

Transcript of speech by Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture – Museums Galleries Scotland Parliamentary Reception – 8 October 2024

Good evening, I am sorry that unavoidable parliamentary business means I am unable to be with you in person tonight as we come together during this year's Black History Month.

As you probably know, after the motion in the Scottish Parliament in June 2020, the Scottish Government made a commitment in the Programme for Government which saw us partner with Museums Galleries Scotland to sponsor the Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums project. This 18 month long project, which concluded in 2022, delivered six recommendations and included the largest consultation of attitudes to race in Scottish museums ever conducted.

That consultation really emphasised to the sector that the vast majority of Scottish society wants to see all deeply embedded racism, including that in our museums and galleries, tackled at the root, and eradicated. This underlines why the Scottish Government was proud to accept all the recommendations.

This work remains essential in all of our cultural places. Scotland's museums and galleries should be safe spaces that represent all our communities, and should reflect our nation's past.

This work had a strong grounding, building on the decades of activism against racism both in Scotland and across the world. We were incredibly fortunate that Sir Geoff Palmer acted as Chair for the Steering Group, his impressive legacy of anti-racism is to be applauded and I can only hope to echo his passion and commitment as we take further action. I would like to extend my thanks for the ongoing leadership from Jatin Haria and my gratitude for the wider work of the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights in Scotland.

This work often requires significant individual commitment which draws heavily on inner personal resilience. I would also acknowledge that some of the more nuanced and sensitive aspects are harder for me to fully comprehend as I am fully aware that I speak from my personal position of white male privilege.

It is by collectively challenging privilege that we will enact change. Constructive challenge is incredibly valuable as we seek to understand how we can implement effective change going forward. I often find in my work here in Parliament that I can rely on my peers to offer challenge to views, actions and plans.

I am therefore pleased to hear of the Delivering Change Museum Transformer organisations that I understand Sheila Asante will talk more about. I hope that they are able to provide valuable peer to peer support as they seek to learn, adapt and implement change within their many fine organisations.

Alongside these is the crucial work of the many hard-working museum activists – I understand that there are several in the room today – and I would like to thank you for your continued work.

We can see this partnership work in action in many of our museums and galleries already. The Reveal and Connect: African and Caribbean Collections in Scottish Museums project is funded by Museums Galleries Scotland and led by a consortium of National Museums Scotland; Glasgow Life; The Hunterian, the University of Glasgow; and the University of Aberdeen. This partnership project will not only publish a national review of African and Caribbean collections, but also develop guidance to support other museums and communities gain knowledge and confidence to understand, care for and make best use of their collections.

Our recently published Programme for Government includes a commitment to continuing to develop and embed social justice, rights, and equalities across education, through the implementation of the Anti Racism in Education Programme recommendations. This includes a focus on understanding and enquiring into Scotland's role in historical world events, including transatlantic historic slavery and colonial histories, and their continuing impact today as part of the curriculum.

The Scottish Government is pleased to be funding programmes of professional learning on Teaching Slavery in Scotland, and Migration and Empire with a focus on building capacity and impetus to improve the teaching of Scotland's involvement in the British Empire and its effects and legacies.

Our local authority partners are demonstrating excellence and leadership in this area with Glasgow and Inverclyde creating their own history resources which explore local links to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Education Scotland has been working in partnership with Museums Galleries Scotland to ensure museums support learning and teaching, specifically in History and Modern Studies. A programme of conversations has been established over the last two years to link school and museum staff together and planning for the next year of this project is underway and will provide further opportunity to highlight anti-racism work.

From schools to Universities, we can see the impacts of the work being done across Scotland. The repatriation or rematriation work demonstrates Scotland's willingness to reflect on the objects in our collections and their place in the wider world. While there are many partners engaging in repatriation work, Universities in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow, working alongside museums like the Hunterian and Glasgow Life, I am particularly proud of the rematriation of the Nisga'a Pole to the Nisga'a nation by National Museums Scotland. It was an opportunity to demonstrate on the international stage that the Scottish Government understands the ongoing impacts of the legacy of colonialism and is comfortable with the concept of examining unethical acquisition.

It is with this in mind, that I welcome the creation of the new Repatriation Working Group by Museums Galleries Scotland, which is led by Neil Curtis from the University of Aberdeen. This group will work on making accessible guidance to

promote best practice for any group seeking to explore the ethics of an object and its provenance.

I am going to finish this evening by once again thanking those whose hard work has led us here. Thank you to the activists for their long years of commitment. Thank you to the Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering group and all those who contributed to the advisory panels, consultations and workshops. And thank you to everyone across the full spectrum of museum, gallery and anti-racism space who is willing to share their experiences and views to help shape our future plans.

I look forward to seeing the successor group to the Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums group taking the work of Recommendation 1 forward and I understand that Churnjeet Mahn will be speaking in more detail about this.

By working together, with these common goals, I believe we will make a fairer Scotland, to better improve and enrich the lives of those who live, work and visit here.

Thank you.