

# Indigenous leaders praise Victoria's commitment to talk about treaty

Government agreement to hold convention on treaty comes as support for constitutional recognition wanes among some Indigenous people



Reconciliation Victoria statewide coordinator Erin McKinnon said it was possible to achieve constitutional recognition and a treaty, saying the two aims were ‘not oppositional’

Photograph: Tracey Nearmy/AAP

[Calla Wahlquist](#)

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Indigenous leaders have praised the Victorian government for agreeing to sit down and talk about a treaty, after a meeting of about 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in [Melbourne](#) voted unanimously against the constitutional recognition process.

In the biggest formal rejection of the Recognise campaign since the multimillion dollar process began, attendees at the community meeting, hosted by the Office of Aboriginal Affairs in February, resolved to reject constitutional recognition and instead demand the state resource a treaty process, including establishing a framework for treaties in collaboration with “all sovereign peoples and nations”, to be finalised by 1 December.

The Victorian Aboriginal affairs minister, Natalie Hutchins, has committed to making that process happen, saying governments in Australia have ignored Indigenous views “for too long”.

“It’s pretty disappointing that in 2016 Australia is still the only commonwealth nation without a treaty with our first peoples,” Hutchins said.

The government, which says it’s committed to self-determination for Aboriginal people, plans to hold a two-day convention in the middle of the year to set out the negotiation process and look at forming an Elders Council.

Rod Little, co-chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, said [Victoria](#) should be applauded for having the courage to open up debate.

“We have talked about treaty for a long time but there is this fear [from governments] and we haven't explored that fear that governments have ... we haven't even sat down to look at this issue and discuss what is a treaty, and what would it look like,” he said. “All people have done is jump to the defensive position.”

Little, a Noongar and Yamatji man from Western Australia, said he hoped other states would follow Victoria's lead and form agreements with their [Indigenous peoples](#).

He said he supported the constitutional recognition process, but said some were “losing confidence in the process”.

“We [the National Congress] supported it from day one, but fundamentally, from constitutional recognition, there has to be tangible outcomes for our people that are going to benefit them and will result in a better life,” he said.

“There's no guarantee that we could work towards achieving benefits from recognition. Some have drawn on the evidence of the 67 referendum when there was a lot of expectations raised but, if you look at our current position, it doesn't seem to have benefited really Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

The federal government has committed to holding a referendum to change the constitution to recognise Aboriginal people and remove discriminatory clauses, and [a 2015 survey by the Australian National University found that 73% of Australians supported the idea](#).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander opposition to the campaign on the basis that it could potentially undermine a treaty process has been [a constant feature of the campaign](#).

Dja Dja Wurrung elder Gary Murray was one of those at the Victorian meeting. He says the Recognise campaign is “a very well-funded distraction”.

“We have always marched for sovereignty, treaty and land rights,” he told Guardian Australia. “We never ever marched for recognition.”

Murray, a spokesman for Victorian Traditional Owners Land Justice Group, said the aims of constitutional recognition – to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the preamble and remove racist clauses in the founding document – could be folded into a treaty.

“Recognition is about removing racist clauses in a white man's document that didn't even look after white women, let alone black people. We are just tinkering with it,” he said.

Reconciliation Victoria statewide coordinator Erin McKinnon said it was possible to achieve constitutional recognition and a treaty, saying the two aims were “not oppositional”.

“We see constitutional reform and treaty processes are both important parts of that work and they are both recommendations of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.”

In a statement, Recognise joint campaign director Tanya Hosch said she was not concerned by Victorian opposition to the proposed referendum, saying that many high-profile Aboriginal people supported both a treaty and recognition, and “it’s critical that we all understand that we don’t have to choose between the two”.

“Treaties and agreement-making can already and do already occur, but the process of constitutional change are separate,” she said. “Constitutional recognition could be just over a year away from completion, and we need to conclude this piece of work.”

“Conversations and efforts towards a treaty are not new,” she added. We don’t expect that work to be shelved because constitutional recognition is being pursued.”