



Brighton & Hove Museums

Briefing note on decision to return Indigenous Australian Human Remains

In June 2005, the Australian Government requested the return of five Indigenous Australian human remains held by Brighton & Hove Museums: two skulls and two femora (thigh bones) in the Natural History collection, and a skull water vessel in the World Art collection.

Brighton & Hove City Council's response was delayed while national guidelines, and the Council's own policy, concerning the care of human remains were drawn up.

In September 2008, the Culture, Recreation & Tourism Cabinet meeting of Brighton & Hove City Council agreed to return the Natural History remains. These were collected by Major Sumner and George Trevor, representatives of the Ngarrindjeri Nation, on Friday 15 May 2009. The occasion was marked by a ceremony outside Brighton Museum & Art Gallery.

In May 2009, the Full Cabinet of Brighton & Hove City Council agreed to return the World Art remain.

These decisions follow a lengthy investigation into and consideration of the material. Brighton & Hove Museums have followed recommended procedure in considering the request, including reference to:

- The Department of Culture, Media and Sport's *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains* (2005)
- Brighton & Hove Museums' *Acquisitions and Disposals Policy* (2005)
- Brighton & Hove Museums' *Policy for the care and treatment of human remains* (2006)

This procedure requires all claims to be assessed against set criteria. These criteria include the status of those making the request and continuity with remains; the cultural, spiritual and religious significance of the remains and the scientific, educational and historical value of the remains to the museum and the public. The decision to return the remains also took into consideration the assurances the Australian government has provided about the treatment of the remains once returned.

Scientific analysis of the Natural History remains showed them to be of Australian Aboriginal ancestry. But since the remains are unprovenanced, and cannot therefore be returned to the community or region of origin, they will be held at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

The World Art remain, which originates from the Ngarrindjeri Nation, will be collected by Ngarrindjeri Nation representatives at some future point and returned to the community.

The Australian government will meet all the costs incurred in the transportation and return of the remains.

Museums hold collections in trust for the public. They rarely release objects from the collections, and then only in highly structured and controlled circumstances.

In September 2008, Councillor David Smith, Chair of BHCC's Culture, Recreation & Tourism Cabinet, stated:

'The two skulls and two thigh bones at the Booth Museum of Natural History were donated almost 100 years ago. Aboriginal remains found their way into several British museums in the 19th and early 20th centuries, including the Natural History Museum in London. In the 21st century we understand more about the cultural, religious and social significance of these remains to the Aboriginal people and, in certain circumstances, the right thing to do is return them to their homeland.

'We have a clear policy and follow national guidelines for looking after, researching and assessing requests for the return of such items. Scientific tests revealed that our remains were of Australian Aboriginal ancestry. We will work with the Australian High Commission to make sure they are returned sensitively.

'The cost of transferring them is not known and will be paid for by the Australian government.'

In May 2009, Councillor Mary Mear's, leader of Brighton & Hove City Council said:

'It's about respecting the Ngarrindjeri people's values and wanting to do the right thing by them.

'The remain is very significant to the Ngarrindjeri Nation. So we felt on balance that returning the carrier is the proper and humane thing to do.'

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