

A new initiative in the campaign for the return of the Parthenon Sculptures



Co-Convenors

Australian Parliamentarians

Hon Maria Vamakinou
 Hon Russell Broadbent
 Hon Adam Bandt
 Senator Nick Xenophon

Advisors

Australians for the Return of the Parthenon Marbles

President: Mr David Hill
 Vice President: Ms Elly Symos
 Vice President: Mr George Vardas

With that in mind, the new co-Vice President of the Australians for the Return of the Parthenon Sculptures, Ms Elly Symons (from Melbourne) conceived the idea of establishing a Parliamentary Friends of the Parthenon in Canberra and to achieve cross-partisan support for Greece from a country that still has strong ties to Britain. In fact, Ms Symons had addressed a meeting of parliamentary delegates of Greek origin at the congress of the World Hellenic Inter-Parliamentary Union in Athens in July 2015 at which she stressed the need for national parliaments to make their voice known to the British.

And so on 14 October 2015 a function was held in the magnificent Main Parliamentary Committee Room in Parliament House in Canberra to launch the new parliamentary friendship group for the Parthenon in recognition of this important cultural legacy and to raise awareness of a campaign to reunite the sculptural and decorative elements of the Parthenon currently roughly divided between the British Museum in London and the Acropolis Museum in Athens.

The Parliamentary Friends of the Parthenon is a distinctly cross-party bi-cameral group. Its co-convenors are the Hon. Maria Vamvakinou (ALP),

The passionate demand for the return of the Parthenon Sculptures is at the core of every Hellenic and Philhellenic heart because the Acropolis and its monuments, as recognised by UNESCO, are the universal symbols of the classical spirit and civilisation and constitute the greatest architectural and artistic complex bequeathed by Greek antiquity to the world.

The campaign is about an ideal, the principle of restoring cultural property to its place of origin. In this case, we are not talking about half a sculpture or some isolated fragments that need to be reunited. More than 200 years ago Lord Elgin abused his position as the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and by means of a dubious authorisation and bribery was able to get his men to strip a significant amount of the frieze, metopes and pedimental sculptures that had adorned the Parthenon and in the process damage the temple and violate its aesthetic and cultural integrity.

That theft has been a sore in the Greek conscience ever since.

The main Parliamentary Committee Room, Parliament House



Russell Broadbent (Lib), Adam Bandt (Greens) and Senator Nick Xenophon (Ind.). As Ms Symons explained:

“The Parliamentary Friends of the Parthenon will enhance Greek and Australian bilateral relations at this critical time and also help raise awareness of the historical and cultural importance of the Parthenon as an extraordinary monument which belongs to the foundation of western civilisation and is unique in world cultural heritage.”

The event attracted many politicians from all sides, including Opposition Leader Bill Shorten, Tony Burke, Philip Ruddock, David Coleman, Mark Dreyfus, Alana McTiernan, Michelle Rowland, Laurie Ferguson, Nick Varvaris, Matt Thistlewaite and Kelvin Thomson. The Greek Ambassador, Mr Dafaranos and his wife, Eva, also attended as did consular and diplomatic staff from a number of foreign embassies. The local Greek community of Canberra was also well-represented.



Members of the local Canberra Greek community (including our own Paul Levantis, John Kalokerinos and Marea Fatseas) with Maria Vamvakinou and Ambassador and Mrs Dafaranos

Maria Vamvakinou, the Victorian MP whose office was of great assistance in organising the function, welcomed the guests and dignitaries and expressed her warm appreciation for the cross-partisan support shown by her parliamentary colleagues in this noble cause, a theme that was echoed by Russell Broadbent and Adam Bandt in their passionate speeches.



Local MPS with the Greek Ambassador and Mrs Dafaranos



In his address, Bill Shorten declared (in an allusion to a famous ALP catchcry) that *“it’s time for the marbles to*



go home". He pointed out that a 200 year campaign really is long enough and that the historical and cultural importance of the Parthenon cannot be overstated. Australia has long and healthy links to both Greece and Britain, so we are well placed to lend our voice to this global campaign.

Mr Shorten also said that it would not be wise to underestimate the Philhellenes around the world and the power of their collective call for the sculptures to be repatriated. He concluded:

"My hope is that this Parliamentary Friendship Group will add strength to your armour and help you achieve your mission to see all existing pieces from the monument, scattered in museums and private collections around the world, returned to their place of origin – their home - Athens, Greece."

Elly Symons restated the reasons for the formation of



(L-R) Adam Bandt, Maria Vamvakinou, Russell Broadbent and Bill Shorten

the parliamentary group and emphasised the need for cross-partisan support for a campaign to reunify the sculptures. As Ms Symons observed:

"The Sculptures of the Parthenon tell the story of Athens and the Ancient Greeks, of Hellenism and Philhellenic ideals and they belong firmly and unquestionably in Greece where they were born. The time has come when Britain, as a traditional and proud custodian of these values, can no longer defend the indefensible and should make the magnanimous decision to restore justice and reunify the Parthenon Marbles in the Acropolis Museum in Athens where they were created."

David Hill, the Chairman of the International Association for the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures and also chairman of the Australian committee, spoke briefly about the history of the marbles and Lord Elgin's brazen actions and stressed how important the new group and its supporters were to the Greek people. According to Mr Hill:

"This is a great cultural and historical wrong that can be righted. After 200 years the time has come for Philhellenes around the world to renew the campaign for return. Australia as a young democracy and with links to both Britain and Greece through migration and shared wartime experiences is well placed to take the lead and I commend the Parliamentary Friendship Group for this initiative."



Adam Bandt, Elly Symons and David Hill

David Hill congratulated the parliamentary convenors and the organisers for the great launch.

Ambassador Dafaranos completed the formalities by praising the new parliamentary friendship group for bearing a “small torch for philhellenism in Australia” and helping to bring the issue to the attention of both the Australian public and international public opinion.

After the speeches, the guests and MPs mingled and



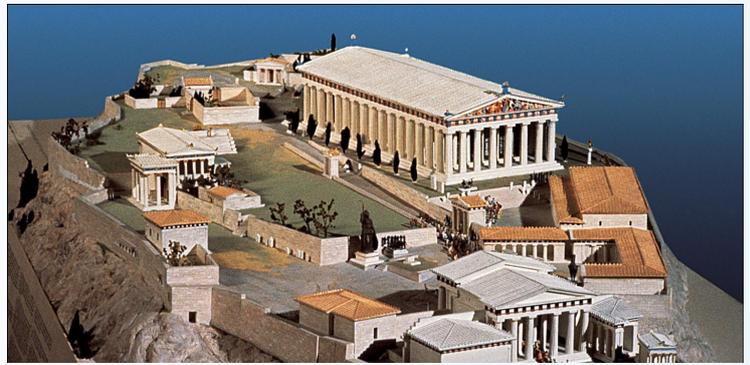
Ambassador Dafaranos

chatted. An electronic photographic montage on display in the background served as a reminder of the timeless beauty of the sculptures and yet their fragmented state.

At the end of the function Maria Vamvakinou returned to the Chamber and made a statement informing the House of the formation of the parliamentary group and its aspirations. In her speech (which is recorded in Hansard) Ms Vamvakinou said in part:

“It (the Parthenon) is also embodies the democratic values and spirit inherited from Classical Greece which have shaped western civilisation. To borrow from the great American writer Henry Miller, it represents the ‘pure distilled heritage of a past which is not altogether lost’.

I am therefore pleased to announce that earlier this evening a function was held in Parliament House in Canberra to launch a new parliamentary friendship group for the Parthenon, not only in recognition of this important cultural legacy but also to raise awareness of the international



campaign for the return to Athens of the Parthenon Sculptures which were removed in highly dubious circumstances by Lord Elgin in the early part of the nineteenth century and which are currently on display in the British Museum in London.

Australia has been to the forefront in this campaign. Former Prime Ministers the Rt Hon Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser and John Howard have all spoken in favour of return. A number of members of parliament, both past and serving, have also eloquently restated the Greek case for reunification of the sculptures from time to time.

In 2000 a passionate submission was made to a UK House of Commons Select Committee enquiry into illicit cultural property by our former colleagues Lindsay Tanner and Petro Georgiou and the memorandum was signed off by 44 members of the Australian Parliament. I especially wish to acknowledge those members who are still serving in this Parliament: Senator Marise Payne, Anthony Albanese, Kevin Andrews, Mal Brough, Anna Burke, Tanya Plibersek and Kelvin Thomson.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the support of my parliamentary colleagues and co- convenors, Russell Broadbent, Adam Bandt and Senator Nick Xenophon.”

We also gratefully acknowledge the generous support and assistance of the Australian Hellenic Council (NSW), George Vellis (its State Co-Ordinator) and the Kytherian Association of Australia in helping to make the function a success. We wish to thank Maria Vamvakinou and her parliamentary colleagues for their spirited co-operation and enthusiastic adoption of the cause.

An informative 8-page colour brochure setting out the history of the campaign and the way forward was also very well-received by both MPs and guests. Extracts are reproduced on the following pages:

The Parthenon Sculptures represent one of the most celebrated cases of forcibly-removed cultural treasures and symbolise the “entire body of unrepatriated cultural property in the world’s museums”.

Public opinion within England (as measured by successive opinion polls) supports the return. The British Government historically has been dismissive of requests for return of the sculptures, asserting that the sculptures were legally acquired and that they are held in trust for perpetuity by the British Museum which in turn is prevented by the provisions of the British Museum Act to deaccession any parts of its collection. A kind of Parthenon Catch-22.

But the case for return is not simply steeped in Greek nationalist sentiment. They may be Greek in conception and execution, but the Parthenon Sculptures are an inexorable part of the priceless architectural *tour de force* that is the Acropolis and the splendid Parthenon temple that defines our western civilisation.

Greece has made formal demand for their return and has offered substantial concessions. In 2002, for example, the then Greek Culture Minister, Evangelos Venizelos, pledged that when the Parthenon sculptures are returned, the Greek Government would ensure that the British Museum would always host Greek antiquities on loan for exhibitions. Greece would even be willing to send rare and even newly discovered antiquities, which have never been seen outside Greece, by way of reciprocity.

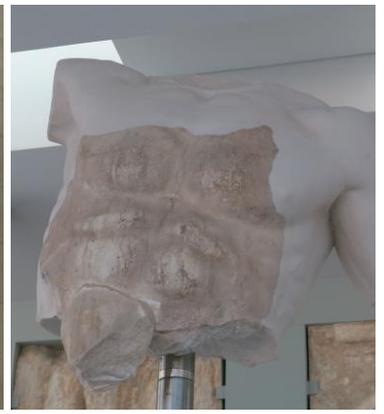
In November 1978 the General Conference of UNESCO established The Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation to promote co-operation between museum authorities at all levels and help facilitate the return of cultural treasures. The Committee has met regularly over the last thirty years but has failed to achieve any consensus over

the Parthenon sculptures. In fact, the British Museum refuses to countenance any possible resolution or compromise, steadfastly maintaining that the sculptures now tell a different story in London as part of a so-called ‘universal museum’, and no longer belong to the Classical Greek narrative of the Parthenon.

In 2013 Greece sought to mediate over the dispute. In March 2015, almost two years later, the British Government and the British Museum officially declined the request to participate in any UNESCO-convened mediation.

And then in late 2014 the British Museum secretly negotiated a short term loan of the pedimental sculpture *Ilissos* the River God to the Hermitage Museum in Russia, using the occasion to propagate the idea that the sculptures are now mere art objects which are now detached, both historically and artistically, from the Parthenon so that the British Museum can effectively do what it likes in terms of loaning parts of the collection to anywhere in the world, except Greece.

As the leading Australian lawyer and jurist, Geoffrey Robertson QC has concluded: *“It is vital not only to Greece, but to the world, that this unique representation of the beginnings of civilised human life should be put back together, in the Acropolis Museum, within sight of the Parthenon and under a blue attic sky. It is intolerable that half these sculptures should be locked up in North London, without any authentic context, in a gallery that honours Joseph Duveen, an art fraud and criminal. For over 150 years the Greek government has tried every possible political and diplomatic pressure, to no avail – the British government and the Trustees of the British Museum are determined that Lord Elgin’s loot will remain in the Duveen Gallery forever. And it will – the Parthenon Sculptures will never be returned – unless Greece has the gumption to take the legal action against the UK that is available in the International Court of Justice and under the European Convention of Human Rights.”*



As the late Christopher Hitchens observed, the 'current distribution' of the Sculptures as between Athens and London will certainly continue to furnish us with the opportunity to tell 'discrepant' stories about the 'monument' and its breathtaking adornments. One of the stories is about the clumsy desecration of a marvelous building and about the opportunistic acquisition of the hastily-chiselled plunder, and about the dismal euphemisms that have been employed ever since to disguise the original offence. Where the god Poseidon's torso is torn asunder between two cities. Where parts of the same sculpture are forcibly separated. The alternative story looks these facts in the face, and sees an opportunity to redress an old injustice and restore an ancient beauty and symmetry, and roundly declares that many, many will never regard the case as closed until the restoration, restitution, reparation or, if you like, the reunification, is complete.

Until then, Parthenon Marbles remain entombed in the Duveen gallery of the British Museum which inverts the original configuration of the sculptures facing inwards in a dimly lit room, rather than outwards "towards the dazzling marble plateau of the Acropolis" in the new Acropolis Museum in Athens.

We look forward to the day when the marbles finally come home.

George Vardas

Vice-President, Australians for the Return of the Parthenon Sculptures

