

Is it altruism or the fear of losing their marbles?

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"The race is a very degraded one and ... even the coarse traders and cattle-ranchers make no irregular unions with their women so the race remains pure." - Dr Arthur Gedge, circa 1900.

Deep in the recesses of London's Natural History Museum rest the skulls and leg bones of two Aboriginal men whose lives were considered so morally "degraded" that, in 1900, they were hunted down and killed by a white expedition. But, once safely dead, these racially "pure" Allura tribesmen became prized trophies. Historical records, held by Britain's Royal College of Surgeons, show their skins were boiled off them "on the spot" and the bones given to Dr Arthur Gedge by the expedition's leader, an unnamed patient. Two decades later Gedge shipped them to Britain where, after first being held by the college, these victims from the Northern Territory's Victoria River ended up among the most valuable parts of the world's largest collection of Aboriginal human remains. To the museum, the collection is an incomparable scientific asset, a vital resource for the study of evolution and genetic development; to many Aboriginal people, it is a sacrilege, an enduring insult to the souls of the unburied dead and their living descendants.

The question is, who is right?

European and British museums are believed to hold thousands of Aboriginal bones, hair and soft tissues, removed or stolen from Australia as recently as the 1940s, usually against the wishes of local people or without their knowledge. Recent research has found that at least 60 museums in England alone hold human remains, including the British Museum in London and the Duckworth Collection at Leverhulme Centre at Cambridge University, the second largest after the Natural History Museum. It holds 448 Aboriginal remains, including named or known individuals, such as King Billy, tribal leader from north Queensland. While there have been some celebrated repatriations, including the head of the West Australian leader Yagan and this year's return of a hair sample from Truganini, Tasmania's most famous Aboriginal woman, by the surgeons' college, many institutions are reluctant to return remains and break up collections. The director of the Leverhulme Centre, Dr Robert Foley, argues that collections belong to the "world" rather than any one group. His views are shared by many scientists. "The ultimate justification is that skeletal collections are kept as part of global human heritage, not the preserve of any one culture," he writes in the current edition of the journal *Science and Public Affairs*.

"Will future generations of Western and Aboriginal cultures be more grateful that the past was preserved rather than lost or intentionally destroyed because of current political fashion? Destroying history is not the answer to the problems of these communities." But, after decades of pressure by Aboriginal groups and, more latterly, the Australian Government, it appears that Foley's arguments may soon be out of fashion. In January, an independent British working group of museum directors, lawyers and academics, chaired by the legal academic Professor Norman Palmer and including the Natural History Museum director, Dr Neil Chalmers, is due to report on more than 18 months of investigation into repatriation of human remains. It is expected to recommend the relaxation of laws preventing export of human remains from Britain's national collection, mainly held by the British and Natural History Museum, and the setting up of a tribunal to deliberate on Aboriginal claims. A working group member, Dr Maurice Davies, the deputy director of Britain's Museums Association, declined to discuss the report but said it be would "sympathetic and understanding" to repatriation claims. But once the working group is done, it will be over to the politicians. More than two years ago, during a visit to coincide with Australia's Centenary of Federation celebrations, the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, agreed to speed up the return of human remains between the two countries. During a 50-minute meeting at Downing Street, at which the two leaders discussed several key topics including Indonesia's then leader, President Wahid, the G8 summit in Japan and Australia's tax reform agenda, Howard told Blair that he "understood the difficulties involved" in the repatriation issue. Members of the human remains working group believe these difficulties now include British fears about the Elgin Marbles, the world's most controversial "stolen" cultural artefacts, removed from Greece by the British in the early 19th century.

Davies and another working group member, who declined to be named, told the Herald that the group had been told by senior public servants that the Blair Government would not change laws governing the national collection if the changes assisted Greek claims for the return of the marble sculptures. "There appears to be nervousness about how legislation on human remains will be perceived in the light of claims for cultural property," Davies said. "Legislation appears to be slipping down the political agenda." A spokeswoman for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport denied pressure had been placed on the working group. It is still expected to push for law changes, but whether the Blair Government accepts its recommendations is another matter. Without law reform, the Natural History Museum will be able to continue to deny repatriation claims in the national interest - and years of Australian pressure may come to nought. Lyndon Ormond Parker, a London-based Aboriginal researcher who has worked extensively in Britain and Australia on repatriation, called on the Australian Government to step up pressure on the British. "Aboriginal people are not going to give up on this issue," he said. "It's a matter of having respect for the wishes of Aboriginal communities concerned."