Ngarrindjeri Nation Obtains Support of World Archaeological Congress

The World Archaeological Congress (WAC) has come out in support of the Ngarrindjeri Nation of South Australia in their attempts to regain appropriate cultural control over the international repatriation of ancestors looted from graves by early colonists and archaeologists.

The Ngarrindjeri cry for help is in response to a change in Australian government policy. Until recently, the Australian government provided full financial support for Ngarrindjeri Elders to visit collections of human remains in overseas institutions so they could conduct spiritual cleansing ceremonies prior to human remains being returned to Australia, and finally to country. These remains are held in institutions throughout the world, including the British Museum. Following the recent abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Senator the Hon Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs) wrote to the Ngarrindjeri Nation informing them that this support would no longer be available.

A Ngarrindjeri Nation delegation attended the World Archaeological Congress Inter-Congress, ‘The Uses and Abuses of Archaeology for Indigenous Populations’ held in Auckland, New Zealand. At its closing Plenary session, delegates to the Inter-Congress unanimously voted to support ‘the Ngarrindjeri Nation’s right to have their Old People returned to country and to have full control over this process both nationally and internationally’.

Chair of the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee, Mr Tom Trevorrow, said ‘The spirits of the Old People are not at rest because their bodies have been removed from country and interfered with. We don’t want any evil spirits that have entered our Old People’s remains to accompany them home to Australia. We must conduct a cultural spiritual cleansing ceremony at the places where Old People’s remains have been held.’

President of WAC, Dr Claire Smith, stated “I am shocked and saddened by the Australian government’s recent actions. Prior to this, Australia was a leader in international repatriation. The respectful treatment of the mortal remains of the dead is a fundamental human rights issue. It is essential that governments provide adequate resources so that Indigenous peoples, such as the Ngarrindjeri, have the capacity to repatriate and rebury their ancestors in a culturally appropriate manner. This is a responsibility for all levels of government: in this case, the British government, the Australian government and the South Australian government.”

“Such battles come at a great personal cost to Indigenous peoples.” said Dr Smith. “Mr Trevorrow had a heart attack and emergency operation at the beginning of the conference, but later gave his presentation to conference delegates.”

BACKGROUND  The World Archaeological Congress (WAC) is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization and is the only elected international body of practising archaeologists. WAC promotes interest in the past in all countries, to recognise the historical and social role and political context of archaeology, and endeavours to make archaeological studies relevant to the wider community. WAC acknowledges and recognises Indigenous methodologies for interpreting, curating, managing and protecting Indigenous cultural heritage.

Claire Smith, President, World Archaeological Congress, 15th November, 2005
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