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LONDON, ARTICLE BY YIANNIS ANDRITSOPOULOS

Research in the archives of the British Parliament: Two centuries of parliamentary battles over the Sculptures.

"Mr. Churchill, would you consider the return of the Elgin Marbles to Greece?"

What business do Konstantinos Karamanlis, Melina Mercouri, Kostas Simitis, Evangelos Venizelos and Kyriakos Mitsotakis have in the House of Commons and the House of Lords?

As themselves, none. Their names, however, have been mentioned more than once by members of Britain's Upper and Lower Houses.

The reason was none other than the Parthenon Sculptures, the request for the return to Greece, which is as old as their purchase by the parliament of Albion 207 years ago.

As the in-depth investigation of "Ta Nea" in the archives of the British Parliament reveals, the issue has, over the past two centuries, occupied dozens of British MPs, ministers and prime ministers.

The first time London was asked to repatriate Phidias' masterpieces was in the parliamentary debate about their acquisition. On June 7, 1816, Congressman Hugh Hammersley slammed their then-imminent purchase, speaking of a "dishonest transaction" and "looting."

He suggested that "the Marbles, so shamelessly acquired, should be bought, kept in the British Museum, and returned, without further formalities or negotiations, when requested by the present or any future government of the city of Athens."

At the beginning and middle of the 20th century the subject was frequently covered in the British news through articles and letters in the newspapers. On 16 December 1930, Archbishop Gordon Lang of Canterbury (an ex officio member of the House of Lords) said to the Labour government of Ramsey MacDonald: "Suppose the day comes when it will be considered very right to make a noble gesture to the nation of Greece and we will be asked, as a sign of friendship, to send to Athens the Caryatid that we hold, which could be considered to be in the Erechtheion or the Parthenon. How difficult it would be to resist pressure of this kind!"

He adds: "If the Museum's Trustees refuse, this would certainly be a cause for misunderstanding, if not an insult."

A few months before the outbreak of World War II, on June 6, 1939, Liberal MP Geoffrey Mander presents to parliament the scandal of the irreparable damage that the Sculptures suffered from the cleaning that took place during 1937-1938.

"Would it be correct to assume that the resignations of two important officials are linked to this unauthorized cleaning of the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum and that disciplinary action has been taken?" he asks.

On behalf of Neville Chamberlain's Conservative government, Deputy Finance Minister Harry Crookshank admits the damage: "Yes, the commissioners took disciplinary action." Labour MP Seymour Cocks then asks: "Isn't it time to return these Marbles to Athens?" - but gets no answer.

On January 23, 1941, while the Greco-Italian war was raging, cabinet member and later Prime Minister Clement Attlee rejected the possibility of the Sculptures' return. Responding to a question from Conservative MP Thelma Cazalet-Keir "whether a bill will be tabled allowing the restoration of the Elgin Marbles in Greece after the end of hostilities, as a certain recognition of the great attitude of Greeks towards civilization", Attlee clarifies: "The government is not willing to table a bill for this purpose."

On 15 October 1942, Labour MP Ivor Bulmer-Thomas asked Conservative Prime Minister Winston Churchill "whether, in order to show our gratitude for the continued resistance of the Greek rebels, you would consider transferring the Elgin Marbles to the Greek government in order to restore them to their original environment after the war".

The "father of victory" does not do him (us) the favour: "I will refer you to the answer given on January 23, 1941," he notes, referring to Attlee's earlier dismissive position.

The next parliamentary petition is recorded eight years later: on October 24, 1950, coalition MP Julian Snow asks the Labour government of Attlee "whether it is possible to table a proposal that does not require a change in legislation, which would allow us to return the Caryatid". Deputy Home Secretary Geoffrey de Freitas promises to "pass on" the question to the British Museum's Trustees.

On 9 May 1961, Labour MP Francis Noel-Baker asked Conservative Prime Minister Harold McMillan what discussions he had with Greek Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis about the return of the 'Elgin Marbles'. "None," "Super Mack" responds.

The Member comes back and drops the idea of copies. "Would you consider making copies of these antiquities and then returning them, as a sign of generosity to a very loyal ally, in order to restore them to their original environment, where they would surely be admired by more people - possibly more Britons - than if they remain in a mouldy room in the British Museum?"

Surprisingly, McMillan seems to be thinking about it. "I will look into what the honourable colleague said. This is a complex issue. There's a problem here and I'm definitely not going to get it out of my head."

A year and a half later, on December 20, 1962, Conservative Deputy Finance Minister Edward du Cann was "bombarded" for the issue of the Sculptures by four MPs, and after admitting that "this is an extremely difficult issue," he calls Elgin... their saviour: "It was Lord Elgin's conscious act that saved the 'Elgin Marbles' for future generations to admire. Otherwise they wouldn't exist now."

Horace King, a Labour MP and later speaker of parliament, takes it upon himself to put him in his place: "How can you claim that Elgin rendered services to future generations when he removed one of the six Caryatids from the Erechtheion, while the five others remain in excellent condition and mourn for their sister?"

On 1 July 1965, nine months after Labour came to power, Prime Minister Harold Wilson again rejected reunification: "The Elgin Marbles belong to the British Museum and I do not intend to enact a law obliging their return to Athens."

The coalition MP William Hamling then addressed the Prime Minister, raising the issue on a moral basis and, indeed, on a personal basis: "Would you not agree that this vestige of 19th-century

cultural imperialism is not in line with your principles? Wouldn't you also agree that their return would be a grandiose act that would contribute greatly to our good relations with Greece?"

In vain. "I am in favour of grandiose deeds, but if we were to adopt the principle that all sculptures and other works of art must be returned to their places of origin, it would result in an extremely unequal distribution of these works of art among the countries of the world," Wilson replies.

On June 26, 1974, former Secretary of State for Culture Jenny Lee told the House of Lords: "Lord Goodman (the then president of the British Arts Council) once shocked me by saying that he wanted the 'Elgin Marbles' to be returned to Greece. I replied, 'Over my dead body!'"

The "Melina" factor

In the 1980s, the campaign for the reunification was embraced by Melina Mercouri. On February 15, 1982, on behalf of Margaret Thatcher's government, Earl of Avon, Nicholas Eden was asked if the Sculptures would be returned: "No, it is not the intention of the government," he says bluntly.

In the same year, Greece's then new culture minister launches an international crusade for their reunification. Her arguments convince not only public opinion in Britain, but also important politicians - even prime ministerial candidates.

On 13 February 1983, Conservative MP David Atkinson accused Labour leader and opposition leader Michael Foot of having "surrendered to the charm of the Siren called Melina Mercouri". Both Foot and his successor Neil Kinnock were unequivocally in favour of the return of the Sculptures, whose fate would probably have been different if the two politicians had managed to become prime ministers...

On March 7 of the same year, Conservative MP David Price called on the government to signal to Mercouri that "in the case of the Marbles, 'Never on Sunday' applies to all other days of the week"!

Deputy Minister of Culture Paul Channon agrees: "It would be a disaster for the whole world if the collections of a culture were found only in their country of origin." He then repeats the permanent government refrain: "The 'Elgin Marbles' were legally acquired and the government's view is still that they should remain in the British Museum."

On June 20, 1986, a week after Melina's historic speech at the Oxford Union, former (now) Labour leader Michael Foot called on the Thatcher government to return the Sculptures "to the people and land of Greece".

The response of Deputy Minister of Culture Richard Luce, is not surprising: "Does the official opposition understand where the precedent of the return of the 'Elgin Marbles' would lead? What would be left in the British national collections?"

On February 14, 1994, amid discussions about the "bad" European Union, Deputy Minister of National Heritage, Iain Sproat made it clear that "we are not obliged by any EU directive to return the 'Elgin Marbles' and we have no intention of doing so."

On 13 April of the same year, former Labour Secretary of Culture Lord Jenkins called on the government to change the law so that the trustees of the British Museum could decide for themselves on repatriations of exhibits.

On 18 January 1996, the Secretary of State for National Heritage, Lord Inglewood, claimed that "the Parthenon Sculptures are part of our national heritage"!

The following year, New Labour came to power. But Tony Blair, unlike his two predecessors in the party leadership, was not willing to part with the Sculptures. On June 1, 1998, Culture Minister Chris Smith reiterated that "the government does not intend to return them to Athens."

Co-government MP Gordon Prentice reminds him of the party's earlier commitment, with the minister having the excuse ready: "In the intervening 13 years we have had time to think about the issue. We believe that the British Museum is the best place to house the Sculptures."

The 2000s

On February 7, 2002, the Minister of Culture, Tessa Jowell, in response to a question from Prentice, stated: "In June 2001 I received a letter from the Greek Minister of Culture, Mr. Evangelos Venizelos, to which I replied reminding him that the Sculptures were legally acquired and that it is best to exhibit them in the British Museum."

It is noteworthy that Jowell admits that in order to return the Marbles to Greece, the British Museum Act of 1963 would have to be amended, negating the government's argument that it was allegedly not involved in the matter.

The following year and the year after that, several MPs called for the return of the Sculptures ahead of the Olympic Games in Athens, with the government monotonously rejecting the request.

On March 3, 2004, Deputy Minister of Culture Estelle Morris reported that "in October 2002 Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis presented to our Prime Minister a copy of a proposal for the reunification of the Marbles in Greece in the form of a long-term loan from the British Museum to the new Acropolis Museum, 'bypassing the issue of ownership'."

The following month, Boris Johnson, then shadow secretary of state for culture, claimed that a return of the Sculptures to Greece would amount to "uprooting the heart of the British Museum".

In the years that followed, the issue continued to occupy the British Parliament. In one of the most recent reports, last February, the Deputy Minister of Culture, Lord Parkinson, mentioned Kyriakos Mitsotakis, "to whom our Prime Minister made clear the government's long-standing position".