIONER BELL: Yes, I did and I think you say in your statement that your Pa had to be his trainer and rub him down.

ALMA THORPE: Yes, my grandfather, he took the job on doing that and - when they were allowed to, of course. Pa became - he used to be a manager of that. Because he was involved
45 in the running and things like that.

COMMISSIONER BELL: Thank you very much, Aunty Alma. Thank you.

ALMA THORPE: Yes, and - thank you.
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COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Certainly. Thanks very much. It's really great to sit here and listen to you.

ALMA THORPE: I don't know if you were going to ask me a question.

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COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Yes, I am. And I just want to go back, you know, into history a bit, and given the leadership role you've played, looking at the history that evolved over time and particularly through this place, through the health service, and Fitzroy, of course, being such a dynamic place as it was, organisations were here. And, of course, one of the key themes of that period, when the organisations were here in Fitzroy and community-based, was being echoed strong and clear, and that was community control.

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ALMA THORPE: Yes.

COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: What do we want? Well, we wanted land rights, of course, and what we got was another question. But what went hand-in-hand with that was we want community control, which is the equivalent of self-determination now in the modern context. So community control was still a key, a key struggle, a key right we pushed for, and I just wanted to get your reflections.

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ALMA THORPE: Yes. Can I answer that one there?

COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Yes, please.

ALMA THORPE: Because I think it was very important when you say that it was community control. And that's exactly how we looked at it. And it was - it's turned out differently now; it's control of the community. It's turned itself around.

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COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: It's turned around.

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ALMA THORPE: And so that's what I mean when it's sort of - bit you like a snake biting itself. But community and - because we didn't want to control the people. It wasn't a matter of that. It was people control of their business, and it wasn't a matter of people controlling people, it was a matter of people controlling their ways of how they lived. And so community control became - to me, became a dirty word. Yet I was the instigator and involved in setting up community control organisations.

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But that's what I mean about how you can sort of inter - look at things and see it can fail, you know. And a lot of good came out of that era. What we've got to probably look at is our future, and it's not going to be over community control. It's about how we would want to look at our future. I can't see - I can't see - I know - one little thing I can say, we set up the - the Fitzroy Stars Football Club many years ago and I remember setting up the under 13s footy club.

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We tried for 20-odd years to get in the councils, meeting with councils to get a ground to play footy, and we wanted to have a state-wide team. We were never allowed to be a state-wide - Fitzroy Stars are still going, but it's all - it's different so there's - one - one - one person I was - I'm proud of is Paul Briggs, how they conducted the football - - -

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COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Rumbalara.

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ALMA THORPE: Rumbalara and had that. But he still had to say - I was listening when he spoke nationally the other day. I don't know if you've seen it, but he said he's never had a way into Shepparton. Still a mark there, you never make it. So - and he's - Rumbalara has
 5 been running 40 years, just about, but you never make it. And, you know, recently I went to Shepparton where they set up the new thing called Onus Paintings and all of that.

But you only just getting one little foot in. You don't get your whole - you know what I'm talking about. You don't - you're not part of it. So, you know, Paul Briggs - and I remember
 10 Paul Briggs when he was a young man living in - running around with all boys of Bruce McGuinness and all that. He's still fighting for the rights in Rumbalara. And he's got a magnificent footy team and basketball. They all played basketball for - netball and all of that, you know.

And he's forever fighting for that Rumbalara. And Martin - he's an amazing man, I appreciate him, and - but just shows you that you - you get shot down straightaway when you do put your foot in. And you will find that if - you know, like, I know I've got three sons, two of them - I've got four sons. Three have never been employed in their life. I have got one dying now. He will never change, you know. It's just - but I've got three - never been
 20 employed.

Alastair did get employed once, but he -- four of them. None of them have ever been able to get jobs. And - unless you want to bow as - bow to the government. You can get a government job, but you - you know, you've got to be able to - but I've got - I've got a Robbie
 25 Thorpe who is just running around wanting to burn the place down because he believes in who he is. He's still doing. He's on radio today. But he still wants to burn down. I said, "You can't burn down and I don't believe in that thing", but that's his voice.

And that's her father. And - but he wanted to come today and bring the big dog - he's got a big horse - and he - he's out the front. But he's - but, you know, there was no opportunities. My girls, they went ahead. I - Marjorie Thorpe, she was involved in pay the Stolen Generations, the whole thing. They had a bit of an education more than the men. But the men - anyway. That's only one family. I'm not talking about other families.

And men never had opportunities, but then they won't take them because you've got to be - I don't know what. I can remember the old workers up in the old protective days, they were good people. But they were doing their job. Let's put it that way. But until you - until you feel the racism, you don't know, do you.

COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Yes. Just one more question. What do you feel needs to be done to open up that door? Open it up for - to get right in there?

ALMA THORPE: Well, I don't know. That's what your job is, hey?

CHAIR: Good answer.

COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Good answer.

ALMA THORPE: No, that's yours. How do we do that? I would like to - you know, that's how I think. Youse have got a big job, if you are going to open that door. And I think that's

how you can gain your strength, is on that. Because you've heard stories, different stories. But if it - apart from that, because that's what I mean when you start to get - depressed and - or feel like it's smoke and mirrors. But I hope and I hope and trust that there can be an opening within the - within Yoorrook that will forge a path for us in the future. I'm hopeful.

5 I'm hopeful of that. And I'm only one person.

COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Yes. Thank you.

10 COMMISSIONER WALTER: I've got just a slightly more upbeat question -- just maybe a small glimmer, a chink. So you make a couple of statements that are truisms. Really profound and at the core of everything. So you said, "It's our country. We shouldn't be begging." And you also said, "We are not welfare recipients. We are land owners."

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

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COMMISSIONER WALTER: Now, if those - you know, to all of us here, if I can speak - I think I can say that safely. These are statements which go without saying, you know. They are central to who it is to be an Aboriginal person in Australia. How do you think - if - - -

20 ALMA THORPE: It turned.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: If it was turned and this was the narrative that non-Aboriginal Victorians had about Aboriginal people in Victoria, that they saw Aboriginal people as land owners and therefore not - and therefore not welfare recipients but landowners, is that - I mean, part of our job - one of our - is to tell the story and that's about not telling the same story, telling a different story.

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ALMA THORPE: A different story, a way out type thing.

30 COMMISSIONER WALTER: Yes, and a - changing the conversation.

ALMA THORPE: Changing - and, you know, it's quite - you're right, because it can change and it changed a whole scene of Yoorrook in the future. But when you say - we never could be landowners. It's not a matter of owning - owning. It is our country. And, you know, we could manage a big cattle farm and things like that. Why would we want to do that? Same as - I will just give you a thing, of the - of the people that worked as slaves for Australian Government was the Island people that came in, and - the black fellas wouldn't work for the government.

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40 They brought in the Islanders that worked in the cane fields. They couldn't get a black fella to do that. And so, you know, we've got that thing there, that - because you - when you're talking about - Aboriginal people were a significant people in - in who they were and their spiritualism and they had the Dreaming and so the Dreaming was part of - their land. And so the land looked after you and you looked after the lands and you didn't sell it and you didn't wreck it or rape it.

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But we can't have those spiritual things. I've just seen recently, just listened to one thing - that piece of paper. We are spiritual people, and we are not going to find money - because when we talk about land ownership, you think money, big money. I don't think that's part of - money is not part of it. I don't know how to explain it. It's spiritual and

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who you are as a person. You asked me about - yeah. The man that - the story of Bung Yarnda and that's the story of the lake, and you can't touch the lake manually. It's a natural thing is the lake.

5 And they are raping the lake and this man that does the stories of the spiritual land, he's - he's Wayne Thorpe, anyhow. But he's a very spiritual man and - but there's - that's why I - we can't say we want to be rich people.

10 COMMISSIONER WALTER: I agree. I think understanding of what I think Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people have dramatically - a diametrically opposed understandings of what land ownership means.

15 ALMA THORPE: Yes. And, you know, it's - so it's going to be pretty hard, but I think doing the - what you talk about, that once it comes out in Yoorrook and how it's going to be presented, I think we have got to get some sort of feeling of an answer somewhere. So I don't know where you get the answers from. I don't know how do you it. I think you've got a massive job. I think that - you know, as you say, it's going to be a mind-bending thing. I'm trying to work it out.

20 And a lot of people are not going to be happy at all. And so be it. But - and that's life in this country. And I can always think - it was a great saying of my mother, "So be it." You don't - what are you going to do? But we are who we are and I think we have got to try. And the thing is that we - we - sorry about that, darling. We have got to try for future of our generations to come because we are not going to die out. Let's put it that way. We are not
25 going to pass on. There will always be a black fella around somewhere. Anyway. I hope.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: Thank you.

30 COMMISSIONER ATKINS: Thanks, Aunty. Thank you, Aunty.

MS FITZGERALD: You had some questions, did you, for the Commissioners that you wanted to ask?

35 ALMA THORPE: No, I think I more or less - I just hope that through this Commission that we have got a voice, and I think that's what - -

CHAIR: I just need to ask Commissioner Hunter if she would like to ask a question, sorry.

40 COMMISSIONER HUNTER: I'm not sure if you can actually hear me.

CHAIR: Yes, we can.

ALMA THORPE: Now I can hear you.

45 COMMISSIONER HUNTER: Thank you. I actually wanted to ask Aunty Alma about community control but Uncle Wayne managed to do that and you answered it beautifully. Can I just say thank you for being so open and honest in your generosity in coming here today. Because it's not easy, and thank you for recalling so much. It helps us in our role. So I don't have anything. Thank you.

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ALMA THORPE: Thank you for that, darl, thank you.

CHAIR: And if there are no further questions, I would like to close with a kind of a statement and say to you, Aunt Alma, your voice already on this public record will contribute not only to truth-telling but to change. Just because it is going to change what is on the official record, along with the other voices. You've said some interesting things today, and I would just like to repeat a couple of things you've said because they are important.

The truth-telling is essential, everybody seems to agree now. So that's no longer the debate. It's what happens afterwards and what is done with it. You reminded us, children are still being taken away.

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

CHAIR: You talked about policies being made about us without us in the room continuing. You state the obvious, as Maggie said before. The theft of land has to be acknowledged by everybody, because it is the core of the heart of this story. The other thing you said, which I haven't heard expressed in this way before, "*The Half-Caste Act* assaulted my mind." That is so profound.

ALMA THORPE: Yes.

CHAIR: So profound. And that will stay with me because I think other people need to know that, because it's beyond the physical. That is mental and traumatic. Because it's obviously in your mind and stayed in your mind, and it impacts on how we live. We have, as a set of values, truth, understanding and transformation. This part is about gathering truth through our people's voices. Understanding is about how we interact with the rest of the Victorian population and, indeed, other parts of Australia, because they are watching us here in Victoria, and how much they will accept of what we are saying.

And we do know we have some allies in the communities. I think you know that. You've acknowledged there is people who have supported us always over the years. And you have been on that journey. And we also have the word "transformation" and you have been referring to that just in the last little while about the system. The system is wrong. The system does not work for us. It is not our system. It is constructed in a paradigm that is alien to us.

And you have given the example of a legal judgment to an individual, and then on the other hand, when we are talking about change and government and transformation, if we want to do anything with government, we have to do it as a collective. Years and years and years of negotiations, whatever they lead to. Whatever - you have laid some of those things bare for me in a way that I haven't heard before because of your questioning of some of the things and the way have you expressed that.

ALMA THORPE: Yeah.

CHAIR: So all I can say is that we are so grateful for what you have had to say, and that will help us when we are debating each other about how we form our recommendations along with others. But it is memorable to me. It's so important for the rest of the Victorian population to understand the truth about how Victoria came to be. That is just - - -

ALMA THORPE: Very important.

CHAIR: It's so important. So the report that we make, which has to go to the government and to the Governor and to the First Peoples' Assembly, will be a public document and I'm
5 hoping we can add some names to that mailing list. Possibly the Queen. We will investigate that.

ALMA THORPE: Can I ask one particular question, is with the - with the - what goes to the Assembly, that's - what does that mean? It goes to the - - -
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CHAIR: Well, our document with our recommendations has to go to the government.

ALMA THORPE: Yes. And who in the government?

15 CHAIR: It will go to the governor. Is it the Governor? The Governor.

COMMISSIONER BELL: Yes. Yes, to the Governor.

ALMA THORPE: To the Governor.
20

CHAIR: Yes, who is the Queen's representative.

ALMA THORPE: Yes. Okay.

25 CHAIR: The First Peoples' Assembly were part - and you know; you have talked about family members participating - were part of framing how we came into being.

ALMA THORPE: Came into being.

30 CHAIR: And they lobbied for the truth-telling exercise.

ALMA THORPE: They got a very heavy load to run, the Assembly and I think they need quite a bit of help mentally and physically through their - their future, because the Assembly is about treaty. And a treaty is that - how many treaties are you going to have? 50 in Victoria
35 or 150?

CHAIR: Who knows.

ALMA THORPE: Or whatever. So we - but there's a lot of young people on the treaty and I
40 know - I know about the treaty and I am for the treaty. But I just hope they are not broken-hearted in the future.

CHAIR: The final thing I should say is, in our findings, from all of these kind of discussions, we expect to hear some things that will be helpful for treaty making to be in the
45 recommendations. The other part we should say, for better or worse, we do have vehicles for change. You know, whether we agree with them or not. We do have the First Peoples' Assembly. We have Traditional Owner groups. We have other Indigenous First Peoples' bodies out there ready to - to do some things or take hold of something. How that will work is hard to know because these things do take so much longer than we would wish.
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ALMA THORPE: I think people have got to start talking and - to one another. I mean, you just said First - the Traditional Owners. Now, this come out of - that's another hard thing to think - but, anyway, that's another thing. The treaty business and all that.

5 CHAIR: Well, you mentioned that and it's a word that's in a certain piece of legislation, and we pick it up and we use it and we use it willy-nilly. But we are - we are mindful of those things. And our language is changing and is being reframed according to the times we live in, you know, starting with the *Half-Caste Act*, to this. So we have to improve on all of that. But we are hearing the voices and we thank you so much. So much.

10 ALMA THORPE: Okay. Can I just say one thing, Eleanor, is with the *Half-Caste Act* - and I know it's at a pretty - and I'm just one person, but I think you will find that the *Half-Caste Act* is - has affected many, many people in this country more than we will ever know. And I think that we have got to be truthful about the *Half-Caste Act*. If we look at how it operated,
15 to start off with, but we can't go back on being victims and we are not victims. So we don't want to be a victim of this country.

So I really felt like - but we have got victims and they're going to be - generational trauma within that. And it's caused through the *Half-Caste Act* more so than a lot of the other Acts.
20 But, anyway, it is something that's really got to be talked about, and I think it's important that people talk. If you don't talk, you don't - you don't get anywhere.

CHAIR: Thank you. Thank so you much for today. Thank you.

25 COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Thank you.

MS FITZGERALD: Chair, I will now tender Aunty Alma's witness statement dated 4 May - this day - 2022, which is Exhibit 4.0. And the 10 exhibits which are Exhibit 4.1, to 4.10, the 9th of which is the 3CR radio station excerpt that we played, and that was dated 23
30 March 2015.

<EXHIBIT 4.0 STATEMENT OF AUNTY ALMA THORPE DATED 4 MAY 2022.

**<EXHIBITS 4.1 THROUGH TO 4.10 ANNEXURES TO STATEMENT OF AUNTY
35 ALMA THORPE**

MS FITZGERALD: That's when were you speaking. Seven years ago.

40 ALMA THORPE: That was a long time ago.

MS FITZGERALD: Yes. And those were all of the formalities. Aunty, we are - - -

ALMA THORPE: Can I ask, what happens now? I have given my statement. What happens to the information or whatever is on paper?
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MS FITZGERALD: The information that's actually on paper I'm now giving over to the Commissioners, and they will use that as evidence to form the basis of their recommendations in their report in addition to what you've said today.

50 ALMA THORPE: Okay.

CHAIR: One more thing to say, Aunt, and I would like Maggie to explain to you about data sovereignty, how we propose to handle the information you have given us.

5 ALMA THORPE: Yes. Good. I would like to know the legal act of sovereignty.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: Data sovereignty is about your rights to your knowledge. So what have you given us today is shared with us. It's not given to us.

10 ALMA THORPE: Yes. Okay. Shared.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: So it still belongs to you, and we are very clear that the ownership of your written statements and the statement you gave today, all the bits - all the other bits you've given us, you have lent us, they still retain ownership. You still retain
15 ownership of those.

ALMA THORPE: Ownership of that.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: And you get to choose how much you want those shared. Do
20 you want those openly available? Many people do.

ALMA THORPE: Yes. I do.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: Yes. That's your choice. And it remains your choice. You
25 can change your mind at any time. We are just the custodians of that. And we have systems and practices build into our record system that makes sure that your wishes around your knowledge and information stay tagged electronically with it so that even when Yoorrook ends, your wishes around your information stay with that.

30 ALMA THORPE: It stays with it.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: So it never gets separated, and you can choose, say, "Okay, yes, Yoorrook will obviously use these" but post-Yoorrook, do you want your story to be openly accessible? Do you want people to access it and use it? It's all up to you.
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ALMA THORPE: Yes, well, I would, because I wouldn't be talking otherwise.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: That's right. But not everybody feels that way.

40 ALMA THORPE: No, no.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: And it's about respecting and embedding people's rights.

ALMA THORPE: Yes, their rights. Yeah. Okay. I agree. I understand.
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MS FITZGERALD: Thank you, Aunty. We are so honoured that you came here to tell your truth today. You said earlier, "I'm probably not a person that follows the rules" and that's been of great benefit to all of Victoria. We say thank you.

ALMA THORPE: Can I say thank you to you people too who have been questioning me for so long, and I love you all. Let's put it that way. I think you're great. And - and I just - it's been an honour for me to be able to participate in this here, Eleanor, and you, Wayne. And I would like to talk more. I really think we should have more talking-fests and talk to one
 5 another and try to find out who we belong to, hey? I had an interesting talk with you, Eleanor.

CHAIR: Yes, we have never talked about those things --

10 ALMA THORPE: Yes, I know and that's what I mean about connecting. I mean, I'm not talking now. It's over. But I mean connecting and, you know, and the Pepper line and my great - my grand-daughter is a Pepper. So.

CHAIR: Yes. Yes. We have all met her. The Commissioners have all met her.

15 ALMA THORPE: Yes, Alice Ann is my granddaughter. Oh, my God. It's - and I feel proud of those young people who are on that - on that treaty. On that treaty thing.

CHAIR: We have one last thing to do and that is Dhamangalnya will make a presentation.

20 COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: Cultural gifts. And of course we also love you. Thank you very much. That's - - -

ALMA THORPE: That's wonderful.

25 COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: -- nice and soft, and for your supports.

ALMA THORPE: Oh, lovely. That's beautiful.

30 COMMISSIONER ATKINSON: For supporting us and share all the things that you've given us. We thank you all. Yes.

ALMA THORPE: Thank you very much. And just - thank you very much. I'm proud to be a part of the Yoorrook and being questioned by you, anyway. And I hope we can come
 35 out - well, we are friends anyway. And whatever will be will be.

CHAIR: I expect we will see you again.

ALMA THORPE: Yes, we will. Okay.

40 **<ADJOURNED 2:59 PM UNTIL THURSDAY, 5 MAY 2022 AT 10AM**