

## Opening Statement

Hon. Lizzie Blandthorn MP

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Minister for Child Protection and Family Services

Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today (and the lands on which I work and live) – the lands of the Wurundjeri people – and I pay my deepest respects to their Elders past and present.

I also acknowledge all Traditional Owners of the lands throughout Victoria, including those in the room today, and those who may be joining us remotely.

I acknowledge that the connection of First Peoples to these lands and waterways is tens of thousands of years old, and that the sovereignty of these lands and waters was never ceded.

Further, I acknowledge all Commissioners (and counsel assisting and support staff) for the work you are doing in this historic Commission.

I acknowledge the sacrifices that you (and your families) are making, as you dedicate yourselves to this important truth telling process.

With sincere gratitude I pay my deepest respects to the First Peoples who have already shared their experiences with this Commission.

I am constantly inspired by the gracious way in which First Peoples are prepared to share their experiences time and again, retelling often traumatic evidence, in

forums which were not established by them or for them, in the hope of realising justice for themselves, their families, their community and their country.

I truly hope that this this Commission is a turning point.

I am a relatively new Minister for Child Protection and Family Services.

I was privileged to be elected to the Parliament of Victoria in 2014.

In my first term I Chaired the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulation Committee – Parliament's joint investigatory Committee with responsibility for ensuring that Bills introduced to Parliament do not breach the Victorian Charter of Human Rights.

In my second term I Chaired the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee – Parliament's joint investigatory Committee with responsibility for ensuring the accountability and transparency of government expenditure.

Last year I was appointed to the Victorian Cabinet.

In all my parliamentary endeavours I have been motivated by an absolute belief that all life is sacred, and that every person has a fundamental right to a standard of living that is consistent with human dignity. And that fundamental to human dignity is the right to wherever possible be cared for by one's family, the right to know one's identity, and the right to practice one's culture and religion.

Therefore, it is now my greatest privilege, and I feel solemnest responsibility, to have been appointed Minister for Child Protection and Family Services, and Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers.

In that spirit, I am humbled to be here with you today.

I hope that I can provide evidence that is of real assistance to the Commission, and which can inform recommendations that will influence more accessible, just and culturally safe Child Protection and Family Services.

At the outset, I acknowledge the grave injustices inflicted by the State (and many State funded organisations) on First Peoples since colonisation.

The Yoorrook Justice Commission provides an opportunity for us to formally reckon with both past - and ongoing - injustices. It also provides an opportunity for us to consider the ways in which our contemporary systems and practices impact the lives of First Peoples.

As the Chair explained earlier this week, the word 'Protection' has a long and tragic history for First Peoples. The *Aborigines Protection Act* was legislation that had a significant impact on Victoria's First Peoples. It enabled so – called 'Protectors' to attempt to control First Peoples through missions and reserves. It also provided for the forcible removal of children (what is better known as the Stolen Generation).

It is well documented that the predominant aim of the forcible removal of First Peoples children was the clear and explicit intention to eliminate First Peoples by ensuring that their unique culture and identities would disappear.<sup>1</sup>

The legacies and trauma created by colonisation - and subsequent laws, systems, practices, and beliefs - continue to pervade our contemporary Child Protection system.

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<sup>1</sup> Bringing them Home report <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-frequently-asked-questions-about-national-inquiry>

We know that risk factors which are closely correlated with Child Protection involvement (such as family violence, substance abuse, homelessness, and poor mental health), statistically present with greater frequency in First Peoples families and contribute to Victoria's shameful rates of over-representation of First Peoples in our Child Protection system.

As the Minister for Child Protection and Family Services, I acknowledge the profound impact of colonisation and associated assimilation policies.

I acknowledge the shameful history of the removal of First Peoples children who were taken under the guise of 'protection'.

And I note that, from the time of colonisation, there were many agencies involved in the removal and assimilation of children.

I have only held my position as Minister for Child Protection and Family Services for five months. In that time, I have sought to better understand the impact of the system – historically and currently - on First Peoples families and children.

I have heard the evidence that this Commission has received.

As a Minister (and as a mother) I find that it is truly heartbreaking.

I take this opportunity, as Minister, to apologise formally and unreservedly:

- for the harm caused by historic removal of First Peoples children - from their families, their communities, and their country,
- for the harm caused by historic practices that infringed on the rights of families and children to live free from violence, abuse, racism, deprivation and discrimination; and

- for the harm caused by historic practices that infringed on the rights of families and children to practice their culture safely and happily.

On behalf of the State of Victoria, I say Sorry.

I believe that the staff who work with children in the current Department of Families, Fairness and Housing work hard. They have the best interests of children foremost in their mind. As Minister I appreciate and value their commitment and dedication to assisting families live healthy, happy and fulfilling lives.

Of course, the impacts of the structures and system built following colonisation are not so easily undone, and I acknowledge that there are real and lasting legacies in the form of unconscious bias and systemic racism that need to be identified and removed.

While we have made some progress and improvements in recent years, particularly in relation to transferring decision-making for some First Peoples children to Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (**ACCOs**), these have not yet had the intended effect of reducing Victoria's shameful rates of over-representation of First Peoples in the child protection system.

I know the Victorian Government must do more.

I understand there is much we can do together now to keep children safe and connected to family, culture, community, and Country. We have committed to work with First Peoples leaders and organisations to:

- Address systemic issues where Child Protection legislation, policies and procedures are driving interventionist approaches and not enabling true connection and engagement with First Peoples children and families.

- Focusing on developing and increasing the limited number of First Peoples-led and designed early help and prevention programs currently operating to divert vulnerable First Peoples children from the Child Protection system.
- Resourcing ACCOs to flexibly deliver place-based holistic services.
- Improve the cultural safety of our services and how we identify conscious and unconscious bias and racism and their impacts on decision-making.
- Enabling the development of a culturally attuned Child Protection and community services workforce, both in ACCOs and in mainstream services, so that First Peoples children and families have a choice of appropriate service options.
- Consider how best to culturally support the long-term care arrangements and exit pathways from Child Protection for First Peoples children when they cannot be safely reunified with their parents.
- Developing First Peoples-led research and evidence.

I am conscious there is an increasing sense of urgency and a desire to understand how change will happen.

This approach must be built on the foundations of self-determination.

I have been grateful for the advice of so many First Peoples led organisations particularly ACCOS.

In conclusion, I am motivated by the work of this Commission, and by the opportunity to meaningfully grapple with the legacies of colonialism and dispossession.

First Peoples children have the right to live safely with their family, connected to their community and country.

First Peoples children have the right to know their identity and practice their culture.

First Peoples families rightfully expect the support of Government to uphold their fundamental human rights.

I am re-assured that the partnerships that exist between Government and First Peoples led organisations, will enable us to progress necessary reforms.

Reforms to both improve the immediate supports and services provided to First Peoples children and families, as well as design and implement a First Peoples-led children and families service system.

I thank the Commission for the opportunity to make this opening statement and I welcome questions.