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Victoria leading the way by funding a new elected body for Treaty negotiations

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (Congress) applauds the Victorian government for committing \$28.5m towards forming an elected Aboriginal body to further Treaty negotiations. The decision was announced in April by Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Natalie Hutchins, who made it clear that the body would also deal with other issues concerning the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria.

The Andrews government committed to investigating Treaty options within Victoria in 2016 and is now pushing for a statutory representative body before the 2018 election. As part of this commitment, the Victorian Aboriginal Treaty Interim Working Group (Working Group) was also established in 2016 to consult with Aboriginal communities and to advise government as “an equal partner” in working towards a Treaty. The relevant funding was introduced two months following a report by the Working Group on the progress of treaty negotiations.

Bangarang woman and Congress delegate, Geraldine Atkinson is a member of the Working Group and advocates for a representative body as it is “important that the Aboriginal people have got that say” in significant issues which affect them, such as Treaty formation.

Central to the resolution of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues is the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders who know what is integral and effective towards the wellbeing and healing of their people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues have been politicised throughout history, with the termination of multiple national statutory bodies alongside elections and changes in government. This can no longer be tolerated at both state and national levels when considering the enduring presence of intergenerational issues among Aboriginal communities and families today, which stem from the trauma of Australia's past.

Congress encourages that the approach put forward by the Andrews government is adopted in other States and eventually, on a national level. Progress is evident, with South Australia appointing Kokatha and Mirning man, Dr Roger Thomas to lead Treaty talks with Aboriginal groups within the State.

As Australia's peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation, Congress reiterates the importance of consistent government funding for a national representative body to coordinate the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups holistically across Australia. We must move forward to achieve the self-determination that was for so long denied to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia, but we must do so as a nation – in unity.

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