



The Parthenon Sculptures:

hope springs eternal in Sydney whilst despair reigns in Athens

Back in 2002 a former director of the British Museum made a very prophetic statement that after the famous Greek actress and later Culture Minister, Melina Mercouri, left office the demands for return of the Parthenon Sculptures became less vociferous and ultimately died down, only occasionally bursting into life for a few days as one side or the other would come up with a new argument or put a foot wrong.

More than a decade later, events in Sydney and across the globe in London and Athens unfortunately have highlighted the fundamental truism in this comment.

Notes from a colloquy

In mid-November 2013 Sydney played host to the **International Colloquy: "Parthenon. An Icon of Global Citizenship"**. Hosted by the International Organising Committee – Australia – for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles Inc, the colloquy was officially opened at Sydney University on 15 November 2013 by the Premier of NSW, the Hon Barry O'Farrell. During his speech Mr O'Farrell paid testimony to the influence of Classical Athens as the foundation of our modern democratic principles and stated that he was very much in favour of

the sculptures' return. overseas committees in the international campaign.

The colloquy got away in earnest on the Saturday with a litany of presentations – both face to face and audio-visual - by various speakers from all over the globe. "Colloquy" is the latin word for "speaking together" and the organisers of this event were hoping to extend this conversation beyond the confines of a traditional lecture hall and using popular digital social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, to focus on four key workshop topics: education, litigation, activism and economy.

The colloquy even got a run on ABC radio that morning although it is fair to say that one of the most telling comments was made by Bernice Murphy, the national director of Museums Australia. According to Ms Murphy:

"It is not a black-or-white issue. It's one of the most vexed issues in the whole history of restitution arguments ...What museums and cultural institutions can do is act beyond the world of absolute legalism of property ownership. World heritage is connected. It's not a matter of owning these objects in one place because after all the Parthenon Marbles are connected

to an extraordinary piece of architecture."

Ms Murphy went on to say that the main issue is not really a legal one, suggesting that maybe a new way was needed to solve the problem, perhaps with the British Museum and Greece sharing such treasures.

This writer's view is that if innovative cultural diplomacy does not work because of the entrenched positions of both sides then litigation as a last recourse must be considered.

On the opening morning Greek Ambassador Haralambos Dafaranos reminded the delegates that the return of the Parthenon Sculptures is a cause that is very dear to him not only in his capacity as a diplomat but as a Hellene and friend of Australia. It was also a reminder of the strength of the spirit of Philhellenism in Australia. The Ambassador spoke of the benefits of "soft power" in diplomatic negotiations and how Greece with the help of others can use the universal appeal of its cultural heritage to inform public opinion and help persuade changes in policy. That the colloquy was being held in Australia is also a reminder of our shared historical experiences forced in the battlefields of Greece and Crete during World War II. Mr

Dafaranos applauded the level of activism in the diaspora, both in Australia and the other committees throughout the world, in support of Greece in her quest for return of the sculptures. As the famous Romantic poet Shelley remarked, "We are all Greeks".

The founder of the organising committee, Emanuel Comino, addressed the audience with his emotive line that there are no more excuses for the British and the sculptures must be returned. But as Emanuel himself noted, the British Museum through its director, Neil MacGregor, has tried to reinvent the museum by resorting to some questionable claims such as that the sculptures belong in London because there they now tell a different story.

The US committee's representative, attorney Michael Reppas, spoke of the global nature of the campaign and how momentum had been gained since the holding of the first colloquy in London in 2012 in working together for a common good. Michael spoke about the universal importance of cultural property and the pivotal role in terms both antiquity and historical significance that Greek cultural property plays. For cultural property is part of our identity. In the case of the Parthenon sculptures, they are the cause celebre of internal cultural property disputes. In protecting the cultural treasures of Greece we are protecting the world's cultural heritage.

The colloquy also featured video presentations from Eddie

O'Hara, the chair of the British Committee, and Elena Korcka, a member of the Greek Government's Consultative Committee on the sculptures. Eddie O'Hara spoke of the self-serving and self-designed appellation by the British Museum as a so-called Universal Museum and how it ignored the fact that the Elgin marbles were in London as an accident of history and as a result of a wanton act of cultural vandalism. In contrast, the New Acropolis Museum has a higher calling and the proper place for the rectification of this continuing moral outrage. Mr O'Hara also welcomed the UNESCO request for mediation.

Elena Korcka discussed her recent research into documents that supporters of Lord Elgin and the British Museum have long claimed prove that Elgin had obtained official permission (in the form of a firman) from the Ottoman authorities to remove the sculptures. As Elena explained, the so called authorisation was not from the Sultan and the document that was issued was more in the nature of a letter of comfort for Elgin's representative and workers in Athens. Elgin had never mentioned anything about dismantling the Parthenon and looting its sculptures and so it follows that no authorisation was ever granted for this purpose.

Russell Darnley gave a very interesting presentation about the role that social media can play in the campaign. Adopting what he described as a "holistic approach" Russell explained how globalisation

has transformed education and these same benefits can be translated into globally-connected social media-driven tools such as blogs, tweeting, Google Drive, Pinterest, as well as web-based research tools such as Wordle. For example, Aurasma is an augmented reality program with incredible potential to change the way we see and interact with the world. It is no coincidence that on his recent visit to China the British PM David Cameron got a taste of his own social media medicine when in response to a tweet from his minders the British PM was hit with over 30,000 tweets demanding the return of Chinese artefacts and manuscripts in British Museums.

But the idealism of many of the delegates and speakers in this long-running campaign was interrupted by a reminder that the cold hard realpolitik of the battle for the marbles is far removed from simplistic calls for their return. Anna Marangou, the head of the Cyprus committee, delivered a paper entitled "Why the truth matters" and she reminded us that ever since Melina Mercouri challenged the British Museum in 1982 to give the marbles back we have all strived to continue her campaign. That campaign should be directed to demanding that the UK government should act. The problem is that Greece's public image has been unjustly tarnished in recent years. Anna lamented the fragmented nature of the campaign and the absence of resolve to confront the British. As the British art critic and writer Tom



Flynn has observed, there is an implicit irony in a fragmented campaign seeking the reunification of a fragmented monument.

According to Anna, if we want to succeed our attitude has to change: “we have to look the British Museum in the eye”. And to continue the analogy, the Greeks cannot afford to blink first.

The problem is that to date the efforts of successive Greek governments have not produced any tangible outcome. There has been no substantial move on behalf of the Greek government and the British Museum for its part has never moved on the issue. But the truth matters. The marbles were stolen in what was at the very best an “opportunistic acquisition”. The British Museum has succeeded in altering the meaning of the works. Enough is enough.

The writer presented a paper about the history of the campaign and the efforts by the British Museum to rewrite history. The latest attempt to reinvigorate the campaign through a UNESCO-brokered mediation dialogue seems destined to fail. It is no coincidence that the British Museum has just celebrated its 255th birthday and in one of the UK’s leading conservative newspapers the Parthenon Sculptures are described as the top “masterpiece” in the museum’s collection.

This is how they are described: *Aka, the Elgin Marbles. Purchased by Lord Elgin in 1816 (sic), these sculptures survive from the ruin of the Parthenon, the fifth-century BC temple to Athena set high above Athens on the rock of the Acropolis. They are a source of continued diplomatic dispute with Greece, the British Museum refusing to countenance repatriation – and with good reason. These 75 metres of sculpted frieze are arguably the BM’s greatest treasure.*

That is the reality of the British position of condescension and assumed cultural superiority that we have to confront.

Tom Kazas from Melbourne suggested that activism needs a catch phrase and in this spirit Tom suggested “In full/in place” to capture the essence of the debate for the sculptures’ return. As Tom explained, we need to confront the illegitimacy of the sculptures’ ‘acquisition’ with a new narrative that brings their return closer to realisation. And imagine the reception that they would receive upon being reunited on Greek soil.

The tireless organiser of the



colloquy, Dennis Tritaris, also spoke of the growing importance of social media since the campaign is all about awareness and social media has no boundaries. Dennis said that we have to engage the British public as well in order that pressure can build on the British Government to amend the law to permit returns of cultural property by the British Museum.

A very interesting video presentation by the Greek international lawyer, Nadia Banteka, discussed different approaches to the issue of cultural diplomacy with an emphasis on new negotiation and co-operation techniques through a structured negotiation model that transcends the traditional ownership versus value debate.

On the second day of the colloquy there were several more presentations on various themes, including a video of a recent televised debate in England featuring the British actor, writer, journalist and comedian, Stephen Fry. Fry reminded the audience that British culture is based on the Greek civilization, and talked about the influential contributions of Greece to the western civilization in areas such as philosophy, mathematics, history, astronomy and justice. Finally, he added:

“Let’s be a classy country. Let’s make an exhibition in the British Museum, of which we would be fantastically proud, that will show the conservation of the Marbles and their transport to the magnificent new Acropolis Museum where they can be reunited with the blue light of Greece. We can show Greek people, that despite the fact that the economic crisis shows that they owe us, we will never be able to repay the debt that we owe to Greece.”

There was also a more general discussion amongst delegates as to

the present state of the campaign and how we should move forward. From this writer’s perspective, whilst social media is an exciting new development and had a lot of potential in spreading the word, the traditional methods of lobbying both the Greek and British governments remains the most effective way of contributing. For after all is said and done, nothing will happen until the Greek Government takes a positive and determined stand, free from platitudes and the usual motherhood statements, and actually serves it up to the British Museum and its advisors and supporters entrenched within the British ruling establishment.

To mediate or not to mediate

In June 2013 with considerable fanfare the Greek Culture Minister, Panos Panagiotopoulos, met with the Executive Director of UNESCO, Ms Irina Bukova, and foreshadowed the Greek Government’s intention to have the long-standing dispute over the Parthenon Sculptures referred to mediation under the auspices of the UN agency.

In October Mr Panagiotopoulos confirmed that the Greek Government had made a formal request for mediation and through UNESCO had addressed its request to the British Secretary for Culture, Maria Miller, the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, and the British Museum’s Neil MacGregor. In his media release the Greek Culture Minister stressed that the campaign is an ecumenical effort with global implications, aimed at the restoration of the unity of a leading cultural monument that is a common reference for all mankind. He rightly pointed out that if the British side agreed to conduct this process it would be the first time that UNESCO would be using mediation for resolving cultural differences between two countries.

To date there has been no public announcement as to the actual or likely British response.

Don’t mention the war

Shortly after the conclusion of the colloquy, we learned that the Greek Foreign Minister (and also Deputy Prime Minister), Evangelos Venizelos (who was also a former Culture Minister) met with his English counterpart, William Hague in London in late November 2013 to discuss a broad range of issues affecting



Anglo-Hellenic bilateral relations. Now it will be recalled that the letter from UNESCO which was issued at the Greek Government's request seeking mediation of the dispute, was forwarded to amongst other people the British Foreign Secretary. So you would assume that when Venizelos met Hague they would have discussed the request for mediation as after all the Greek Government has repeatedly said that the issue of return is important to the Greek nation.

Now one would expect that Greece's well-documented financial woes and the vexed Cyprus issue would dominate those talks. And fair enough. Reading through the joint statement we are told that other issues on the agenda included Syria, illegal immigration in Europe, improved security in Libya, sanctions against Iran and increased British economic investment in Greece. Mr Hague in fact prefaced his remarks by referring to the "good bilateral relationship" between the United Kingdom and Greece.

But nothing was said about the

Parthenon sculptures let alone the request for mediation. So what is the point, you might ask?

Oh, that mediation!

What has actually happened to the UNESCO "initiative"? The Greek Culture Minister hosted a meeting with foreign correspondents and reporters in the New Acropolis Museum on 10 January 2014 during which he spoke about touring Greek cultural exhibitions in the United States and future cultural events within Greece. The question of the Parthenon sculptures came up and Mr Panagiotopoulos once again referred to the invitation through UNESCO for mediation to take place. When asked what had transpired, the Minister responded: "We are good friends with Britain and that allows us to discuss everything".

But the real question that begs to be asked is this: has Britain responded to the UNESCO-backed request for mediation to take place? Will the British Government and British Museum engage the Greeks in mediation talks?

What does the Greek Government want to do?

It appears nothing really has changed, prompting the question: do the Greeks really want their marbles back? If they do, then it's about time that the return of the sculptures was promoted as a serious and defining issue in bilateral talks between two countries and not left to the usual round of wishful statements and rhetoric.

Whilst the Parthenon Colloquy held in Sydney serves as a reminder of the real passion that still burns in the heart and minds of Greeks and Philhellenes around the world, the authorities in Greece have to be made to understand that, as the old saying goes, those who cannot learn from history are almost certainly doomed to repeat it.

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