

Cleansing ceremonies in Germany mark a homecoming and a shift in cultural understanding

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[Gail Jones](#)

Smoke wafted through a Leipzig museum's halls following the return of 45 human remains to their rightful custodians in Australia

This is a good news story.

In current times, when so much seems lost, forgotten or burnt to ashes, the return of ancestral remains has a special appeal. Last week the Guardian reported the handback of artefacts stolen from Indigenous Australians [at a ceremony in Manchester](#); this week in Leipzig another significant event took place – the return of 45 ancestral human remains to their rightful custodians, the Gunaikurnai from Victoria, the Menang in Western Australia and the Ngarrindjeri of South Australia.

At the Grassi Museum of Ethnology, the scent of Australian smoke infiltrated the halls and display rooms. Leaves and wood brought from Australia were burnt in two cleansing ceremonies conducted by those responsible for the human remains and their return to communities of origin. Witnesses were reminded of another kind of smoke, another kind of history.

Ngarrindjeri elder Major Sumner (Uncle Moogy) spoke of the smoke as symbolic of release and essential in rituals of mourning and addressed the prestigious museum in the language of the present. With song and body he performed ancestral respect and a model of deep time. This contemporaneity of feeling was a revelation to the sympathetic German audience.

“I was most moved,” one witness whispered, “when I was told the dead are here, among us in this room. I’d never thought about museum exhibits in this way before.”

The Indigenous delegation instructed their European “family”: bodily traces are fully human and without the erosion of time. Even fragile hair samples – gathered in 1880 and among significant matter returned – betoken full humanity and inspire feelings of care and custodianship. According to Amanda Morley of the repatriation section of the Department of Arts, a fundamental assumption is that all human material, whether a sample of hair, a child’s skull or an entire skeleton, remains forever a vehicle of spirit. Even with body parts considered “modified”, such as a skull decorated and used as a drinking cup, Indigenous belief preserves its status as a person, not an object.

The remains were held in modest white boxes, draped in the Aboriginal flag. Arranged together, they formed the shape of a single coffin. This was a funeral of sorts, with the appropriate solemnity and ceremony.

Led by Dr Birgit Scheps-Bretschneider, whose in-depth provenance research was supported by forensic anthropology and medicine, a team was able to discover age, gender, injuries, illnesses and causes of death of human remains. Descendants were established for all of the named ancestors from whom samples originated. Scheps-Bretschneider is a formidable woman with a gentle presence. She has worked at the Grassi Museum with the Oceania collection for 41 years.

“When the wall came down and I was able finally to travel, I gathered all my funds and set off for Australia,” she said.

Repatriation of remains hinged, she said, on a principle of “rehumanisation”. Museum convention requires all acquisitions be given a number and record of provenance. When applied to human remains, this means that what is human is eradicated, disqualified or secondary to object status.

The Australian government has been committed to restitution of remains since 2009 and this is the second ceremony conducted by the state of Saxony. A third and final Australian ceremony will take place in 2020. Australia’s ambassador to [Germany](#), Lynette Wood, was clearly moved by and committed to the principle of returning ancestors to “rest in peace”. “Repatriation”, she said forcefully, “makes us all stronger.” She added that the issue of repatriation was of enormous national significance to each country involved and that its cultural meanings should be better known and more widely discussed.

“It takes just one person talking to another,” said Megan Krakouer, a Menang woman from Western Australia. “Then everything else follows.”

The director of the Grassi, Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, joked that the museum had to switch off smoke detectors to enable the first smoking ceremony – “a very un-museum-like behaviour!” There’s a sense in Leipzig of groundbreaking and radical action. Meijer-van Mensch is devoted to a model of museum activism that considers the repressed history of colonial violence and racism that accompanied the trade in body parts and artefacts. She believes that the role of the Leipzig “racial school of thought” of 19th-century anthropology laid the foundations for the state’s antisemitic laws of 1935. In this she is at the forefront of museum directors for whom the principle of return and disestablishment of certain collections has been crucial to the redefinition of their cultural role.

John Mulvaney, a pioneer in Australian archaeology, warned in 1990 that the return of remains would “replace white violence and repression with black intellectual totalitarianism”. He was mistaken. The sincerity and humility of German and Australian participants in the handing back ceremony – each standing in the same cleansing smoke and aura of tender solidarity – was evidence enough of a shift in cultural understanding of remains.

Bianca Baxter, a Gunaikurnai woman, said: “Everyone has a longing to be home, and it is no different for our ancestors.”

- Gail Jones is an Australian novelist and academic. She was shortlisted for this year’s Miles Franklin award and won the prime minister’s prize for fiction

ROSS GITTINS

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Lowe should rescue a PM lost in the Canberra bubble

Dr Philip Lowe, governor of the Reserve Bank, is one of the smartest economists in the land. You don't get a PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology unless you're super-sharp. But the question now is whether he has the courage to stand up to a wilful Prime Minister whose confidence far exceeds his comprehension.

Scott Morrison, as we know, is refusing to do what Lowe – with the support of the international agencies and most of our economists – has been begging him to do: use his budget to come to the rescue of monetary policy and its ever-feebleness efforts to stop the economy slowing almost to stalling-speed.

Morrison is desperate to deliver a budget surplus. So desperate he's convinced himself that failing to do so would cost him more political support than would allowing the economy to continue failing to lift voters' living standards, and be so weak that a shock from abroad could push us into recession.

How any politician could come to such a self-harming conclusion is hard to fathom. Perhaps it's that the 28 years since our last severe recession have robbed the latest generation of Liberal pollies of their economic nous.

Morrison's so green he hasn't learnt the first rule of politics: if you stuff up the economy, they throw you out. If that's news to you, remember the 1961 credit squeeze, which brought Bob Menzies within a whisker of having his career cut short.

Remember how the 1975 recession dispatched with Gough Whitlam, the recession of the early 1980s finished Malcolm Fraser and the 1990 recession caught up with Paul Keating despite a one-term reprieve granted by Liberal fumbling of the 1993 election.

The question for Lowe is how he responds to the Prime Minister's misreading of his own best interests (not to mention ours). Does Lowe stand back and watch an overconfident leader dice with political death by pretending that monetary policy hasn't reached the end of its useful life and that blood can still be squeezed from the stone? Or does he announce he's done all he sensibly can and turn the economy's problem back to the one (elected) person who could fix it if he came to his senses?

Conventional monetary policy (interest-rate manipulation) has lost most of its power because household debt is at record levels, because the official interest rate is almost at zero, and because rates are already so low that another few cuts won't make much difference.

Further, as Lowe explained in his [speech](#) last week, there's little to be gained from deciding to progress to QE – "quantitative easing". It's not capable of lowering rates much further and, in any case, comes at a cost.

As Lowe himself has acknowledged, it creates a moral hazard. For as long as Lowe

pretends monetary policy is still effective, he's running cover for the person who could do something effective, but chooses not to.

And it's not just the absence of a positive, it's also the continuation of a negative. Everything that causes the budget to take more out of the economy than it puts back in government spending causes private demand to be weaker.

Consider the way continuing bracket creep (only partly countered by the new middle income-earners' tax offset) takes a bigger bite out of households' wage income before they can spend it. Fiscal policy is actually counteracting monetary policy.

In his speech outlining the "limitations of monetary policy" and his lack of enthusiasm for unconventional measures, Lowe noted that their modest benefits needed to be balanced against their possible adverse side-effects.

Such as? First, they may change incentives in an unhelpful way. Providing the banks with ready liquidity during emergencies may encourage them not to bother holding their own adequate buffers, thus making further crises more likely.

Similarly, "the willingness of a central bank to use its full range of policy instruments might create an inaction bias by other policymakers [and] this could lead to an over-reliance on monetary policy," he said. But which policymakers could he possibly have in mind?

A second possible side effect is reducing the efficiency with which resources are allocated throughout the economy. Low interest rates and flattening the yield curve (pushing long-term interest rates down to the level of short-term rates) can damage banks' profitability, leaving them with less capacity to lend.

There are also risks to the stability of the financial system when low interest rates cause the prices of property or shares (and borrowing) to boom at a time when the economy's actually weak.

Finally, a third side-effect is a blurring of the lines between monetary policy and fiscal policy. "If the central bank is buying large amounts of government debt at zero interest rates, this could be seen as money-financed government spending," and so damage a country's credibility internationally.