



**First Speech by Sissy Austin
Inaugural Meeting of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria**

10 December 2019

Thank you. My name is Sissy Eileen Austin. I am a Gunditjmara, Keerray Woorroong, Djap Wurrung woman. I acknowledge and pay my respects to the caretakers of the land we meet on today. I acknowledge my family, my Elders and our culture. In particular I acknowledge the long line of staunch, resilient Koori women that have come before me, in particular my nan Eileen Austin. I am 25 years old and a kinship carer and a paralegal support worker at Djirra. I thank my father for being here with me today, despite the pain and hurt this building triggers for many, in particular our victim-survivors of the Stolen Generation. I acknowledge North West elected member Jason Kelly, who is not with us today due to feeling culturally unsafe in this building, but he supports the treaty Assembly.

I stand here today in the position of representing the South West Region. This role is not about me as an individual; it is about being a listener, a learner and a voice. I commit to being an honest voice for community, country and everything else in between that shapes us, heals us and grows us. As a young Koori woman, I never thought I would have the opportunities I have today. The ability to stand here today is a privilege I do not carry lightly. I believe strongly in the power of our grassroots people—our community members that protest in the streets for justice and our community members caring for one another as a matter of priority. If not for the ability of our people to survive the struggle, we would not be here today.

There must be truth telling and honest, hard conversations in order to move forward and have no community member or clan group be left behind or unheard. Within the region I represent is the Djab Wurrung Heritage Protection Embassy, established to protect sacred women's country from the very same government we are dealing with today. The outcome and decisions made by the Andrews government regarding the Western Highway duplication project could make or break the trust the community place in the treaty agenda.

A few months ago I found my 10th birthday card from my dad. It said:

'To dearest Eileen' - my birth name – 'You have a strong Gunditjmara Keerray spirit. This spirit is the voice you hear every day that helps you make decisions and guides you and protects you. Always follow and listen to that spirit, those inner thoughts that help you make choices and decisions in life.'

This guidance is how I conduct myself yesterday, today and into the future. Thank you.

