

Submission to inform the new National Cultural Policy

From the Advisory Committee for Indigenous Repatriation (ACIR) May 2026

ACIR acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia and recognises the enduring cultural authority of Traditional Owners and Custodians for ancestors, Country, and cultural heritage. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders.

This submission responds to the Australian Government's request for views on how the next National Cultural Policy can reflect First Nations priorities, strengthen recognition of cultural rights, recognise the centrality of language to culture, and support pathways for First Nations leadership across the cultural landscape.

The Committee's focus is Indigenous repatriation: the repatriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestors (ancestors) and cultural heritage material. The Committee provide advice on policy and program matters related to repatriation.

Australia is recognised globally as a leader in repatriation, and the next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to both celebrate this leadership and strengthen it for the future.

About us

The Committee is the Australian Government's expert, ministerially appointed, all-Indigenous advisory body on repatriation. The ACIR comprises six members with lived experience of repatriation and expertise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural matters.

Since its establishment in 2011, the Committee has provided strategic advice on the return and culturally appropriate care of ancestors, specifically for those ancestors where their Traditional Custodians are not identified.

First Nations First – for inclusion in the National Cultural Policy

The Committee's submission is grounded in long-standing experience and emphasises that repatriation is not only a cultural priority but a fundamental human right and recognises Australia's commitment to enacting the articles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

The Committee agrees that the next National Cultural Policy should explicitly:

1. Recognise repatriation as a core cultural, human rights and truth-telling priority.
2. Strengthen the role of Committee as the central, expert advisory body across all Commonwealth repatriation initiatives.
3. Call for a coordinated, whole-of-government policy framework for repatriation providing for community led decision making, care standards, storage and access arrangements and Indigenous data sovereignty and intellectual property rights.
4. Commit to a refresh of the Australian Government's Policy on Indigenous Repatriation 2016.
5. Continue to progress arrangements for a National Resting Place for ancestors returned from overseas with provenance to Australia.
6. Secure, long-term and indexed funding base to support both the international and domestic repatriation program elements.

Indigenous repatriation as a First Nations priority

The return of ancestors and cultural heritage material to communities and Traditional Custodians is a fundamental priority for the Committee and First Nations people. Repatriation supports healing, restores dignity and strengthens cultural practice. It is also a practical expression of truth-telling: acknowledging the historic acquisition, collection and displacement of First Nations ancestors and cultural heritage and taking responsibility to return them to Traditional Custodians.

Repatriation sits at the intersection of arts, museums and galleries, archives, research, heritage protection, international relations, and community cultural governance. For that reason, it is essential that the next National Cultural Policy embeds Indigenous repatriation as a national priority—so that institutions and governments act consistently, ethically, and in culturally appropriate ways.

Foundational principles to include in the National Cultural Policy

The following core principles should be reflected in the National Cultural Policy:

- **Australian Government commitment:** The government must maintain its ongoing commitment to addressing the injustice of Australia’s shared past and supporting the repatriation of ancestors and cultural heritage material both internationally and domestically, with repatriation being an avenue for truth telling.
- **Cultural authority and rightful custodianship:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the rightful custodians of their ancestors and cultural heritage material, and must inform decisions about the return, care, access, ceremony and long-term care of their ancestors and cultural heritage material.
- **Dignity and respect:** Ancestors and cultural heritage material must always be treated with dignity and respect, in accordance with relevant cultural protocols and community directions. Any research, display, digitisation, conservation treatment, or access to culturally sensitive materials must occur only with free, prior and informed consent of Traditional Custodians or their authorised representatives.
- **Free prior and informed consent:** This forms the cornerstone of repatriation work and recognises self-determination for First Nations people in Australia to control decisions about their ancestors and cultural objects.
- **Ethical research, Intellectual Property Rights, and Indigenous data sovereignty:** Information, images, recordings and other data associated with ancestors and cultural heritage material must be managed in ways that uphold Indigenous data sovereignty and intellectual property rights.
- **Collaborative partnerships:** The government maintains a collaborative approach across government agencies at all levels of government both domestic and foreign and supports building partnerships with First Nations people to support communities returning their ancestors and cultural heritage material to Country.

Adopting a whole-of-government approach to Indigenous repatriation

In the past 10 years there has been an increase demand for the repatriation of ancestors and cultural heritage material from both First Nations communities. As the repatriation landscape continues to evolve, there are an increasing number of agencies, institutions and jurisdictions active in the repatriation space. To reduce the burden on First Nations communities, the Committee supports the development of a comprehensive strategy to coordinate repatriation activities across jurisdictions. The new National Cultural Policy provides an

opportunity to improve coordination, governance, and leadership across all Commonwealth and state and territory repatriation activities.

The Committee recommends that the National Cultural Policy formally recognise the Committee as the central advisory body on Indigenous repatriation across government. The Committee calls for the National Cultural Policy to include key principles that can be applied across all areas involved in repatriation while also recommending refreshing the Indigenous Repatriation Policy to reflect the current repatriation environment.

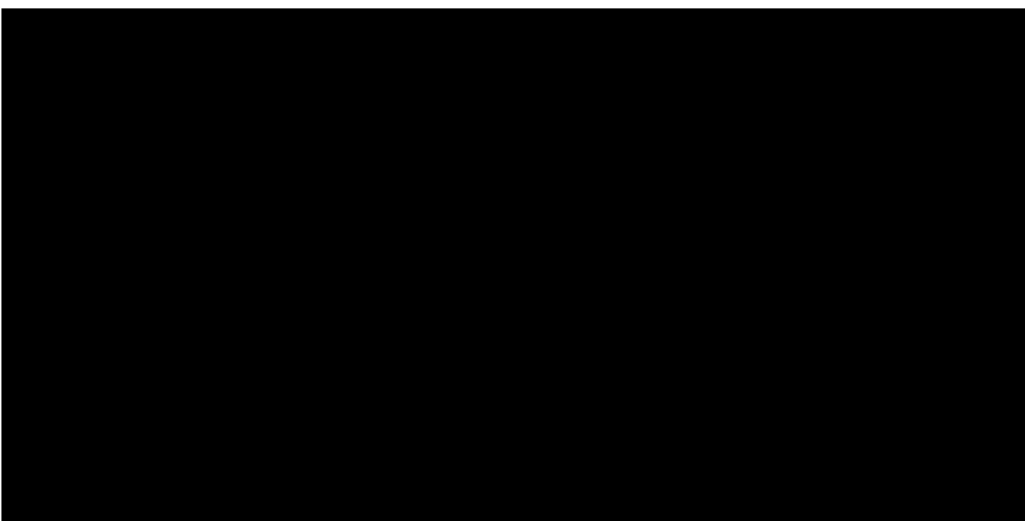
Long-term investment in repatriation and return to Country

The Committee calls on the government to establish a secure, long-term and indexed funding base for both international and domestic repatriation program arms to ensure ongoing support. Funding should reflect escalating travel and operational costs and be structured to support the full journey of the ancestors and cultural heritage material home to Country.

This should be strengthened with state and territory investment to support repatriation within their jurisdictions and to identify and secure appropriate land for return to Country and burial. Recognising the joint responsibility of both the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. Stronger, coordinated engagement by heritage agencies would further support sustainable repatriation outcomes and encourage deeper state and territory involvement.

Australia's Indigenous repatriation program is internationally recognised and respected. It reflects decades of leadership and effort from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with sustained bipartisan government commitment. The next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to celebrate and build on this leadership, to embed stronger, more coordinated and future-focused policy settings. The Committee stands ready to continue working with government to ensure that repatriation policy and practice is responsive to the needs of communities and to provide a voice for the repatriation and care of ancestors whose Traditional Custodians are unknown.

Signed on behalf of the Advisory Committee for Indigenous Repatriation



Date: 19 May 2026