

Aboriginal skeletons head home

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ABORIGINAL skeletons and body parts shipped to British museums in the past 200 years will begin returning home in coming months.

A third of the 21 British institutions and museums approached by the federal Government, including the prestigious British Museum, have promised to return the remains.

They are likely to start coming home within months after consultations with Aboriginal communities are completed.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough said yesterday that after more than 20 years of campaigning by indigenous Australians and years of work by the Australian and British governments, progress had finally been made.

The British parliament passed the Human Tissue Act last year, which removed the legal block on

the return of remains held in museums.

All museums in Britain have now removed Aboriginal remains from display, and most are negotiating with Canberra on their repatriation.

Australia posted a repatriation projects officer at the Australian high commission in London last year to help museums — including those in Exeter, Cornwall, Bristol, Manchester and north-east England — comply with the request for remains.

Mr Brough said the Government welcomed the British Museum's recent agreement to return the remains of two Tasmanian Aborigines.

"This is a positive sign that public museums are beginning to respond to the work of the Australian and British governments," Mr Brough said.

More than 10,000 sets of remains in Australia and overseas are unidentified.

Many of the bodies were illegally supplied to museums and medical schools overseas by grave-robbers who sold skeletons for "scientific purposes".

John Howard and British Prime Minister Tony Blair issued a joint statement in 2000, agreeing to increase efforts to repatriate remains to indigenous communities. The governments recognised the special connection indigenous people had with ancestral remains.

The British Government set up a working group in 2001, which produced a comprehensive report confirming the value of returning remains to indigenous people.

"Over the past 100 years, bodies and body parts of indigenous Australians have been taken for several reasons, including scientific research," Mr Brough said. "Some of the remains are the grandparents of people alive today. Returning these remains enable communities to heal."