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British Museum exhibition Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation reignites repatriation debate

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Julian Drape, London



Prince Charles receives a gift from basket maker Abe Muriata, centre, as he visits the "Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation" exhibition at the British Museum. *Photo: AP*

A landmark exhibition of Indigenous objects in London is the beginning of a debate "among friends" about the possible repatriation of artefacts, the British Museum's director says.

Neil MacGregor revealed he hoped to stage a permanent exhibition of Indigenous Australian artefacts at the museum, just as the new showcase of Aboriginal objects at the London institution has reignited calls for items to be repatriated.

A delegation of Indigenous Australians, along with other dignitaries including Prince Charles (the exhibition's patron) and Australia's High Commissioner in Britain Alexander Downer, attended a reception at the museum's *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* exhibition on Thursday night (Friday morning AEST). The exhibition opened a week ago to mixed reviews and is already drawing large crowds.

Mr MacGregor said the museum was hoping to soon exhibit some Australian Indigenous objects permanently.

"We've begun talking with the Indigenous representatives about how they'd like that story to be set in the context of what's happening all around the world," Mr McGregor told AAP.

There was a small protest outside the exhibition ahead of the opening, but Mr MacGregor said he welcomed the debate. "People have different views on what belongs where and that's precisely what this exhibition allows," he told reporters. "The debate can now take place, as you would hope, between friends on the basis of proper information."

Mr Downer said the exhibition would improve Britain's limited understanding of Aboriginal Australia.

However, he has refused to enter the heated debate about possible repatriation of artefacts.

"This will be extremely educative," Mr Downer told reporters. "People have a very simple understanding here in the UK of Indigenous Australia and this will give them a much clearer picture of the richness of the culture."

Some Aboriginal people in Australia are demanding the museum return objects they insist were stolen during British settlement.

Neatly side-stepping the controversy, Mr Downer said the Australian government's priority was to have human remains repatriated from the British Museum and other institutions.

"Some have been, [but] there's still some here though," he said. "There are obviously legal issues that have to be addressed, [but] I think the philosophical debate might be pretty much won [in favour of repatriation]."

However, when it came to the potential repatriation of objects, the high commissioner was more measured.

"It depends a lot on the artefacts and how they were acquired - the circumstances in which the British Museum got those artefacts," Mr Downer said, adding he'd defer to Indigenous people from the relevant communities. "They have a lot to say about it".

The exhibition, a joint project with the the National Museum of Australia, will travel to Canberra in November.

Yawuru man Peter Yu, from the Australian museum's Indigenous reference group, believes the exhibition is the first step on a long road towards possible repatriation.

"Let's give the dialogue and the discussion a chance, and then see what the possibilities are," Mr Yu said.

"Everything is based on relationships and trust. If you don't have that, this isn't going anywhere. There are no easy answers at this stage."

Prince Charles said his younger son may, like him, have been struck by the deep spiritual relationship that Indigenous Australians have with the land "which is part of their being in every sense".

The British Museum exhibition, which opened last week and runs until August, is the first major show in Britain to present a history of Indigenous Australia through objects.

The artefacts on display include a shield believed to have been collected by Captain Cook or one of his men at Botany Bay in 1770.

Prince Charles said the exhibition explored the "immense impact" of European settlement, and dealt with difficult and painful episodes in Australian history, including dispossession, social dislocation and the stolen generations.

"[But] my great hope is that exhibitions of this kind can help build a bridge to enable Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to communicate with, and understand one another more effectively," he said.

"If it can also inspire us to regain that sense of reverence for the natural environment, which is so much a part of the innate wisdom of all indigenous communities around the world, then perhaps it will have helped us all to learn to be better custodians of the planet."

Earlier this year, Aboriginal activist and historian Gary Foley cast doubt on the British Museum's willingness to engage in serious debate.

"Bet they won't be prepared to seriously discuss issues of repatriation of cultural materials obtained through nefarious means ... because of their retention of the so-called 'Elgin marbles'," he wrote.

It's expected Indigenous people will mount a legal challenge to try and stop some objects returning to Britain after the Canberra exhibition.

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