

11 July 2025

To: The Trustees of the British Museum, The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom**We Will Not Stand By: A Letter in Defence of the Elgin Marbles and the Integrity of Our National Collections**

We write as individuals from across public life—academia, politics, the law, and the arts—united in our deep concern over the accelerating campaign to remove the Elgin Marbles from the British Museum and send them to Athens.

The Marbles were brought to the UK by Lord Elgin former British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire who petitioned the authorities and was granted a permit to remove them. His actions were thoroughly investigated by a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1816 and found to be entirely legal, prior to the sculptures entering the collection of the British Museum by Act of Parliament. They are British owned and should remain at the Museum for the benefit of its visitors.

This movement to remove the Marbles is not organic. It is politically orchestrated, heavily financed, and increasingly shrouded in secrecy. It now benefits from powerful lobbying, a growing network of high-profile advocates, and extensive foreign state involvement. This is no longer a discussion of curatorial best practice—it is a full-scale political operation, and one that threatens the principles underpinning our national heritage institutions.

The British Museum is not a plaything of ministers, lobbyists or magnates. It exists by law and by trust, for the benefit of the British public and the world—not for the satisfaction of sentimental diplomacy or nationalist agendas. The 1963 British Museum Act is clear: the collections are held inalienably. Any attempt to circumvent that legal reality through so-called "permanent loans" or private arrangements would not only be legally dubious, but ethically and democratically indefensible.

The Parthenon Project, lavishly funded by a foreign industrialist, has now penetrated our institutions and politics to a troubling extent. Former ministers, peers, media figures and cultural influencers are being flown to Athens and entertained in the hope or expectation that they will support the cause of repatriation. The Greek government itself is deeply entangled in the campaign, and its proxies do not disguise their ultimate aim: the wholesale repatriation of the sculptures, with no return.

This is not cultural collaboration. It is cultural capture.

We reject the claim that returning these sculptures is a moral imperative. Quite the opposite: the real moral duty is to preserve the universal and encyclopaedic spirit of institutions like the British Museum, which exist to tell the story of human civilisation in its broadest context. Fragmenting collections by accident of modern nation-state politics diminishes that purpose and would set a precedent with dangerous consequences.

The Elgin Marbles are not trophies. They were lawfully acquired, extensively documented, and saved from near-certain destruction. They are now part of a global public collection that serves millions, accessible for free, in a city that remains one of the most diverse and accessible on earth. To frame their continued presence in London as an act of injustice is not only historically false, it is a betrayal of the very principles that made their preservation possible.

We don't deny the importance of the Marbles to Greece. But these sculptures were acquired legally. Their acquisition is a cultural fact that deserves as much understanding and respect as the very moment of their creation. They would not exist now were it not for the British rescuing them from the irreversible damage they faced.