

New British laws allow Aboriginal remains to return

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The British government has enacted a law allowing the British Museum and eight other leading institutions to return human remains to indigenous communities abroad, including Australia.

A section of the Human Tissue Act allows museums to return remains "which are reasonably believed to be under 1,000 years in age".

Culture Minister David Lammy said the change was a "response to the claims of indigenous peoples, particularly in Australia, for the return of ancestral remains."

Australian Aborigines have appealed to the British and Australian governments for more than 20 years to help them bring the remains of their ancestors home.

Indigenous groups in North America and New Zealand have made similar appeals.

Aboriginal groups estimate more than 8,000 sets of remains remain in museums and institutions abroad, most taken from the country as curios and scientific specimens in the 19th century.

Hundreds of remains have already been taken back to Australia from countries, including the United States and Sweden.

Most British museums can already respond to such claims, but the British Museum, the Natural History Museum and other large national facilities were created by acts of parliament which barred them from disposing of items in their collections.

The government also said it had also drawn up new guidelines to help museums decide what to do with human remains in their collections.

- AP