

YOORROOK OPENING STATEMENT

Good morning Commissioners – thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the lands we meet on today – **the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation** – and pay my personal respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Those are also the lands where I work, live and raise my family.

I also acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which Corrections and Youth Justice facilities are located across our State – including the **Wurundjeri People, Wadawurrung People, Bunurong People, Dja Dja Wurrung People, Djab Warrung People, Gunaikurnai People, Yorta Yorta People, Taungurung People** – and Traditional Owners across Victoria.

I acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded.

In accordance with the preference of the Aboriginal Justice Caucus, I use the term Aboriginal to respectfully refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

I also acknowledge the First Peoples' Assembly, and the truth behind that name. Aboriginal people are the First Peoples of this country – and hold a special and distinct place in the past, present and future of this State.

I acknowledge the ongoing intergenerational trauma that Aboriginal Victorians have suffered – and continue to suffer – because of the colonisation of Victoria.

That included the deliberate creation of institutions and policies to dispossess and disadvantage Aboriginal people – including the criminal justice system – as well as the direct use of State violence to impose trauma on Aboriginal people.

I acknowledge that our current criminal justice system still has its roots in that truth.

This had – and continues to have – lasting implications for Aboriginal people both in the criminal justice system, and across society.

There is no clearer or more devastating example than deaths in custody.

There have been too many.

These deaths happened away from family, community, culture, and Country.

These people had plans, had hopes – and of course were loved by friends and family.

Since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 34 Aboriginal people have died in Victorian custody, including 24 in Corrections custody.

I am deeply saddened to note that number now includes a 70-year-old Torres Strait Islander man who passed in hospital last week.

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To respect his family's wishes, I will not be naming him.

I know the names of other Aboriginal people who have passed in custody have been mentioned at this Commission out of respect for them and their families. I also want to express my respect for them and their families.

I acknowledge that the State is responsible for Aboriginal deaths in custody, and many of these deaths were a result of critical and unacceptable failings within our institutions.

Personally, and on behalf of the State, I apologise for them – and for the profound grief and trauma those deaths have caused. I send my deepest sympathies to the families, friends and the wider Aboriginal community for their loss.

In the face of all that, I want to acknowledge the strength and resilience of the Aboriginal peoples of Victoria, and the many important contributions Aboriginal people have made and continue to make to our society.

I want to recognise and thank the Aboriginal people who have shared their truth with this Commission regarding their lived experience with the criminal justice system.

That resilience – and those contributions – must mean something. We must do better!

As Minister for Corrections, Youth Justice and Victim Support – as a member of this Government – and as a human being – I am working to do just that.

We must continue to address systemic injustices that result in Aboriginal people being over-represented in the criminal justice system.

Aboriginal people must have a leading role in this work – recognising that advancing Aboriginal self-determination is a fundamental right of Aboriginal people – and also because we know that it leads to better outcomes.

But we cannot expect Aboriginal people to do this alone.

This government has committed to playing its role in enabling self-determination and addressing systemic injustices.

We are doing this through the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, our commitment to the Treaty process – and through the establishment of this Commission.

The guidance and wisdom of this Commission, and the voices heard throughout it, will be critical in this journey. I thank the Commission for the opportunity to contribute to its work. I am truly humbled to be able to assist the Commission.

I am here to answer your questions in that spirit.