

Position of the Foreign Office in 1941

Introduction

In January 1941 the Foreign Office recommended to Ministers facing a House of Commons question that on certain conditions 'it should be decided in principle to return to Greece the Elgin Marbles, including the Caryatid and the Column from the Erechtheum'.

As usual, the parliamentary record shows only the tip of the iceberg. A National Conservative MP, Miss Thelma Cazalet (Mrs Cazalet-Keir), asked the Prime Minister on 23rd January 1941 'whether he will introduce legislation to enable the Elgin Marbles to be restored to Greece at the end of hostilities as some recognition of the Greeks' magnificent stand for civilisation'.

Deputising for Churchill, Mr Attlee – then Lord Privy Seal – declined to do so, evidently basing his reply on that part alone of the Foreign Secretary's recommendation which said that the moment was 'inopportune for a final decision'. He did not indicate, as the Foreign Secretary had suggested he should, 'that HMG will not fail to give the matter their careful and sympathetic consideration'.

Behind this bland parliamentary exchange, there lies a compilation of expert opinion and a diverse range of comments by the various officials involved, which taken together point to an openness of mind such as we have little evidence of today. Time had been gained to assemble these views by persuading Miss Cazalet to defer her question, originally tabled some weeks earlier. But the Chief Whip reported that she insisted on asking it sooner or later in view of 'the pressure to which she is being subjected by English and Greek friends'.

The Courtauld Institute

Of the expert opinion canvassed by the Foreign Office in preparing its advice, the most forthright came from the Librarian of the Courtauld Institute, a Miss Welsford, who began her reply:

'I've consulted my Professors who agree that provided they are not exposed to the weather, scholarship would not suffer if the Elgin Marbles were returned to Greece.'

Although the Professors thus contradicted one of the more bizarre defences of the status quo, they could not be denied their own academic self-interest:

'A set of the best possible casts to be put up on the Parthenon is the ideal from the Professors' point of view, leaving the originals here.'

But this was apparently not a serious option, and Miss Welsford concluded by anticipating the plans of the present Greek government: 'If they do go back to Greece a special museum must be built for them.'

The British Museum

The Memorandum in which the British Museum stated its views is dated 31st December 1940, and is a very curious document indeed. Perhaps the most curious things about it are that it nowhere expresses explicit opposition to the return of the Marbles, and that in one sentence it neatly summarises the very case for their return!

The document is divided into sections on Historical, Legal, Moral and Practical considerations. The legal paragraph is limited to one brief statement:

'Even if the acquisition had not been made by Parliament, an Act of Parliament would be necessary to remove them from the British Museum, since the Trustees have no power to alienate material of this kind, not being duplicate or unfit for the Museum.'

Recognition of this fact – so convenient for the Trustees – was of course implicit in the phrasing of Miss Cazalet's parliamentary question.

Not surprisingly, the legality of Elgin's own acquisition of the Marbles is nowhere called in question in the BM memorandum, save that it notes in the 1816 Select Committee 'some opposition based on the view that the sculpture was improperly taken from Athens.'

Apart from this crucial point, the bulk of the historical section – which makes up well over half of the 830-word memorandum – can be ignored, as not being of central importance to the case for or against the return of the Marbles. It must be observed, however, that among a number of dubious or misleading assertions it contains at least one simple untruth. This is that of the sculpture removed 'most of it was lying on the ground'. The British Museum's own *Historical Guide*, first published in 1962, clearly states that 'the majority (of the sculptures) were taken down from the building itself'. There is no shortage of contemporary descriptions of the permanent damage that this forcible stripping of the Parthenon caused.

What is also of central importance to the case – indeed in large part *is* the case – is conceded by the British Museum in its paragraph on moral considerations. This opens with further endorsement of Elgin's action (though, true, 'the Greeks regard it as a spoliation of their national heritage under Turkish tyranny'), proceeds to reject the principle of wholesale restitution of antiquities, and concludes:

The point is that the Acropolis of Athens is the greatest national monument of Greece, and that the building to which the Marbles belonged are still standing or have been rebuilt.'

Precisely! And it is no less gratifying that, having enumerated its reservations on practical grounds, the British Museum's last word was: 'But Greek pride may reasonably be offended by the patronage ... which proposes the return as a favour rather than a right.' Does this not sound just a little like surrender?

The Foreign Office

The task of collating the expert opinion and drafting a memorandum for Ministers was undertaken by the official on the Greek desk at the Foreign Office, Mr W.L.C. Knight. Knight took the view that a decision on the general question of return should be reached 'in the fairly near future', invoking not only Britain's 'exceptional relations with Greece', but also 'the interest now being taken in the question by the British public, as shown by the recent correspondence in *The Times*. Of the letters published the great majority were in favour of the marbles being restored to Greece.'

But since some time might be needed for this decision, he suggested a 'non-committal reply' to Miss Cazalet's question, along the lines – followed word for word in Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden's final recommendation – that 'the present moment is inopportune for a final decision on a subject which raises several important issues, and has given rise to so much controversy in the past; but that His Majesty's Government will not fail to give the matter their careful and sympathetic consideration.'

Knight also suggested that, if return were eventually decided on, the best time for it would be after the war when transport would again be safe: 'It would thus set the seal on Anglo-Greek friendship and collaboration in the way that would most appeal – short of the cession of Cyprus - to Greek patriotic sentiment.' And he concluded:

'For the gift to be complete and completely acceptable it should comprise, in addition to the Parthenon friezes, the Caryatid and the column from the Erechtheum which all together constitute the Elgin Marbles.'

Once ready, the Knight Memorandum was passed up the line accompanied by a note from his immediate superior, Mr (later Sir) James Bowker (Deputy Head of the South-East European Department), in which he said:

'Everything points to a decision in principle to return the Elgin marbles to Greece on certain conditions, as enumerated in Mr Knight's memorandum. In order that the memorandum should be quite complete I think it should include recommendations, and I have appended a draft final paragraph accordingly.'

The Bowker-Knight recommendations are reproduced below in their entirety (Appendix 1). Paragraph (1) constituted the Foreign Secretary's advice to the Government. Appendix 2 contains a selection of comments added by various Foreign Office officials as the Memorandum made its way to the top. Appendix 3 documents the final outcome.

Appendices

Appendix 1: The Foreign Office recommendations*

[* As appended by Mr R.J. Bowker to Mr W.L.C. Knight's internal memorandum (14th January 1941).]

1. That the reply to Miss Cazalet's question should be to the effect that the present moment is inopportune for a final decision on a subject which raises several important issues, and has given rise to so much controversy in the past; but that HMG will not fail to give the matter their careful and sympathetic consideration.
2. That, subject to the views of HM Minister at Athens, it should be decided in principle to return to Greece the Elgin marbles, including the Caryatid and the Column from the Erechtheum on the following conditions:
 - (a) it should be made clear that the decision to return the marbles is in the nature of a gesture of friendship to Greece and is not based on any recognition of the principle that antiquities should be returned to their place of origin:
 - (b) the marbles should not be returned until after the war:
 - (c) before they are returned, adequate arrangements should be made for their proper housing, exhibition and preservation:
 - (d) HMG should be assured of a share, in perpetuity, in the control of the arrangements to be made for their preservation.
3. That, again subject to the views of HM Minister at Athens, before anything is said officially to the Greek Government, the decision of HMG should be communicated unofficially to General Metaxas, who should be asked for his views and advice.

Appendix 2: Comments of Foreign Office officials

1. Sir Stephen Gaselee, Librarian and Keeper of the Papers:

‘Yes, I am personally very much against the whole project; but since the British Museum have receded to a certain extent from their former rigid position, I suppose we must go as far as is now suggested.’

2. Mr (later Sir) Philip Nichols, Head of the South-East European Department.

Personally I am strongly in favour of returning the marbles, including the Caryatid and the Column from the Erechtheum, at the end of the war, . . . because I think such a gesture would be warmly welcomed by the Greeks and by public opinion throughout the world...’

3. Sir Orme Sargent, Deputy Under-Secretary of State.:

‘... As regards the conditions under which the Marbles should be returned, I would deprecate condition (d) to the effect that HMG should be assured of a share in perpetuity in the control of the arrangements to be made for the preservation of the Marbles. This would be all right if an offer to this effect came spontaneously from the Greeks, but for us to demand it, would certainly offend Greek *amour propre* and undo a good deal of the psychological value of the gift. Besides, from the technical point of view, I should say it was quite unnecessary.’

4. The Hon Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Under-Secretary of State:

‘I don't know where this is going to end. . . Public attention has been focussed on the Elgin Marbles, but they were actually acquired in a manner no more disreputable than many of the contents of European & American Museums. We can reply to the PQ on the lines proposed, but I hope we shall think twice before taking a final decision.’

5. Mr (later Sir) Anthony Eden, Secretary of State:

‘I am prepared to advise reply to the PQ as suggested, but we should not go further at present. This is a matter that can well be decided after the war, with much else both artistic and political.’

The last word

As already mentioned, Mr Attlee's reply in parliament did not go even as far as the Foreign Secretary himself had advised. Noting this in a minute to a colleague two days later, William Knight added: 'In these circumstances, and in view of the state of Greek feeling on the subject, the less said about the matter the better.'

Appendix 3: The Foreign Secretary and the Lord Privy Seal

a) The advice finally given by the Foreign Secretary for a parliamentary answer was contained in the following letter to a Treasury official, dated 16th January 1941 and signed by Philip Nichols:

1. With reference to your letter to me of the 30th December and your letter to Bowker of the 8th January about the Elgin Marbles, I write to say that my Secretary of State recommends that the answer to Miss Cazalet's question should be to the effect that the present moment is inopportune for a final decision on a subject which raises several important issues and has given rise to so much controversy in the past; but that His Majesty's Government will not fail to give the matter their careful and sympathetic consideration.
2. Mr Eden is not prepared to go further than this at present since he thinks that this is a matter that can well be decided after the war.

b) As we have seen, to the dismay of at least one of the officials involved, the Lord Privy Seal chose not to go even this far. Hansard of 23rd January 1941 records the following exchange:

GREECE (ELGIN MARBLES)

Miss Cazalet asked the Prime Minister whether he will introduce legislation to enable the Elgin Marbles to be restored to Greece at the end of hostilities as some recognition of the Greeks' magnificent stand for civilisation?

Mr Attlee: His Majesty's Government are not prepared to introduce legislation for this purpose.