IVORY BILL – RETURNING IVORY ITEMS TO COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

Thank you for your contribution to the debate at second reading of the Ivory Bill. I said that I would write on the matter of returning ivory items to the countries of origin.

First, there is nothing in the Bill that will require owners of ivory to destroy or otherwise dispose of ivory items. Commercial activities, including sales, loans and exchanges to, and between, accredited museums will be exempted from the prohibition; and ivory owners will still be able to sell any item to those museums, even if it does not qualify for another exemption. There is therefore no intention for this ban to affect the valued and educational display of historic, artistic and cultural items to members of the public by accredited museums.

The national museum collections are vested in the trustees of the institutions and held for the nation. Collections management is a matter for the trustees and decisions are made independently from government. However, the law prevents national museums such as the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum from disposing of objects in our national collections; successive governments have believed that this is right in principle, and there are no plans to change the law in this respect.

Similarly, it is for local authorities in England that hold collections to decide how to manage them. We expect locally run museums to follow the principles set out in the Museums Association’s Code of Ethics which provides a strong framework for responsible disposal whilst ensuring safeguards are in place to protect collections and public trust in museums.

In practice, restitution of cultural objects in museum collections to their countries of origin tends to involve various legal, ethical and practical complexities. In relation to worked ivory objects, an obvious challenge is the fact that ivory has been carved for thousands of years all over the world so there is a huge diversity in both the types of worked-ivory objects that may be held in museum collections and their geographical origins will often not be readily identifiable. All restitution cases therefore bring their own complexities.
depending on the nature, provenance and ownership status of the objects in question; therefore, questions of restitution are best dealt with on a case by case basis.

I am placing a copy of this letter in the Library of both Houses.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

DAVID RUTLEY MP

P.S. How pleased we were to hear the Second Reading debate — it was good to see strong support for the Bill.