

The British at UNESCO: deceit, lies and the Parthenon Marbles

Delegations from the United Kingdom and Greece are shortly to meet in Paris at UNESCO to discuss the Parthenon Marbles. At the same time, the British PM has come out and said the marbles are staying. The British have been stalling the Greeks for years on the subject of return of the sculptures by a combination of cultural and imperial arrogance, deception and hypocrisy. Old habits die hard.



From today 30 June to 1 July 2011 the 17th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation will take place at UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

The first item listed on the agenda is consideration of cases pending before the Committee, namely the Parthenon Marbles (United-Kingdom – Greece) and the Sphinx of Βοτatzkoy (Germany – Turkey).

Under the heading “Promotion of Bilateral Relations” the Secretariat Report of the Committee states that UNESCO has continued to encourage the holding of meetings between Greece and the United Kingdom and has offered its assistance. It goes on to note that in early May 2011 discussions between Turkey and Germany have resulted in the conclusion of a restitution agreement for the Sphinx.

That sounds promising. Or so you think.

But what really happens at these UNESCO meetings? And are the British at all interested in any sort of bilateral agreement regarding the Parthenon Sculptures?

In November 1978 the General Conference of UNESCO established the Intergovernmental Committee with the express role of using its good offices to promote cooperation between museum authorities at all levels. At the third session of the Committee held in Istanbul in May 1983 the members resolved to “intensify the promotion of bilateral negotiations for the return or restitution of cultural property”. Finally, in October 1983 a formal bilateral request - described as the “first ever made” - for the return was made by the Greek Government.

So what has happened in the intervening period? The Intergovernmental Committee has met on numerous occasions and for at least the last 20 years the Parthenon Sculptures have been on the agenda.

But all the goodwill and hard work by UNESCO has been undone by British deception, obfuscation and arrogance.

For example, at the 8th session of the Committee in 1994, the United Kingdom’s representative, in attempting to explain the continued British opposition to the question of return, claimed that there had been wide consultation within the British Government and with the trustees of the British Museum, that the marbles had been legally acquired and that, as the British Museum was the owner of the marbles, expropriation of their property would be

regarded as confiscatory and contrary to Article 1 of the First Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights.

But a briefing paper in February 2000 by a British Museum press officer leaked to The Economist magazine revealed the true story:

“The paper describes a number of tactics that have been used to delay or derail the Greek efforts. One in particular is the argument, used in the past at UNESCO meetings, that removing the marbles from the British Museum by law could be interpreted as confiscation and would be contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights. ‘This argument is of limited value,’ the paper comments. ‘It was raised as a delaying tactic and may have run its course.’”

On 8 June 2000 the then UK Arts Minister, Alan Howarth, appeared before the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee and was asked whether the door was firmly closed to any further discussion on resiting or lending of the sculptures. The Minister replied:

“I would certainly not say that the door is closed to discussion ... We have said before and I say again that we are happy to continue to discuss this issue with the Greeks under the auspices of UNESCO as has occurred in the past. Certainly, we would not wish to block our ears to any arguments that they might wish to put to us but there are principles which, in my view, we cannot lightly set aside which we would be articulating to them in that dialogue ... I think there needs to be a closer meeting of minds, a closer mutual understanding of each other’s point of view.”

In early 2001 the then Secretary of State, Chris Smith, in a letter to David Hill, now Chairman of the International Association for the Return of the Parthenon Sculptures, stated that the British Government was “prepared to continue a bilateral discussion with Greece ... under the auspices of UNESCO, or elsewhere”.

And yet, despite the rhetoric, no meaningful discussions took place.

Then, in 2003, The Times of London reported that UNESCO had been seeking to encourage a dialogue between the two countries. Guido Carducci, of UNESCO’s division of cultural heritage, was quoted: “The dialogue is focussed on whether or not the marbles may be exhibited in Athens, probably through a loan ...”

Immediately the public relations spin merchants at the British Museum denied that there was any such dialogue,

with the newly-installed (and current) director, Neil MacGregor, reaffirmed that the museum’s trustees were not prepared to negotiate on the basis of those requests and repeated the mantra of the British Museum:

“(The Trustees) believe that the world benefits by being able to see and understand the surviving sculptures (roughly held are in Athens, half in London) in two different contexts; as an achievement of ancient Greek culture in Athens, and of world culture in London.”

Further meetings of the Intergovernmental Committee were held in 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2010. Each time the Parthenon Sculptures were on the agenda for discussion. So how have these “bilateral discussions” progressed at UNESCO?

I have it on good authority that all that really happens at UNESCO is that the representatives from the two countries are invited to discuss the issue. The British delegation (which is dominated by British Museum representatives) typically declares that the marbles are not going anywhere and frowns upon any attempt by UNESCO to try to encourage a constructive dialogue. The Greek delegation leaves the meeting frustrated.

And then, just a week or so before the upcoming UNESCO meeting, we are treated to the following example of what the British really think of the issue.

On 22 June 2011 in the House of Commons the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, was asked by Andrew George, an MP with the Liberal Democrats (with whom the Conservatives share power in the UK), whether Britain was prepared to help regenerate the Greek economy and put right a 200-year wrong by giving back the marbles. Cameron was interrupted as he was about to say that he did not agree with that view. Then this hilarious exchange took place between the Speaker of the House and Cameron:

The Speaker: Order. I want to hear the Prime Minister’s views on marbles.

The Prime Minister: The short answer is that we are not going to lose them.

Such levity. They must have been rolling in the aisles at this superb display of English wit. Westminster, which has been graced by giants like Gladstone, Disraeli and Churchill, now has a joker at the dispatch box.

Obviously Greece is beset by other problems of a more pressing nature, but the claim for return of the Parthenon sculptures is something that will not go away. Unfortunately, the

British Museum and its supporters within the Ministry of Culture and the Government do not want to see a solution. They do not even want to talk about it.

The British are simply reliving their faded imperial past by clinging on to the Parthenon Sculptures without even attempting to engage the Greeks in a sensible, fair-minded discussion about seeking alternative means of resolving the impasse. In the meantime, Neil MacGregor struts the world stage flogging his tome *The History of the World in 100 Objects* (the subtitle of which should read “Or why the British Museum will do anything to hold on to the Elgin Marbles”) and imperiously proclaiming that his museum is the collective knowledge of mankind. MacGregor has even claimed that the British are prepared to lend some pieces to the Greeks but that the Greeks have turned them down. I confronted MacGregor in the Art Gallery of NSW a few months ago during his book signing and challenged him to identify the specific sculptures that the British are prepared to send to Athens on a short-term loan. He could not answer.

So where to from here? At the beginning of this article I mentioned that agreement has been reached between Turkey and Germany for the return of an ancient sphinx. Perhaps it’s time to take a leaf out of the Turkish Culture Ministry’s playbook. The return of the sphinx was not as a result of protracted or subtle negotiations conducted over a glass of wine and a plate of cheese in the conference rooms of UNESCO.

Instead, according to news reports, the Turkish Government simply demanded from Germany its return from the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, failing which German archaeologists might well be denied permission to commence or continue archaeological diggings in the country. That may sound heavy-handed but it had the effect of bringing the Germans to the negotiating table.

Although Greece has other distractions at the moment, it is hoped that the forthcoming meeting at UNESCO of the Intergovernmental Committee does not descend into just another talkfest. If it does, then maybe it is time to look at engaging the British head on.

And then there is litigation. But that is another story for another time.

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