

# NEGOTIATING FOR PHIDIAS:

## the return of the Parthenon Sculptures



*Members of the International Association for the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures with the Greek Culture Minister, Nikos Xydakis in what was a fruitful meeting to discuss strategies and ideas for the future (L-R): Fabrizio Micalizzi (Switzerland), Elly Symons (Melbourne), Maria Koutsikou (Marbles Reunited UK), Culture Minister Nikos Xydakis, Anna Marangou (Cyprus), George Vardas (Sydney).*

In late July 2015 a conference (or colloquy) was held in Athens under the theme of “Unifying the Cause” with the stated intention of bringing together all the participants in the international campaign for return of the Parthenon Sculptures.

The writer represented the David Hill-led Australian Committee along with fellow Vice-President, Elly Symons from Melbourne. In the previous week Ms Symons had in fact attended the 10th General Assembly of the World Hellenic Inter-Parliamentary Union held in Athens and had addressed over fifty parliamentary representatives of Hellenic descent on the campaign for return of the Parthenon Sculptures. We were very pleased to see that our draft resolution on the Marbles was adopted by the whole assembly.

At the colloquy, there were delegates from other countries, including Cyprus, the United States, Switzerland, Sweden, South Africa, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Regrettably, the conference attracted no local or international media attention.

The eminent South African jurist, George Bizos SC, delivered the keynote speech and emphasised the need for a truly united effort and for all political, diplomatic, cultural and legal options to be pursued by the Greeks in this noble cause. However, only selective papers submitted to the conference were read.

***An edited extract of the detailed written submission which I made to the colloquy follows:***

### ***Cultural Diplomacy***

1. The Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs extols the virtues of public diplomacy, through the use of cultural soft power, to try to persuade without the need to resort to force or coercion. Cultural diplomacy seeks to project a positive image internationally and to inform international public opinion. Greece is on record that it will continue to use diplomatic means and political initiatives in its quest for the marbles.
2. Diplomacy in this context involves both State and

non-State actors. The Hellenic State is supported by a variety of groups, including national associations, diasporic organisations, cultural arts movements, independent philanthropic foundations, altruistic individuals, academics, and many others.

3. However, what is lacking is a proper co-ordinated and consistent strategy that takes advantage of these resources, both in terms of traditional diplomatic statecraft (at both bilateral and multilateral levels) and via social media communications (eg. Elginism and other websites, twitter, facebook, instagram as well as other emerging instantaneous technologies).
4. According to the Greek Government's official website, Greece places particular emphasis on the functioning of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP), in what it describes as the "ongoing negotiations with the British side regarding the issue of the return of the Parthenon Marbles". The website still proclaims the UNESCO-driven request for mediation, pointing to a "dynamic that has already been created in favour of reuniting the Parthenon Marbles; a dynamic of which both Great Britain and the international community must take note".
5. Unfortunately in March 2015 the British Government rejected mediation and once again restated that the Parthenon Marbles will remain in London.

### ***The British Museum and historical revisionism***

6. The British Museum under the leadership of Neil MacGregor has rebranded itself as a so-called universal museum and now it is the "museum of the world, for the world". In an age of cultural terrorism the British Museum has effectively declared that it is a 'safe haven' for antiquities that are endangered and uses this as leverage in its projection of great political diplomatic strength and the notion that culture can keep doors open when traditional State-sponsored diplomacy fails.
7. The recently-concluded Defining Beauty exhibition staged in a separate exhibition hall within the British Museum had seen six sculptures literally dragged out from the Duveen Gallery under the pretext of displaying how the Classical Greeks sculptured the ideal human body. The Parthenon sculptures as a whole were effectively reduced to mere art objects, disassembled from the rest of the collection. In the official guide published to accompany the exhibition its author discusses the reception of the Parthenon sculptures "that Lord Elgin had brought to Britain" as though it was just another museum acquisition. The British Museum literally photoshops history to portray Britain as the natural successor to the glories of Ancient Greece and that the sculptures taken by Lord Elgin now tell a different and novel narrative in the ultimate 'memory institution', the British Museum.

### ***How should the Greeks and the international community respond?***

8. The campaign since the heady days of Melina Mercouri has made little headway and needs a total rethink.
9. At a State level, Greek cultural diplomacy has been largely ineffective for a number of reasons, including:
  - (a) Inability to focus and stay on message;
  - (b) The onset of a complacent mindset that once the New Acropolis Museum was built the marbles would be returned;
  - (c) Failure to devise and maintain a consistent and coherent strategy;
  - (d) Failure to engage the Greek diaspora and its international supporters;
  - (e) The unfortunate "revolving door" of culture ministers (since 2000 there have been at least twelve);
  - (f) Failure or inability of government to make the issue a strong bilateral and multilateral issue;
  - (g) Lack of co-ordination between the Ministry of Culture, the Parthenon Marbles Advisory Committee and the International Association (and through it the various constituent national committees);
  - (h) Failure to counter the self-legitimizing narratives of the British Museum.
10. Greece needs to meaningfully engage the Hellenic and Philhellenic diaspora – perhaps by the creation of a Parthenon Διάλογος (dialogue) with the diaspora that takes advantage of the

museological, cultural, legal, creative artistic, architectural and other talents within the international campaign to elevate the profile of the cause and help co-ordinate the various groups and campaigners under the auspices of the International Association that is inclusive of all national committees.

11. Instead of the existing all-Greek advisory committee, Greece could create a Parthenon Sculptures Council incorporating personnel and resources from both within and outside Greece that can advise on policy and strategy as well as react to developments in relation to the Parthenon Marbles. In this way, the various national committees would have direct input.
12. Another initiative would be the appointment of prominent people as Parthenon Ambassadors to maintain a high social and cultural awareness of the issue, both within the UK and outside.
13. We should take advantage of the revolution in social media and communication technology by consolidating websites and social media platforms as well as engaging traditional media (eg. the Murdoch press) so as to pressure the current 'opinion gatekeepers' within the British Museum and the UK Government and not merely preaching to the converted.
14. In turn, as the 200th anniversary of the 'reception' of the marbles in the British Museum approaches in 2016, the campaign within Britain truly needs to reflect the unifying of the cause, particularly if there is to be any realistic prospect of influencing public opinion in the UK to a point where we will see UK political leaders make decisions that are supportive of return.
15. Greece could consider a blockbuster sculptural exhibition of its own to highlight the perfection of the sculpture and cultural literacy of Classical Greece in collaboration with other famous museums (eg Louvre, the Metropolitan, Vatican Museum, Getty) to highlight that the Parthenon Gallery in the British Museum is not the centre of the Classical world.
16. Cultural diplomacy – if it is to prevail – requires a coherent and co-ordinated approach which is both inclusive and collaborative and rises above petty politicking and entrenched positions for both State and non-State actors. By way of example, the Armenian lobbying effort around the world to recognise and commemorate the Armenian Genocide on the occasion of the 100th

anniversary in April 2015 serves as a reminder that consistent engagement, the delivery of a structured message and strategic cultural and educational exchanges can work provided the political will is also present.

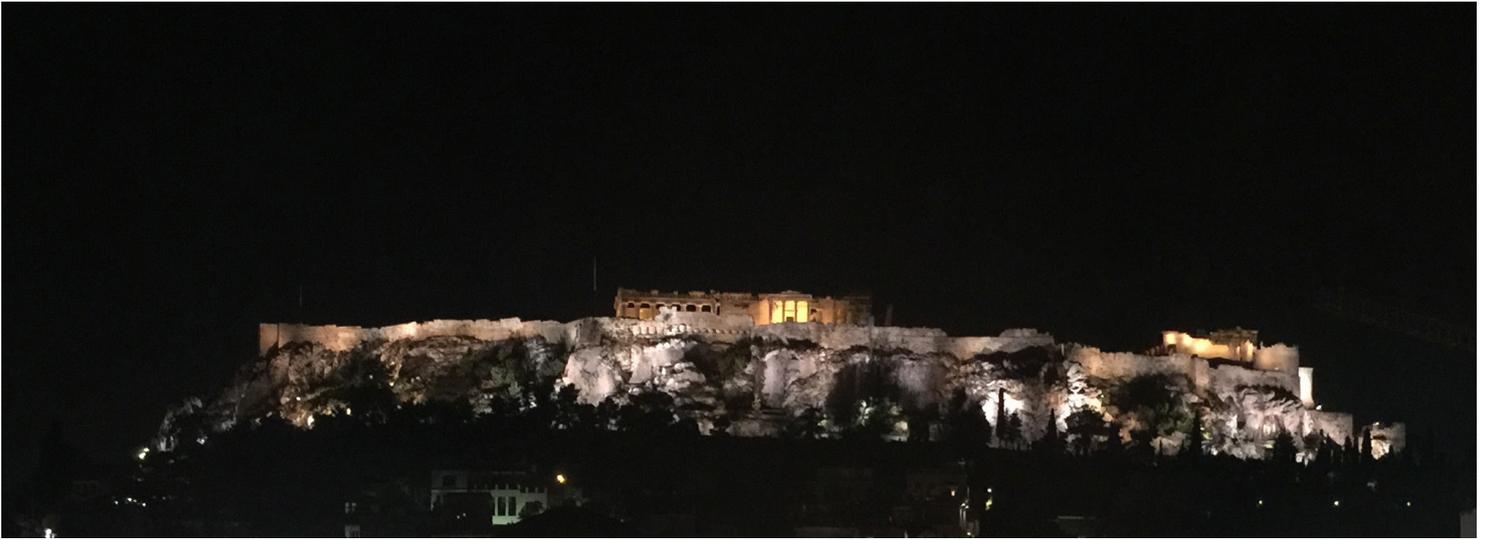
17. But the biggest and most important factor in unifying the cause is to ensure that the Greek State pursues a coherent strategy for return. Greek governments of whatever political make-up have to adopt a realistic approach and engage the British Government at a bilateral level on this issue.
18. Greece cannot rule anything in or out as the changing cultural and diplomatic landscape in both the UK and Greece demands a flexible response, diplomatic panache and a cogent litigation strategy if cultural public diplomacy fails.
19. All options must therefore remain on the table. A legal challenge in an international court, based on the developing principles of international customary law and in recognising Greece's legal property and cultural rights in the sculptures that by their very creation and existence define Greece's nationhood and at the same time epitomise a global cultural heritage, is not a forlorn or dangerous strategy if properly understood. [Since making this submission, I note that a comprehensive memorandum of advice has finally been delivered to the Greek Government by a group of UK lawyers led by the Australian barrister, Geoffrey Robertson QC]

At the time of writing Greece is heading to another election and it remains to be seen if Culture Minister Xydakis, who has been one of the government's better performing and high profile ministers, remains in the portfolio or is promoted. Only time (and the Greek voters) will tell.

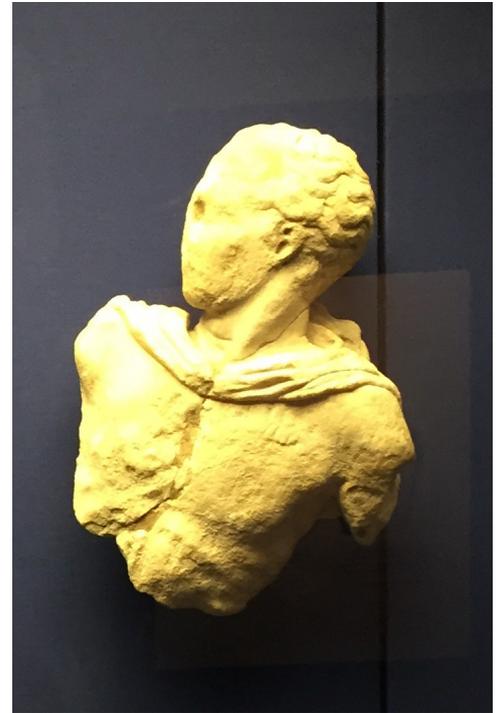
Despite Greece's ongoing economic and geopolitical woes, the campaign for return is a beacon that should unite all Philhellenes.



# Unify the cause to unify the sculptures



*A light on the Acropolis Sacred Rock*



*Disunity of sculptures (divided between Athens and London)*



*British Museum remains out of step (foot in London; rest of sculpture in Athens)*

The respected international campaigner, George Bizos SC, walks past the marbled immortality of the Parthenon



*How to reunite these sculptures requires a genuine unity of purpose*

**George Vardas**  
*Vice-President, Australians for the Return of the Parthenon Sculptures*