

Australian Senate joins push to repatriate Indigenous artefacts from British Museum

Indigenous activist Rodney Kelly wins Senate's support for return of Gweagal shield and spears



Rodney Kelly, who is a descendant of the Gweagal warrior Cooman who was shot by Captain James Cook's men in 1770. He is campaigning for his ancestor's shield to be returned from the British Museum. Photograph: Roseanna Parks

By Calla Wahlquist
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It's a tale of first contact: in the autumn of 1770, two members of the Gweagal people stood on the shore of the place that would come to be called Botany Bay and watched warily while a boat paid for by the British navy approached the shore.

One of the men on the boat was Captain James Cook, who would soon be credited with discovering the place where the Gweagal people and people from more than 200 other nations had lived for millennia.

Both men on the shore carried shields and spears and used them to warn the intruders to stay away. The British shot back, hitting one of the men, named Cooman, in the leg. Cooman dropped his shield.

Two hundred and forty-six years later, one of Cooman's descendants, Rodney Kelly, is trying to get that shield back from the British Museum, where it has been since Cook collected it and up to 50 spears and sailed back to England in 1771.

On Tuesday, Kelly sat in the public gallery while the Senate voted for a motion to support the repatriation of the shield and spears to Australia and the ownership of

the Gweagal people. He won the support of the New South Wales parliament last month.

The British Museum has a vexed relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and indeed people of most cultures, for its history of acquiring artefacts that were in many cases stolen from their original owners.

They have also traditionally been presented in a way that supports a singular view of history, one of settlement and terra nullius rather than invasion and conflict. Many, such as Kelly, see the museum's dogged refusal to hand back artefacts as a continuation of the colonial project.

"I just would like for these artefacts to be available for our kids, so that they can all go to the museum and here the story of what really happened in 1770," Kelly told Guardian Australia.

"I would like the kids to learn that from day one we were confronted with armed marines and gunfire.

"From day one we were never thought of as people ... Since the first day there has been gunfire and bloodshed and artefacts taken."

Kelly said that as the story of that first meeting between Cooman and Cook was passed down through his family it became as much a story about the shield that was stolen, a shield they had to get back.

"It connects me and my family to a people who were in the Botany Bay region for thousands of years," he said. "To have that connection just makes us proud of who we are."

The shield was one of 151 artefacts lent by the British Museum to the National Museum of Australia for a recent exhibition detailing early encounters between colonists and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is one of the few pieces in the museum's 6,000-piece Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collection to currently be on display in London.

But Kelly said it could be better displayed in the Museum of Sydney, where Gweagal people could explain the history and the story of the artefact.

"They would never tell that story like we could, they are not talking from the heart, it doesn't mean nothing to them," he said.

A Western Australian senator, Rachel Siewert, who moved the motion, called on the federal government to support Kelly's attempts to negotiate the return of the artefacts.

"I met with Mr Kelly today and had a really positive discussion about his campaign and hope the shield and other artefacts are returned," Siewert said.

“It is core to Aboriginal belief that artefacts must be kept on the country they came from.

“It is a positive step for Mr Kelly’s campaign that the Australian Senate has expressed its support for repatriation of these important artefacts and has requested the Australian government to extend diplomatic assistance to Mr Kelly.”