

Museum lawyers claim bias

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LAWYERS representing Britain's Natural History Museum in the fight to stop scientific testing on the remains of 13 Tasmanian Aborigines have accused the Australian-appointed mediator in the case of bias.

Mediation between the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre and the museum is due to begin on Wednesday, with former NSW Supreme Court chief justice Sir Laurence Street appointed as mediator on the Australian side.

But according to London-based Australian lawyer Geoffrey Robertson, who is representing the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, British lawyers have objected to Sir Laurence because his mother, Jessie Street, had an interest in Aboriginal culture.

Jessie Street, who died in 1970, was a suffragette, feminist and human rights campaigner who played a key role in the removal of Australia's constitutional discrimination against Aboriginal people in 1967.

"On the basis that Sir Laurence's mother was interested in Aboriginal culture, and maintained a small art collection, they believe this could imply a bias in her son," Mr Robertson told The Sunday Age.

"He's one of the best mediators in the world, was a distinguished judge in the NSW Supreme Court, and they have lodged objections about perceived bias on the basis of the recreational interests of his mother. It's quite ridiculous."

The Natural History Museum is fiercely contesting the attempt by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre and the Australian Government to stop the testing on the skeletal remains, which includes drilling into bones and teeth to extract DNA and making plaster casts.

Sir Laurence told The Age last week he was confident an agreement could be reached.

The Natural History Museum has agreed to the return of the remains but wants to conduct more tests before the handover.