

Opening Statement

Raylene Harradine, Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal
Self-determination and Outcomes Division

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

15 May 2023



1. Good afternoon.
2. Martinga Kalinga Murrup.
3. Today, as we gather to discuss matters of great importance, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the land on which we are meeting today - the Wurundjeri people - and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.
4. I thank the Commission for welcoming us to Wurundjeri Country.
5. I also acknowledge Traditional Owners throughout Victoria, and to those that are here in the room with us today in particular, Chair Professor Bourke and Commissioner Lovett from Wergaia/Wamba and Kerrupmara/Gundijtmara Countries respectively. I acknowledge Commissioner Hunter from Wurundjeri and Ngurai Illum Wurrung, Commissioner Walter from Palawa and Commissioner Bell.
6. I acknowledge First Peoples who have shared their stories to this Commission. I honour their bravery to share your truth. It is your voice that will assist this Commission to drive all of us to make the necessary change for First Peoples Children and Families to thrive connected to their Country, culture and communities.
7. I am a Aboriginal woman of Victoria and bring with me my ancestors and old people which I am proud of – my mother's country, the lands of Wotjabulluk and the lands of the Yung Balug Dja Wurrung, and my father's country, the lands of Latje Latje in the northwest of Victoria, as well as my connections to Ngarrindjeri.
8. I was fortunate to be born on Country and have always resided and worked on Country.
9. My Grandmother is one of the most profound influences in my life. Since my childhood she has been a constant source of wisdom, support and strength for me, and my family.
10. A staunch and determined Wotjabbuluck Woman, who showed me what it meant to love, care and protect your family.

11. My Uncle was also an important role model in my life. I remember him conducting important cultural practices and traditions. Such as traditional burns in the landscape. We call it Djandak Wi.
12. It was only a couple of weeks ago, where I was on Country with my Grandson, watching him conduct Djandak Wi and I too participated – a proud moment for me to see our People's traditional practices alive.
13. Another proud moment for me is right now. This is a moment I have not taken on lightly.
14. I know that I am here on the shoulders of those before us and our Ancestors, and I know that I am here to give yet another important contribution to this Commission's inquiries and to assist in creating a legacy for those to come after us.
15. I recognise the gravity of this important moment in history and the role each of the Commissioners have in facilitating Australia's first ever truth-telling process.
16. I am here with over 20 years' experience working and delivering outcomes for First Peoples in Victoria locally and state-wide.
17. I have a unique understanding of working within both Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and government agencies.
18. Along the way I have been fortunate to have worked with and learn from many deadly, formidable First Peoples, particularly within the Victorian Public Service including Andrew Jackomos and Terry Garwood.
19. What I have learnt is how to facilitate and amplify our voices to influence and enable decisions that will deliver positive outcomes for our Peoples.
20. Today, I am the Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal Self-determination and Outcomes Division in the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (department).
21. Our Division is a critical pillar of the department's structure. We have a crosscutting function in supporting and enabling the many portfolios including housing, family violence and children and families, among other things the advancement of self-determination and strengthening the necessary foundations to take on the big and transformative change that will come with Truth and Treaty.
22. Our Division is still in the establishment phase and we are focused on identifying our priorities and operating model with all of those that we work with and for.
23. As a division, self-determination is our guiding principle, and our authority not only comes from my appointment as a Deputy Secretary and member of the department's board of management, it derives from our 60,000 years of sophisticated systems of law and lore, kinship and cultural practices and traditions.

24. I have a deadly, formidable team. My Senior Executive Team comprises me, and 3 executive directors.
25. All of us are First Peoples and three of us are Aboriginal First Peoples Women, and three of us are Victorian Traditional Owners. Each bringing our own unique experience and skill set and 100 per cent commitment to achieving positive outcomes for our People.
26. Overall our Division has 12 executive positions that are designated for people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
27. The department's leadership was clear that in order for this Division to succeed, it needed to be Aboriginal led.
28. At the same time, there are 87 staff positions in total in our division who bring passion, commitment and dedication to our Division's purpose.
29. Starting at the very top of the department and cascading throughout it, my team and I work alongside our colleagues in other divisions to deliver the critical work here and now while advancing self-determination and strengthening foundations for the future.
30. Critical issues such as the unacceptable disproportionate overrepresentation of First Peoples Children in the children and family services system is one that our Division has inevitably prioritised.
31. I see important work occurring across the children and families system; some of this I led while the CEO of the Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative. I also see the important work that needs doing to ensure that all First Peoples children subject to protection orders and placed in care, are transitioned to an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCOS), and to support more ACCOS to become authorised to make decisions for First Peoples children.
32. In my experience, both working in ACCOS and now back in the Victorian Public Service, I have to say I see a strong commitment to self-determination.
33. When I was the chair of the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance which comprises 15 ACCOS, I experienced a department willing to work with ACCO representatives at their pace to deliver important and key priorities such as Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care.
34. Equally, I see the need to reform the current children and families systems to enable a Aboriginal led end to end children and families services system.
35. Having seen first-hand the struggles of First Nations families and children, I am well aware of how significant the challenges are and how much work is still to be done.

36. It is a great honour to be able to speak to you in my capacity as Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal Self-determination and Outcomes Division.
37. In my role, I am committed to amplifying First Peoples' voices across the department, and driving real and tangible outcomes in the present while strengthening the foundations for the future.
38. Our Division is responsible for leading and coordinating the departments' response to the Yoorrook Justice Commission including partnering with the other divisions in the department to implement the relevant recommendations.
39. This is history in the making, where self-determination and truth and justice, provides an opportunity for the department to truly acknowledge, and assist in addressing the wrongs of the past, learn from the mistakes and move forward in a genuine and equal relationship with the First Peoples of Victoria so that all First Peoples children and families thrive.
40. In closing, I would like to particularly acknowledge and extend my sincere thanks to the Commissioners, whose unwavering strength and leadership have made it possible for us to embark on this journey of historical change. The emotional burden incurred from your role in hearing these painful truths cannot be overstated, and my gratitude to you is profound.
41. I thank the Commissioners for the opportunity to engage in this truth-telling process.
42. Thank you.