

Greek and Aboriginal communities unite against British Museum

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A Victorian Aboriginal group has called on the Greek community to support their battle to have the British Museum return two important Aboriginal Bark Etchings and one Ceremonial Emu Head-dress. The Cultural Artefacts are priceless and unique, being the only ones in the World from Dja Dja Wurrung Country near Boort north west of Bendigo.

Led by Mr Gary Murray, spokesperson for the Dja Dja Wurrung people of northwest Victoria, a small delegation representing the tribe visited the offices of NKEE last week accompanied by the President of the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne and Victoria, Mr George Fountas.

During his visit, Mr Murray said that to his people these three cultural artefacts were as important as the Parthenon sculptures are to the Greek People.

"The cultural heritage of both Australia's Aboriginal people and the Greek people have been plundered and desecrated by the British Museum," Mr Murray said. "It is important that we support each other in our mutual desire to have the British Museum return culturally significant artefacts stolen from each of our peoples!"

The two items in question are the only surviving examples in the world of Victorian Indigenous bark art, and have been in storage at the British Museum for almost 150 years. Earlier this year the British Museum loaned the three artefacts to the Melbourne Museum where they were exhibited as part of the 150th Anniversary celebrations of Melbourne Museum.

The three artefacts were seized under Federal Cultural Heritage legislation that enables an Aboriginal inspector to make a 30-day emergency declaration under which the objects cannot be moved. The Aboriginal inspector has renewed the 30-day declaration five times now, and the Melbourne Museum has commenced legal proceedings in the Federal Court to have the barks returned to the British Museum.

The Melbourne Museum's legal action has created outrage in the Aboriginal community, and Mr Murray and other Indigenous leaders and Elders have called on the State Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr. Gavin Jennings, to resolve the matter by



GOCMV president George Fountas (left) visited Neos Kosmos last week with Gary Murray (right) and another representative of the Dja Dja Wurrung people of northwest Victoria.

using his delegated statutory powers under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 to keep the artefacts in Australia.

Mr. Murray said that Mr Jennings "has the power under Cultural Heritage legislation to resolve this dispute with the stroke of a pen." He called on the Greek community and their supporters to put pressure on the State Government to prevent the barks returning to the British Museum.

"The British Museum's refusal to return these barks is directly related to their refusal to return the Parthenon sculptures, as the British are concerned at creating a precedent that might see the marbles returned to their rightful owners," Mr Murray said. "I therefore believe that the Greek community and the Aboriginal community have in this instance a common enemy, the disreputable institution known as the British Museum."

Mr Murray concluded by saying there has been a long and positive informal association between members of the Melbourne Greek and Aboriginal communities, and this issue was one that could help strengthen and develop this historic relationship because of each community's concern about the theft of items of great importance to their cultural heritage.