

Australia Pressured Former Prime Minister Blair to Avoid Indigenous Delegation in 1999, Archives Reveal

July 22, 2025

— Categories: Politics & Government



Newly released files from the UK's National Archives reveal that in 1999, the Australian government urged former Prime Minister Tony Blair not to meet with an Indigenous Australian delegation led by Patrick Dodson, a respected Yawuru elder and prominent advocate for reconciliation.

Correspondence from the time shows that Australian officials, including High Commissioner Philip Flood, warned Blair's foreign affairs adviser John Sawers that the group could be seen as "troublemakers". They recommended the former Prime Minister avoid the meeting altogether, suggesting he could claim diary constraints as an excuse. Blair's apparent handwritten "yes" next to the note indicates his agreement with the suggestion.

The delegation, led by Dodson, who would later become a senator and national figure, had hoped to raise issues surrounding Britain's colonial legacy in Australia and press for a formal apology from the Crown. The Australian government expressed concern that any engagement could be seen as interference in its domestic affairs, particularly sensitive given the looming 1999 referendum on the nation becoming a republic.

The documents also indicate unease within Downing Street over the potential for diplomatic fallout. Officials worried that a meeting with the Indigenous delegation could be perceived as aligning the UK with one side of Australia's internal debates on race and reconciliation. At the same time, Blair was also preparing to host a high-profile Chinese dissident the following week, raising the stakes of multiple politically sensitive engagements in close succession.

Other memos from the period reflect general caution within Whitehall about public relations with Australia. For example, civil servants flagged a proposed friendly cricket match between prime minister-selected teams from both nations as a possible source of media embarrassment, should it be mishandled or perceived as trivial amid more pressing bilateral issues.

From a centre-right perspective, former Prime Minister Blair's decision to avoid the meeting appears to have been a strategic diplomatic calculation. While the concerns of the delegation may have been valid, the broader priority was maintaining a strong working relationship with Australia and avoiding unintended political consequences during a period of constitutional debate.

Ultimately, the episode serves as a reminder of the fine balance between acknowledging historical grievances and respecting allied nations' autonomy. In the realm of international diplomacy, restraint is often necessary to uphold longer-term partnerships, even when the optics are complex.