

# The Marbles Incident

Extracts from the daily press

Martin Robertson

Day 1 At question time in the House of Commons yesterday the Home Secretary was asked about a report in a national newspaper that the Elgin Marbles had disappeared from the British Museum a few nights ago. Mr. Whitelaw replied that he had received no report of such an occurrence, but that he was looking into the matter. The galleries which house the Marbles are closed, according to a Museum spokesman “for routine cleaning and stock-taking”. He declined to answer further questions.

Day 4 At question time yesterday the Prime Minister was asked to comment on the announcement by the Minister for Culture in the Greek Government that the so-called Elgin Marbles had been recovered in a commando raid and were now on display in the Athens Hilton pending the preparation of suitable museum accommodation. “This is a great day for our country”, Miss Mercouri was reported as saying. “A major part of our national heritage, too long held by the British pirates, is ours once more.” Mrs. Thatcher replied to the question that the report was unfortunately true. An ultimatum had been despatched to the Greek Government to return the marbles immediately or face the consequences. To a question whether he was satisfied with security arrangements at the British Museum, the Home Secretary replied that this was primarily a matter for the Trustees, but that security was under constant review and there had hitherto been no reason to doubt the adequacy of the measures taken. Asked if he intended to resign, Mr. Whitelaw said that he saw no reason to do so. Later Mrs. Thatcher commented that she was entirely satisfied with Mr. Whitelaw’s performance as Home Secretary and hoped he would not think it necessary to resign. Asked how it was possible that so many tons of marble could be removed unnoticed, Mrs. Thatcher replied “It is evident that we are dealing with professional criminals of a high order of competence, but the House, and the country, may rest assured that they will not get away with it.”

Day 9 The Greek government has replied to the ultimatum merely that “we have repossessed ourselves of our own”. In anticipation of such an attitude a task force has been assembled, and it has now been given orders to sail for the Mediterranean. The exact composition of the force has not of course been revealed, but it is said to be “sufficiently strong”. It is understood that the liner QE2 is in attendance to bring back the marbles. Opposition leaders congratulated the Prime Minister on her firm handling of the situation, while expressing the hope that the door would be left open for discussion of a peaceful settlement. President Reagan has offered the services of his Secretary of State as mediator. Opinion polls reveal much enthusiasm in the country, and Mrs. Thatcher’s popularity is soaring.

Day 15 After an engagement with the Greek navy, in which two of our vessels and a considerably greater number of the enemy’s were lost, the Task Force has arrived off Athens. Our ships have suffered considerably from aerial bombardment, but several of the missiles, including one on the

---

This story is reprinted from Now and Then, the website devoted to the poetry of Martin Robertson, at [http://rtn1.org.uk/now\\_and\\_then/](http://rtn1.org.uk/now_and_then/)

QE2 have passed through without exploding. The enemy airforce is now said to have been put out of action. The Commander-in-Chief yesterday called on the Greek Government to surrender, and on receiving a defiant reply gave orders to our ships to shell the city.

Day 16 The shelling of Athens continues. It is concentrated of course on military and industrial targets, but it is feared that there has been inevitably a good deal of loss of civilian life and destruction of property. A report in the media that one shell fell on the Acropolis and destroyed the Parthenon is strongly denied. The Prime Minister is said to be very angry about the tone of media reporting.

The Home Secretary was asked in the House yesterday about a report in a national daily paper that seventeen years ago the Director of the British Museum went to a fancy-dress ball as Grendel's Mother; and whether he thought it proper that a transvestite should have been appointed to a position of such responsibility. Mr. Whitelaw replied that he had no knowledge of such a report, and that in any case the appointment of the Director of the British Museum was in the hands of the Trustees.

Day 20 The Secretary of State is shuttling between Washington, London, Athens and New York, but appears to be getting nowhere. A British landing in Piraeus is expected shortly.

The Director of the British Museum has resigned. In his letter of resignation he apologised for any embarrassment his actions may have caused the Trustees or the public. In answer to a question in the House the Home Secretary announced that the Trustees had agreed that the names of possible successors would be submitted for positive vetting.

Day 24 After several days of bloody street fighting, with much loss of life on both sides and great destruction of property, Piraeus and Athens are in British hands. The removal of the Elgin Marbles from the Hilton to the QE2 has begun. It is now admitted that the Parthenon was demolished by a stray shell. A spokesman expressed deep regret, but as he remarked "it is not the first time this has happened, and they can build it up again". He added that the virtually total destruction of industry in and around Athens would greatly improve the atmosphere and so help the preservation of the ancient monuments.

Day 30 While crossing the Bay of Biscay the QE2 blew up and went to the bottom with all hands and the marbles. It is supposed that the unexploded bomb, which was thought to have passed through the hull, had in fact lodged in the hold and not been noticed. Announcing the loss in the House, Mrs. Thatcher expressed her deep regret and her sympathy with the bereaved, but added that she was in no doubt as to the rightness of the action she had taken. "The Elgin Marbles have been lost", she said, "ironically by a Greek bomb, but it was not the marbles we were fighting for. It was the principle. The rule of law has been upheld, and our country's dignity and prestige restored." She did not think that the expense of the expedition, though considerable, nor the necessarily large sum which would have to be paid in compensation to Cunard, would have an adverse effect on the steady economic recovery which was the inevitable result of her policies; "and of course," she added, "we can always make further cuts in peripheral areas of state spending like education and health." Opinion polls register no drop in the Prime Minister's popularity.

Day 31 Mr. Whitelaw has resigned the office of Home Secretary. "I am deeply sorry to lose a valuable and trusted colleague", Mrs. Thatcher said, "but I am sure that his special talents will be well employed in the new post he has accepted, that of the Director of the British Museum."