

## First People's Assembly of Victoria pushes forward for truth-telling

An interview with Marcus Stewart - 9 October 2020



**Connection Matters Radio (CMR):** On the 11th of July this year, the First People's Assembly of Victoria announced that the state Government had accepted the need for a truth-telling process and had committed to work with the Assembly on establishing such a process. Now, nearly three months later, and to discuss progress towards establishing a truth telling process we're joined on Connection Matters Radio by Assembly Co-chair Taungurung and Nira illim bulluk man, Marcus Stewart. Marcus, welcome once again to Connection Matters Radio.

**Marcus:** Pleasure, as always Charles. Thanks for having me.

**CMR:** Marcus, even before the 11th of July and the idea of taking this body of work on the Assembly was already well and truly entrenched in an enormous body of work that was stretching resources to the limits. How does the Assembly expect to take on this new and possibly even larger body of work going forward?

**Marcus:** It's a good question, Charles. And you know, we've had everything thrown at us this year, including a global pandemic. We've been locked down again since July from memory, we went to stage four. But the leadership and the commitment of our chamber never ceases; and my fellow Assembly members never ceases to amaze me. We've dived straight into the work, a truth injustice process. We saw it through a

member led resolution, and this is going to be a community driven outcome, which is critical, which is important, and which is going to be the first in this country's history, in this state's history, a truth process to tell the true side of history.

We've established a truth committee, another committee on top of the work we're doing, which we're meeting fortnightly. We've got two Co-chairs in Troy McDonald and Melissa Jones who are overseeing this work because it's so big, but we're confident that we're going to deliver something special for our community. And we're going to be able to do something special for this country and this State, which has never been done before. It's exciting.

**CMR:** I recognise that during COVID, it's difficult to get out there and gauge community support and even consult with community. But what progress is being made towards that and what plans are being made going forward to ensure that the engagement with community is effective or even more effective than is already being experienced and managed by the Assembly?

**Marcus:** It's always going to be tricky because our mob like the face-to-face, they like to gather, we like to get around each other and have these conversations, have these yarns and talk about ways through things and ways forward. That's not possible right now.

But we've been successful in how we've done this in a digital platform. We saw the results in our annual report, which I think we reached over 40,000 people through our engagement processes. That's outstanding and astonishing given we're in the middle of a global crisis.

Now we've got a commitment that will continually get better in how we reach our people, because this is their process. Their voice is what is critical for us to deliver on all our streams.

So right now, we're out for some consultation, but if we can't get the information, if we can't, for instance, if I use an example, the sample Elder's Voice, which we're consulting on now, if we can't reach our elders, we'll bring it back to our chamber. We'll make a decision on how we can better do it and we'll do it again. That's not preempting a decision of our chamber, but we're committed to getting this right. We're committed to getting treaty right. We're committed to getting truth right.

**CMR:** What are the immediate goals of the Assembly in this body of work? Because the scope is absolutely mind boggling when you're talking about truth-telling: massacres, stolen generation, stolen wages, assimilation, the Frontier Wars, it goes on. So is the goal to actually establish a process or to establish a framework towards achieving a process or a commission?

**Marcus:** Our goal as an assembly is quite simple, Charles. We need to establish a terms of reference in partnership with Government to decide on how that process goes. So from our perspective, it'll be the terms of reference, or whatever that truth and justice process looks like, whether it be a commission or whether it be something else, is going to be community driven and it's going to be community designed. So the scope of what that looks like that'll be our communities across Victoria, traditional owner nations across Victoria, deciding on what that looks like and what that needs to be.

**CMR:** So we're not actually looking to establish a commission at this stage, but just at the core of this is a terms of reference,

which will then establish the next step forward with the Assembly, the Government and Victorian Aboriginal people?

**Marcus:** Our responsibility is to work in partnership with Government on what a terms of reference will be and decide on them terms of reference. What the legal instrument, whether it looks like it's an inquiry, whether it looks like it's a commission, I'm not sure I'm not a lawyer. What that looks like will all form part of the discussions post or part of the discussions we'll have with community.

**CMR:** Do you have any timelines with this particular body of work?

**Marcus:** Our resolution stipulated six months when it was put to the floor. And I think that roughly gives us a timeline of around December. Now, we're working through - given everything that's occurring including COVID, given that we've been in stage four lockdown. Our communities are doing it tough right now. Our members, some of our members are doing it tough, our families are doing it tough. Childcare is only just reopened, that's hard. People have been homeschooling and on Monday some of their families across Victoria can start sending their kids back to school. It's just been tough and we need to acknowledge that. And so we need to always be conscious on the timelines of how we're going to deliver this. And that's something we've always got front of mind.

**CMR:** So there would be a degree of flexibility in this to ensure that there is that engagement?

**Marcus:** I think from our perspective is we're going to have to timelines front of mind. And if it's unachievable, we'll adjust accordingly. But at the moment we have a resolution that's stipulated six months. But we're open to and committed to getting this right. We get one shot at this and we need to get this right.

**CMR:** Marcus given that the goal of a truth telling process, whether it's a commission or whatever, ultimately is going to raise awareness within the broader community of the reality of what has happened to the First Nations since what 1788. Do you believe that this is an instrumental tool to achieving greater reconciliation within this country?

**Marcus:** This is a phenomenal opportunity and an historic opportunity to deliver something special on behalf of our people. And I'd probably flip the question: Is it true reconciliation without truth, without justice

and without treaty? That's the opportunity we have right now in Victoria. And that's the responsibility we carry as elected members to deliver for and with our communities across Victoria.

**CMR:** Marcus Stewart, Co-chair of the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria, thanks so much, indeed, for sharing your thoughts and your insights into the truth telling process here on Connection Matters Radio.

**Marcus:** Thanks, Charles.

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