

Herald Sun

Racism kills our heritage



Andrew Bolt
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THERE'S plenty of New Racism -- and some of the old -- in the bid by Dja Dja Wurrung activists to seize two Aboriginal bark etchings on loan from British museums.

So-called elders of the Bendigo-based "tribe" say they are the true owners of the etchings, which were collected by Loddon River landowner John Hunter Kerr in the 1850s.

"We believe strongly that (the artefacts) connect us to our country, our culture and ancestry," said spokesman Gary Murray.

This is not just a try-on.

Murray has won an emergency declaration order under Aboriginal heritage laws to stop the return of the etchings to their legal owners -- the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens, which sent them here for an exhibition at the Melbourne Museum. Some thanks they've got. The British thought we'd be borrowing their stuff, but now find we're keeping it.

Lawyers have been engaged, experts flown out and we taxpayers, of course, will once more foot the bill for a stupidity that should have been laughed to scorn.

But welcome to the New Racism, which insists that we are always members of a tribe, and that what was done to some never-known ancestor was done to us.

This New Racism also declares that what was once owned by that never-known ancestor -- even if given away -- was owned by us, too. Even the knowledge of that never-known ancestor remains our property.

Forget the humanist idea that we are all individuals, free to make our own identities as equal members of the human race. In this New Racism, we're driven back into tribes.

And so Gary Murray and the Dja Dja Wurrung say these etchings are theirs, simply because ancestors 150 years ago made them.

There's a touch of old-style racism in their claim, of course. How does Murray know his ancestors didn't freely give these etchings to old Kerr when he came collecting? Or does he assume Aborigines back then were all too greedy or dumb to give or sell such things?

And if they did give Kerr the etchings, by what right does now -- 150 years on -- grab them back?

It's a good thing his ancestors -- if indeed that's what they are -- did hand over the etchings. They are the only two left in existence, and if Kerr hadn't collected them, and send them off for safekeeping, there would be none left for anyone to fight over.

That's one of the great gifts of museums; they have been keeping artefacts that may otherwise have been lost to us.

They have also brought knowledge of the cultures that made them to people who would otherwise have known nothing of tribes such as the Dja Dja Wurrung.

But the Dja Dja Wurrung's bid for ownership attacks the very concept of our museums by declaring that artefacts are in the end always owned by the tribes that made them, never the museums that bought, found or saved them.

What a primitive and undeserving ownership that is.

Murray and his fellow "elders" did not make these etchings, did not collect them, and did not preserve them. Their only claim to them is that some tribesman they never met and could not name may have made them before giving them away.

If that's what ownership is today, then nothing in our museums or art galleries can stay. Our Dutch paintings must go back to the Dutch who painted them, and the skeleton of Phar Lap back to New Zealand

NATURALLY, all Aboriginal artefacts in the Melbourne Museum must be given back to the tribes that produced them -- just as the priceless Kow Swamp Aboriginal skeletons, at least 9000 and possibly 20,000 years old, have already been returned to the dead's presumed descendants in Echuca, to be destroyed by them and lost to science forever.

How this New Racism cuts us off from each other, and from the knowledge which is part of our common human history.

What a tragedy for civilisation that it grows so strong, particularly among the educated, and is even backed now by our laws.

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