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JOINT STATEMENT WITH TONY BLAIR ON ABORIGINAL REMAINS

The Australian and British governments agree to increase efforts to repatriate human remains to Australian indigenous communities. In doing this, the governments recognise the special connection that indigenous people have with ancestral remains, particularly where there are living descendants.

The Australian government appreciates the efforts already made by the British government and institutions in relation to assisting the return of human remains of significance to Australian indigenous communities. We agree that the way ahead in this area is a cooperative approach between our governments. Our governments recognise that there is a range of significant issues to be addressed in order to facilitate the repatriation of indigenous human remains. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated long-term approach by governments involving indigenous communities and collecting institutions. Consultation will be undertaken with indigenous organisations as part of developing any new cooperative arrangements.

Significant efforts have already been undertaken by individuals and particular organisations in this area. More research is required to identify indigenous human remains held in British collections. Extensive consultation must also be undertaken to determine the relevant traditional custodians, their aspirations regarding the treatment of the remains and a means for addressing these.

The governments agree to encourage the development of protocols for the sharing of information between British and Australian institutions and indigenous people. In this respect we welcome the initiative of the British Natural History Museum which has catalogued the 450 indigenous human remains in its collection and provided this information to the Australian government.

We endorse the repatriation of indigenous human remains wherever possible [and appropriate] from both public and private collections. We note that several British institutions have already negotiated agreements with indigenous communities for the release of significant remains. In particular, Edinburgh University, following extensive consultation with the Australian government and indigenous organisations, has recently completed repatriation of a large collection of remains.

Our governments look forward to continuing to address this issue in a cooperative and constructive spirit.

4 July 2000

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