

Lord Frost talks to "Ta Nea": "A loan is not a satisfactory solution for the Sculptures"

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LONDON. INTERVIEW WITH YANNIS ANDRITSOPOULOS

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David Frost, Brexit minister during Boris Johnson's government and "architect" of the agreement on Britain's departure from the European Union, calls on the British government to donate the Parthenon Sculptures to Greece, transferring their ownership to the Greek state.

In his exclusive interview with "TA NEA Weekend", Lord Frost, who served as Downing Street's chief negotiator for the Brexit deal and the subsequent trade deal with the EU, calls the "solution" of borrowing Phidias' masterpieces and their rotating exhibition in Athens and London, which was recently circulated by the British press, "unworkable".

For the Sculptures to be returned "the law will have to be changed, which I think most British MPs would consent to," notes Frost, one of the most powerful members of the Johnson administration until his resignation in December 2021.

In an article in "Telegraph" last week, the leading Tory politician surprised readers by advocating the reunification of the Sculptures. "I have been supporting this privately since I was studying in Greece," he comments today, revealing that he decided to take a public stand when "TA NEA" brought to light the secret Osborne - Mitsotakis negotiations.

Why did you decide to support the return of the Sculptures to Greece? Did you support the request even when you were a minister?

I have been supporting, privately, this position since I was studying and learning Greek in Greece in the late 1980s. It was then that I realized what a great loss it is that the Sculptures are not in the place for which they were created. As a civil servant and, later, as a minister, I was certainly loyal to the position of the British Government. But now that I am free to speak, I felt that publicising the discussions that the British Museum is having was the right time to publicly add my support also.

The terms of a loan will hardly satisfy both Greece and Britain, since both claim ownership of the antiquities. In addition, Greece is demanding their permanent reunification, which cannot be fulfilled with a loan - unless we are talking about an indefinite or constantly renewed loan. Do you believe that a loan, is the right solution?

A loan, if it is provisional, would seem unworkable. It is hard to imagine that it is a realistic scenario for the Marbles, or a part of them, to move back and forth between Athens and London. If it were a permanent loan, it would be practically like transferring ownership, but without creating the climate of goodwill that the definitive solution of the problem would create. In any case, I assume that Greece would not be satisfied with a loan, so this would not solve the issue. I therefore believe that this is not the way forward.

Is that why you think it is the government that should provide the solution?

Yes. Only a conditional transfer of ownership could solve the issue. To do this, the government will have to be involved.

You call on the British government to return the Sculptures as a "one-off gift" to Greece. How will this be done? Would it be a donation?

A donation by transferring the ownership seems to be a sensible way forward. However, I am sure that there are other legally sound ways of achieving this.

If we are talking about a permanent return, will a change in the legislation be required?

The law in Britain will have to be changed in order to transfer ownership of the Sculptures to Greece. That is one of the reasons why the government should have a role in this issue.

If the matter came to the House, do you think that a majority of British MPs would support reunification?

If the reunification of the Sculptures is part of a broader agreement, such as the one I have set out (i.e. a "new Anglo-Greek cultural cooperation"), and since it becomes clear that it does not create a precedent for the return of other objects, I think it would secure political support.

During the Brexit negotiations, some argued that the EU should signal to Britain that only by giving back the Sculptures would it secure a trade deal. Has such a thing ever been discussed?

As far as I know, the issue was not discussed at any stage of the Brexit negotiations.

Do you think that Rishi Sunak's government will make the "grandiose gesture" you described? Are you optimistic that the Sculptures will soon return to Greece?

Politically, any outcome will be difficult for Britain. The ground should first have been prepared for a grandiose gesture to be made. As I told you, the loan is not a satisfactory solution. The status quo is also difficult politically. I believe that it will not be possible to agree on a loan and the British Government will stand by its position against the transfer of ownership. Therefore, I am not optimistic that there will be any development any time soon. I hope I am wrong.

What do you remember from your years in Greece?

I learned Greek in Greece - mainly in Patras - in the late 1980s, with funding from the Foreign Office in view of my placement in Cyprus in the early 1990s. From earlier times, however, I was interested in the language and culture of Ancient Greece and the Byzantine Empire.

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