



Truth-telling: Frequently Asked Questions

What is Truth-telling?

Truth-telling is a process of openly sharing historical truths after periods of conflict to allow societies to move forward in a more inclusive way, based on justice and human rights.

Why is Truth-telling important?

250 years ago the colonisation of the Australian continent began. Since this time the First Peoples of our continent have been systemically murdered, disposed of their lands, natural resources and cultural practices, with disastrous and ongoing impacts.

Many people hope that Truth-telling can inform the development of Treaty/Treaties by building the public case for why this process is necessary. The Truth-telling process may also support communities to work out what they might want included in a Treaty/Treaties.

The Truth-telling process will recognise the injustices that have been largely ignored and actively hidden from the Australian consciousness and will change how the history of Australia is viewed. Truth-telling empowers individuals to openly share their own stories and have their truth acknowledged. Truth-telling exposes what has happened as a result of colonisation, what the causes were, who is responsible, the harm that was caused, and how these structures continue to impact the First Peoples of Victoria.

Truth-telling is critical for developing an official shared understanding across the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community in Victoria of our shared history, so it cannot be denied or minimised. Through this process, Truth-telling can change people's minds and behaviour.

How would a Truth-telling process work?

A body will be established that will then invite people to come forward and share their experience of their individual and community history, and the impacts that these experiences have had. It will examine why and how abuses took place, who was responsible, and how such things can be prevented in the future. It will review documents, conduct research and hear personal testimony. It will analyse all the information collected and publish its findings.

This Truth-telling body is NOT a judicial process and therefore doesn't operate through the courts. It does not follow formal rules of evidence and cannot formally punish or convict anyone, nor deny stories brought before it. This process is a different form of justice that occurs when truths are told, shared and acknowledged across society.

Over 40 other countries have set up Truth-telling processes and we are looking at these other processes and incorporating their learnings, but most importantly we want to make sure the Victorian process works for our communities.

The Truth-telling process will need its own legal identity and authority, so that it can operate independently from both government and the Assembly. In some places these processes are called 'Truth Commissions', 'Truth and Justice Commissions', 'Commissions of inquiry', or 'Truth and Reconciliation Commissions'. The exact legal steps to set it up, and the name of the body, have not yet been finalised.

Who will run the Truth-telling process?

The Assembly will not run the truth-telling itself, but instead will design and establish a separate and independent body that will conduct the Truth-telling process. Once established, the body will be led by a small group of independent Commissioners or Members (depending on what the body is called).

The people selected must be trusted by communities and be seen as credible by the broader public. The process for selecting the independent Commissioners or Members (depending on what the body is called) will be managed by a selection panel agreed by the Assembly and the State.

Will government be involved?

Yes. In July the government publicly announced its support for the establishment of a Truth-telling process. The government will have input into the design of the Truth-telling process and will fund the independent body.

However, once the Truth-telling body is formally established it will operate independently of government so that it can hold government and other official institutions to account. Different parts of government, like child protection and the police, will likely be asked to provide information and evidence to the Truth-telling body about past and current policies.

What sorts of stories will be heard by the Truth-telling body?

The Truth-telling body will examine the individual and collective impact of colonisation in Victoria on First Peoples. This includes but isn't limited to things like the frontier wars, massacres, stolen land, removal of children, slavery, forced displacement and denial of culture. It is also intended that the Truth-telling body hears stories of the resilience and strength of First Peoples cultures, knowledges, and traditional practices.

Will the Truth-telling process cover current issues?

Yes. It will be able to address deaths in custody, police violence, removal of children, over-representation in prisons and other forms discrimination. Many government systems, laws and practices have still not acknowledged the impact of colonisation and so further entrench disadvantage and discrimination. It will be important for the Truth-telling process to hear how historical practices – and the lack of public or official recognition of this history – continues to cause ongoing harms.

What will Truth-telling change?

Truth-telling plays an important educative function, but public acknowledgement can also be a form of justice in its own right. Evidence uncovered by Truth-telling may be the basis for a range of changes, such as changing education curriculums, the names of places, public memorials, current government policies, practices and law reform including providing redress for the First Peoples of Victoria.

While it is important to note that the Truth-telling body itself will not be able to implement changes it will be able to make recommendations to government and other organisations for implementation. Future Treaty/Treaties might include an agreement on what will happen following the Truth-telling process.

Will Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from country outside Victoria and non-Aboriginal people be included?

Yes, but the Truth-telling about historical injustice will focus on what happened on country within Victoria, to First Peoples of Victoria. This may include stories from people removed from country in Victoria.

Stories of continuing harm caused by past policies are likely to include stories from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people from country outside Victoria who have been living in Victoria. Yes, non-Aboriginal people may have stories that contribute to Truth-telling about historical injustice and are also an important audience for the Truth-telling.

What powers will the Truth-telling body have?

We propose the Truth-telling body should have the power to compel government and others (for example churches or schools) to appear or produce documents and to answer questions. These issues are still being finalised.

It will not have the power to order reparations, punish individuals, or implement reforms. It will have the power to recommend specific follow-on action that should be taken and by whom. For example, it might suggest changes to education curricula, or law reform, or that reparations be included in a future Treaty with the State.

When will the Truth-telling process start?

We are aiming to have the Truth-telling body set up by mid-2021. There is no decision yet on how long the Truth-telling process will run for. In other countries, truth commissions often last for three to five years.

How do all mobs have a say?

Information about how to have a say on our website www.firstpeoplesvic.org or email at truthtelling@firstpeoplesvic.org.

Community can talk to Assembly Members in their regions – contact details are on our website: www.firstpeoplesvic.org.

We will be holding forums in Community – contact Lisa Thorpe (Engagement Project Officer) via lisat@firstpeoplesvic.org.