

PM rejects Greek push for marbles

The Guardian
6/6 p4

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A Greek charm offensive to persuade Britain to return the Elgin marbles foundered last night when Tony Blair ruled out the idea and Tory MPs boycotted a Commons hearing for the country's foreign minister to make his case.

Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs gave George Papandreou a sympathetic hearing when he appeared before the culture, media and sport committee to propose a partnership deal to return the

marbles to the Acropolis in time for the 2004 Olympics.

The hearing was marred by peremptory comments from Alastair Campbell, the prime minister's secretary, at the Downing Street lobby briefing, announcing that Britain had no intention of returning the treasures which are displayed in the British Museum, in central London.

Conservative MPs boycotted the hearing with Julie Kirkbride, MP for Bromsgrove, claiming that Mr Papandreou's visit was "superfluous and unnecessary" since the committee had al-

ready been briefed by the Greek foreign ministry when they went to Athens to view the site.

She claimed that the culture committee was being used by Pasok (the Greek socialist party) which wanted to be seen fulfilling an election pledge to re-open a dialogue on the marbles.

Ms Kirkbride also indicated that she would oppose any move by the select committee to suggest Greece had a moral case for their return.

"As far as I am concerned the marbles were acquired legitimately and the committee

has far more important issues to discuss.

"I see no reason why ... the Conservative party which opposed their return for 18 years should change their mind."

At the hearing Mr Papandreou told the MPs the issue of the 2,500-year-old marbles was "a very sensitive one and a very important one" to the people of Greece.

"We are talking about the Parthenon," he said. "We are talking about the greatest national symbol of Greece. It symbolises the Greek contribution to the cultural heritage of humankind.

"What we are saying is that this masterpiece must be reunified and its integrity restored."

Mr Papandreou said he did not want to "rake over" the events of 200 years ago when Britain had an empire and Greece was a "subject" nation. But he told Gerald Kaufman, the Labour chairman of the committee, that one part of his case was that the marbles had been acquired illicitly.

Asked about sharing ownership between the countries, he said Greece would be "very glad to look at all the possibilities" provided the marbles

were reunited with the rest of the monument.

Later, on Westminster's College Green, Mr Papandreou said: "This is something we want to move from controversy to building a partnership, conceptualising this problem as a win-win situation for both Greece and Britain.

"I think we can both do something which is very important for world culture, around the time of the Olympic Games, and this would be high visibility for Britain and high visibility for British culture."