Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Harvey Morris

Cautious optimism that UK and Greece are moving to resolve 200-year-old Parthenon dispute

There are positive signals that at least one long-running international conflict may be on the brink of being resolved, with reports of a potential agreement to repatriate the Parthenon marbles from Britain to Greece.

The deal is not in the bag yet. But, if it goes ahead, it could provide a lesson on how quiet diplomacy and an avoidance of grandstanding are sometimes the best course in addressing seemingly intractable disputes.

The so-called Elgin Marbles have been a subject of controversy since, from 1801, the eponymous Scottish earl had his agents strip around half the surviving statues from the Athens Parthenon in then-Ottoman-ruled Greece and shipped them to Britain.

Marbles on loan

The latest interest was sparked by Britain's The Critic magazine, which wrote that British Museum chairman George Osborne, a former Conservative chancellor, had agreed to give the marbles "on loan" to Greece.

Since the Greek government claims legal ownership of the sculptures, it was extremely unlikely that they would ever return to Britain, the magazine said.

> Talks between Greek officials and the British Museum are at an advanced stage

The museum, where the 5th century BC treasures have been on display since 1817, dismissed the report, insisting talks were continuing and no final agreement had yet been reached.

However, Greece's hopes of a deal had been raised days earlier with a report in the country's Kathimerini daily that talks between Greek officials and the British Museum were at an advanced stage and already 80 per cent agreed.

Moving towards resolution

Leaving aside the arguments for and against handing the marbles back, the reported progress is a benefit of a confluence of circumstances that have allowed the two sides to quietly move towards resolving a two-century-old feud.

> Up to the British Museum to determine the fate of the marbles

The Labour government, keen to avoid yet another battle in the culture wars over Britain's imperial past, moved to depoliticise the issue at the turn of the year, saying it would be up to the British Museum to determine the fate of the marbles.

The government said it did not intend to revise a 1963 law which prevents museums from giving back such artefacts. But that would not prevent a loan agreement that could see them returned to Greece.

The museum, meanwhile, has a new director, Nicholas Cullinan, who said after his appointment a year ago that he wanted to work in partnership with the Greek government over the future of the Parthenon marbles.

Cullinan has pledged to move forward with a £1 billion revamp of the museum in the coming decade, which could provide an opportunity to transfer at least some of its artefacts under loan agreements.

UK public opinion also appears to have shifted towards the view that the marbles belong in Greece, with polls showing a majority now back their repatriation.

Divided opinions

The fate of the marbles has divided British opinion almost from the time that Elgin had them removed. The earl, who had been ambassador to the Ottoman Empire at the

time, told the House of Commons in 1816 that his enterprise had been authorised by the Turkish authorities.

Lord Byron, the English poet and philhellene, was among the prominent figures to condemn the vandalism of dividing the remains of the Parthenon frieze and even wrote a poem to that effect.

> There are those in Britain who believe the relics should stay where they are

The first formal claims for restitution came within a few years of the establishment of an independent Greek state in 1830 and have been periodically revived ever since.

Greek actress and culture minister Melina Mercouri was one of the prominent Parthenon campaigners from the 1980s. More recent campaigners have included George Clooney and his activist wife, Amal. The Hollywood star recently told Athens' Ta Nea newspaper that he was confident the marbles would return to Greece.

There are those in Britain who take a contrary view and believe the relics should stay where they are. They include the cultural historian Dr Tiffany Jenkins, one of five new British Museum trustees appointed in March.

The author of Keeping Their Marbles, which sets out her views, has argued that no individual or group can own culture, and therefore none has exclusive rights to cultural artefacts. She blames a current focus on restoring treasures to their place of origin on postmodernism and liberal guilt.

Sober and constructive approach

At the moment, it is likely the opposite view will prevail, at least when it comes to the Elgin Marbles. One of Greece's strongest arguments is that the marbles were almost certainly stolen, possibly with the help of bribes to local Ottoman officials, despite Elgin's insistence that he had proof of their purchase.

The Greek position gained support from a somewhat unexpected source a year ago, when a Turkish official told a conference of the United Nations cultural organisation UNESCO that his country's archives contained no record of an Ottoman document authorising a sale.

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Zeynep Boz, the head of smuggling prevention at the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, said, "I eagerly await the day when the Parthenon Marbles reunite with the sky they deserve, displayed in the splendour of the Acropolis Museum."

Despite the recent reported progress, that day may still be some way off.

Kathimerini, quoting a person familiar with the negotiations, spelled out the remaining differences to be overcome. The two sides still had to resolve how many of the treasures would be repatriated and over what period.

There were also issues with the legal formula governing any agreement. The newspaper said the British side wanted to avoid any litigation against the agreement in UK courts, while Greece wanted to avoid any definition implying that it was ceding ownership of the sculptures.

None of that sounds insurmountable, although

the anonymous source cautioned that even advancing by an additional one per cent was not easy.

If a deal does finally emerge, it may show that a sober and constructive approach to resolving the crises afflicting a troubled world can produce results, even if it takes 200 years.