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We keep Elgin Marbles, Smith tells Greece

BY ANDREW PIERCE

THE Elgin Marbles, the subject of one of the world's longest-running diplomatic disputes, will not be returned to Greece by the new Labour Government, it was announced yesterday.

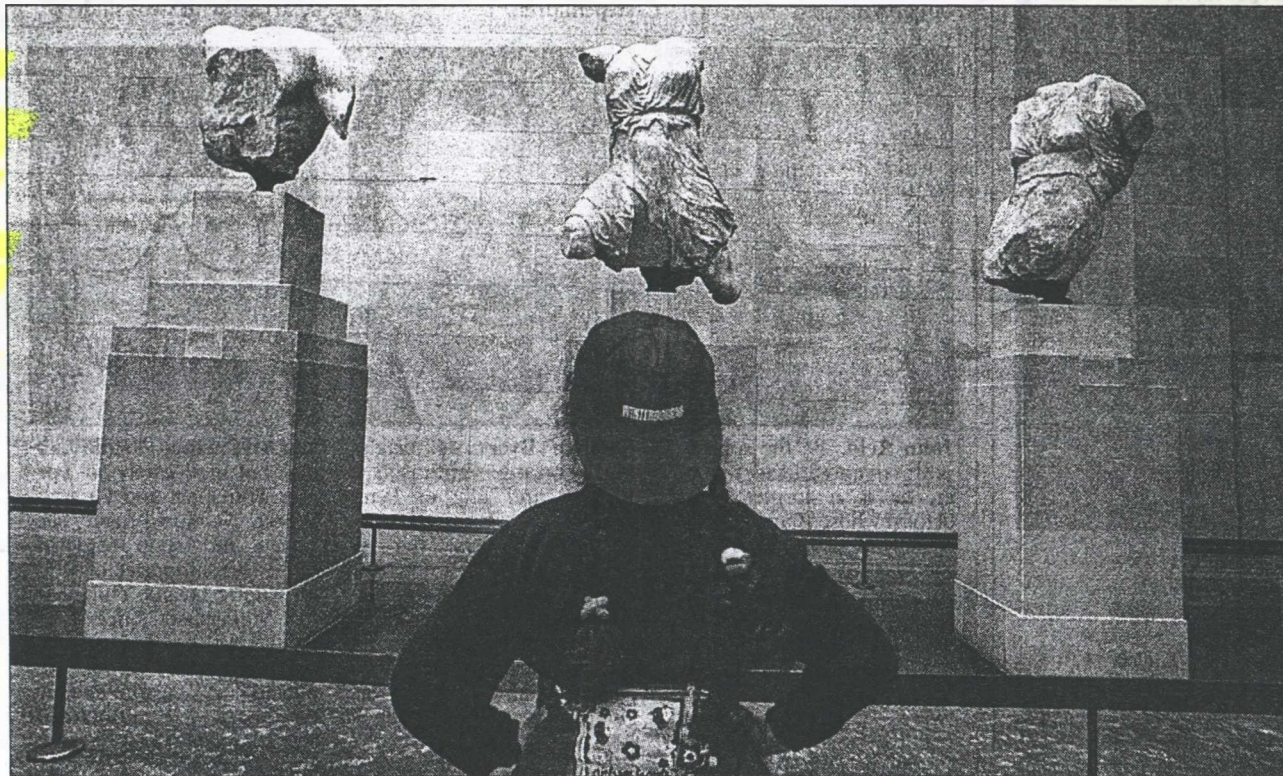
Chris Smith, the Heritage Secretary, in the first definitive policy statement of the new administration, confirmed that the 2,340-year-old marbles, which were prised from the Parthenon by Lord Elgin in 1803, will remain at the British Museum.

The decision, which will cause the first upset in relations between the new government and one of its European Union partners, could also put Mr Blair on collision course with Labour MEPs. More than 40 signed a petition last year calling on Britain to give the marbles back to Greece.

But the announcement thrilled the 11th Lord Elgin, the great-great-great-grandson of the seventh earl, who bought the marbles from the local Ottoman administration.

Lord Elgin said last night: "I am delighted by this news. The marbles were sold to my forebear in perpetuity to the British people. That was the original terms. It is right they should be honoured.

"The Greek authorities have



The new Government's first policy decision was that the Elgin Marbles were to remain in the British Museum

allowed the sculptures left at the Parthenon to crumble into ruins. Were it not for the action of my forebear there would be very little left.

"There is no logical reason for them to return. The Greeks rely on emotion." The Greeks

opened up their latest public-relations offensive, to try to secure their return, within hours of Mr Blair's election.

The socialist Government had hoped for a more sympathetic response after the defeat of the Tories who had always

opposed their return. But Mr Smith was having none of it yesterday.

The Heritage Secretary, speaking on BBC's *On the Record*, said: "They are an integral part of the British Museum's collections. They

are wonderfully displayed in the British Museum."

Labour had examined the issue over the past five years. "We decided it was not a feasible or sensible option. We won't do it," Mr Smith said. Millions of visitors from all

over the world see the marbles each year.

Mr Smith added: "If you start embarking on questioning where particular works are located around the world then you get into all sorts of difficult areas of discussion. You are going to have swaps of works of art taking place throughout the world, disrupting everything, and it doesn't make sense."

The policy decision by the Blair Government is in stark contrast to the one adopted by Neil Kinnock, who was ridiculed when he chose his first policy declaration as Labour leader in 1985 to return them to Athens.

Mr Kinnock said then that without the frieze of stone sculptures the Parthenon was "like a smile missing a tooth".

Mark Fisher, then Labour's spokesman on the arts, was last year reprimanded by Mr Blair for suggesting that talks could be opened on the marbles, which inspired Keats and Hardy, with the Greeks who regard the 1803 transaction as an act of theft.

The Greek Government would restore them to the Parthenon, a temple that is of unique significance to the Greek culture.

The marbles are the best surviving example of the work by Phidias.