



**First Speech by Alice Pepper
Inaugural Meeting of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria**

10 December 2019

My name is Alice Pepper. I carry with me on my mother's side and come from the Yorta Yorta, Mutti Mutti and Arunte peoples. On my father's side I come from the Gunnai, Gunditjmar and Djab Wurrung people. I am grateful to be on the land of the Wurundjeri, Woiwurrung and Boon Wurrung people. I pay my respects to the ancestors past and present, and I acknowledge future leaders. One of those leaders sitting here witnessing this today is my son, Xavier, and my husband, Hughie. I want to acknowledge the strength and resilience of my people. It is because of them that I have the opportunity to stand here. I want to acknowledge that there are 38 clans and nations across Victoria, which I hope are recognised and included in the conversations and have the right to input into the frameworks that we will develop in order to negotiate treaties for our future generations.

I want to acknowledge our connections—physically, spiritually—to the country, land and waters, and the stories and songlines embedded within them. That is the very essence of who we are as Aboriginal people that have lived here, survived here, for thousands of years. Some of those songlines are currently under threat, like the Djab Wurrung birthing trees on my Gunditjmara country, the Murrumbidgee River on my Yorta Yorta/Mutti Mutti country, and the rivers and lake systems and bushlands on my Gunnai/Kurnai country; all under threat of destruction, mining, greed and the fast declining of the health of our land due to the rapid climate change. This is in turn making a lot of us sick. It is most important for us to be able to address these issues through this journey to treaty so that our future generations can stand strong on country, living their culture, living healthy and longer, and aspiring to be who they want to be.

I was encouraged and supported by my communities of Gippsland to be here, and my heart sits with my Gippsland community right now because in the last few months they have had lots of sorrow, lots of sorry business, without any time to grieve or any time of healing. My heart is with you all. They are why I am here: to advocate and magnify their voice so it is heard at the state level, ensuring that open dialogue and transparency to our communities happens throughout this phase so we can influence a structure and a framework to negotiate treaties that will reflect changes in a system that clearly does not work for us because we have not been at the heart or the decision-making of those systems; self-determining our future around everything from land, water, justice, health, wellbeing, education, economic development, healing, keeping our families together and safe, and restoring our cultural governance structures, that we have a right to operate in our country as sovereign peoples which have never ceded. The time is now. Our future generations are depending on us to get this right.





**First Peoples'
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Before I leave I just wanted to tell a story of one of my Arunte nans that I met in Alice Springs, that we are still trying to form linkages and kinship with because of the Stolen Generation. When I was there they had not had rain for a long time, and it rained. Everybody was getting excited: 'Open the windows, open the doors'. And she said to me, 'You brought the rain, my darling'. And I said, 'Yeah, it's cold in Gippsland, I probably did'. But what she meant was that the rain has come—there is lots of footprints that have been here before us, the rain has come to wash some of those away to make some room for ours. And that is what I think we are doing here today. We need to walk in our ancestors' footprints and we need to make some room for the leaders and the future generations, and that is what I am here to do with all of you. So thank you.

