

Group to work on return of remains

By KIRSTIE PARKER



THE Federal Government says it will overhaul the processes for the repatriation of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander remains and cultural material from international institutions to make them more inclusive of Indigenous aspirations.

Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin announced on Friday that the Government would establish a new International Repatriation Advisory Committee to steer the review.

Ms Macklin said she would call for expressions of interest and the committee would be appointed in September.

"The committee will advise the Government on a range of issues, including reviewing current international repatriation policy and finding a more effective way to deliver on international repatriation," she said.

The development came at the International Conference on the Inclusive Museum held at the University of Queensland (UQ) in Brisbane on Friday, just before a panel of Indigenous people from the Torres Strait, the Kimberley, Groote Eylandt and South Australia shared some of their experiences of repatriation.

A fortnight ago, Centre for Indigenous Cultural Policy (CICP) representatives confronted Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Heritage Minister Peter Garrett at a Community Cabinet meeting in Beenleigh, south-east Queensland.

Endorsed at an Indigenous repatriation summit last year as an interim co-ordination body for a national Aboriginal repatriation body, the CICP wants more Indigenous say in repatriation and a holistic approach by all levels of government.

"What would you do, Prime Minister, if the remains of your Grandmother or your Grandfather were kept in plastic bags and cardboard boxes in vaults and cupboards and drawers in a museum anywhere across the world?" CICP Chairman Bob Weatherall asked the PM.

Mr Garrett is understood to have given a commitment to a better and more co-ordinated response to the issues, a theme picked up by Minister Macklin on Friday.

She was applauded as she called on museums and private collectors worldwide to work with the Government to return Indigenous remains.



Minister Jenny Macklin with delegates at the International Conference on the Inclusive Museum in Brisbane on Friday.



KALACC's Terry Murray, Neil Carter and Tom Lawford told the conference about their people's experiences in repatriating remains from European museums.

RIGHT: Repatriation campaigner Bob Weatherall, who is Chairman of the CICP.



"The Australian Government strongly believes the repatriation of Indigenous remains must occur respectfully, unconditionally and as quickly as possible, and will continue to work with countries to ensure the return of Indigenous remains," she said.

Ms Macklin said it was estimated that 1000 Indigenous Australian ancestral remains continued to be held in museums around the world, after being collected by explorers, travellers

and scientists over the past 160 years.

However, Indigenous groups believe the figure to be considerably higher.

In the past 18 months, more than 80 Australian Indigenous remains have been repatriated from five institutions in four countries.

At the end of June, the Seattle Art Museum became the first American collecting institution to independently initiate the return of

a secret/sacred object to Australia. It plans to return an important Central Australian Aboriginal object, which was first collected in 1970.

Bob Weatherall welcomed Ms Macklin's speech, particularly as it echoed the CICP's earlier calls for an overhaul of Australia's repatriation policies.

But he said Aboriginal people would want more information about the proposed advisory body; who would decide its

membership; whether it would be independent and adequately resourced and if the government would be compelled to implement its recommendations.

"(Repatriation) really requires a collaborative approach between Aborigines, Islanders and museums and governments," he told delegates. "But Aborigines and Islanders must be the ones who guide this all the way through."

Mr Weatherall said Indigenous Australians did not enjoy the same ownership or control over repatriation processes as the Native Americans or the Maori of New Zealand.

"We don't have nothing," he declared. "We've still got whitefellas managing us, and managing our ancestors. It is out of our control; there's no ownership, no control and no management. That has got to change."

Mr Weatherall appealed to museum representatives to deal directly with Indigenous Australians.

"I understand that there must be some government-to-government approach, but they don't make the decisions and we do not give them the consent to do so," he said.

The chairperson of the conference advisory board, Professor Amareswar Galla, from UQ, and President of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Alissandra Cummins both described Minister Macklin's speech as a turning point for repatriation for Australia.

Madame Cummins said Australia had a very short colonial history but the damage done meant that a great deal of work was needed to address its legacy.

She said initiatives being taken by governments and museums in Australia 'must involve the Indigenous people to whom the damage was done and for whom the repair is so essential to the self-respect and to the essence of this great nation'.

Mr Weatherall told *The Koori Mail* on Saturday he would be disappointed if the CICP or other organisations such as the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) or the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC) were not represented on the advisory committee announced by Ms Macklin.

For more information on how to apply for positions on the International Repatriation Advisory Committee, go to <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/about/news/2009/Pages/RepatriationAdvisoryCommittee.aspx>



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