

Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre

PRESS STATEMENT

VICTORY FOR ABORIGINES AGAINST UK MUSEUM

The 20 year struggle by Tasmanian Aborigines to force the British Natural History Museum to give up its hold over 17 Aboriginal dead is finally over, Legal Manager Michael Mansell said today. “The remains will be brought back to Tasmania at the Hobart airport at 1pm on Monday 14th May”, he added.

A formal agreement has been reached between the TAC and the Natural History Museum. The legal case TAC took against the Museum will be dropped, and the full collection of Tasmanian dead NHM holds will be handed over to Greg Brown and Caroline Spotswood in London at 4pm on Friday 11th, London time. Under the deal the Museum must hand over all DNA taken from the remains.

“This is a great victory for Aboriginal people against an unsympathetic British institution. It means the spirits of our dead can be settled once and for all. We will cleanse the spirits of the dead in a ceremony. This time, we hope, the trauma the spirits of our 17 ancestors suffered after death will at last be put to an end.”

Mr Mansell admitted there was nothing Aborigines could do about the abuse the remains had been subjected to. “It is not a perfect settlement, but it was the best we could do. Our main concern was to get the remains out of the grubby paws of these scientists in London who abused the dead against our express wishes we conveyed to the Museum over the last 20 years.

The importance of the capitulation by NHM cannot be overstated. While many other museums throughout the UK have been happily handing our dead back over the last 17 years, the Natural History Museum has held the line. The attitude of its scientists that treated our heritage as their playground dictated the policy towards repatriation. That attitude flew in the face of the agreement struck between John Howard and Tony Blair in 2000, and defending the legal case we were forced into cost the Museum about \$A1m.

The cave-in by this particular museum means that institutions that formed an alliance with NHM – Oxford and Cambridge universities – are now isolated. NHM was central to the alliance, a bit like the US pulling out of Iraq and leaving the other countries to make their own decisions.

Already our delegates have found a change of heart at the Scottish National Museum that holds the skull of one of our ancestors. We expect all Tasmanian remains to be repatriated this year or next.

We won this battle,” Mr Mansell said “because our people never gave up. The support of the

Australian government was also significant, and we had a legal team led by ex-pat Geoffrey Robertson QC who believed a wrong had to be righted.”

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