



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: British Museum, HC 1851

Wednesday 18 October 2023

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Members present: Dame Caroline Dinenage (Chair); Kevin Brennan; Clive Efford; Julie Elliott; Damian Green; Simon Jupp; Jane Stevenson.

Questions 1-88

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon George Osborne CH, Chair of the Trustees, British Museum; and Sir Mark Jones, Interim Director, British Museum.

II: Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay, Minister of State for Arts and Heritage, Department for Culture, Media and Sport; and Maria Balshaw CBE, Chair, National Museum Directors' Council and Director of Tate.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: George Osborne and Sir Mark Jones.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this meeting of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee. This morning, we are examining the work of the British Museum and the protection of our national collections, following reports in the summer of theft and loss of items from the British Museum's collection. For our first panel, we are joined by the right hon. George Osborne, who is the chair of trustees of the British Museum, and Sir Mark Jones, who is the interim director of the British Museum. Thank you both so much for your time and for coming to join us today.

I am going to kick off the questions. I understand, of course, that an independent review and a police investigation are ongoing, so there are some limits to the detail that you can go into. The key thing we want to know is what went wrong and where we are now.

George Osborne: First, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and, indeed, in general for the support that Parliament and the Government have given to us during this difficult period. I would like to start by apologising again on behalf of the trustees and everyone who works at the British Museum for what has happened. I do not want to minimise the damage that has been done or the shock to the very many members of staff who work in the museum, have given their lives to the museum and are very upset at what has happened. There is a police investigation, and there is an independent review, as you say, Chair, but essentially we were the victims of an inside job by someone who, we believe, over a long period of time was stealing from the museum, and the museum had put trust in.

Obviously, there are lots of lessons to be learned as a result of that. The member of staff has been dismissed by us. The objects have started to be recovered, and I can perhaps say more about that. We have changed our whistleblowing code, changed our policy on thefts and tightened up security around the collection, including in the stores. We have an independent review, which we commissioned to give us some lessons learned and recommendations by the end of this year, and we are undertaking a big project, which Mark will speak more about if you give him the opportunity, to digitise the whole collection so that this great national asset is more properly recorded.

Finally, again, I don't want to minimise the damage caused by what happened, but we do want to use these events as an opportunity to ring the changes: to make the museum more open and more accessible, to make the culture in the museum more open and more accessible—which the new director has started to do—and to undertake the changes that will make this great, historic institution and national and global asset fit for the 21st century and accessible in a way that it has never been before.

Q2 Chair: Were you surprised at the extent to which there was a lack of recording of items and at the extent to which items could go missing over a long period of time without anybody spotting it?



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George Osborne: I will ask Mark to say something in a moment. I am enormously grateful: Mark came out of retirement to help us in our hour of need when the previous director felt he had to resign. Mark has enormous experience, having run the V&A and National Museums Scotland, among other things. I have learned quite a lot from Mark about how museums should think about their collections.

I would observe one thing, which is that the British Museum has been around for 270 years; it has accumulated millions of objects and it still regularly receives bequests. Recording those objects—collecting the image and identifying where the object came from, its provenance and the special properties of that object—is a complicated task. We do do it. On average, around 100,000 objects are recorded each year, and have been over the last couple of decades, so it is a massive task. But you are right to ask us questions—we are certainly asking ourselves questions—about what more we can do, and Mark has some specific ideas about that.

Q3 **Chair:** That is a long-winded way of saying whether or not you were surprised at the way in which items could go missing.

George Osborne: I guess I was not so surprised. I would say two things. First of all, it is difficult, because there is a police investigation. But, inasmuch as I can say what we believe—and we did dismiss a member of staff—if someone is entrusted by an organisation to look after something, and it turns out they are the person removing those objects, that is hard for any organisation. It was hard for the museum, where there is a trusting culture, and there is a feeling that the museum is not just a display cabinet; it is a research facility, and people come in to use our collection to study, and the curators, many of whom have given their lives to the study of particular topics, use the collection as well.

If that trust is completely abused—as I think will become clear in the coming months, quite a lot of steps were taken to conceal this, and it wasn't just that these things were taken; records were altered and the like—it is hard to spot. The big question for the museum—one that the trustees and I are asking of ourselves, and the independent review is asking of us—is why, even though these thefts may have taken place over a 20 to 25-year period, and, in 2021, the museum received an email from a reputable antiquarian dealer who said, "Things are being stolen, they are for sale, and I think I have bought them," and who, by the way, identified an individual he believed was responsible, the museum didn't do better in using that piece of information. That, to my mind, is a big question for the museum, which the independent review needs to properly address.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you. Sir Mark, you have taken over as the interim director. What is being done, in the short term, to ensure that the wider collection is now both secure and accounted for?

Sir Mark Jones: We have changed the rules governing access to strongrooms, so now there is nobody who is allowed to go into a strongroom on their own. That, along with a whole lot of other measures,



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should ensure that the kind of theft that has happened could not happen again.

Going back a little bit to what you were asking, yes, it is very shocking that this could have happened. I think it's also exceptional. I used to work in the British Museum years ago. That was a long time ago, and I have been spending my first month there trying to reacquaint myself with the museum and to go around and look at the stored collections. I think this particular cache of unregistered material is completely exceptional; it is not the case that the British Museum contains a lot of valuable objects which are unregistered.

This is not an excuse at all, but I think that what happened is that these objects came in as part of the very large gift to the British Museum of the Townley collection—well, they were partly purchased by the British Museum. The objects that we are talking about were thought very lowly of—were despised—in the early 19th century because people realised that many of them were in fact recent and not antique. It is a real failure that the initial decision not to register them was never rectified.

Q5 Chair: Have you any idea what proportion of the missing items are now returned or in the process of being returned?

Sir Mark Jones: The current situation is that about 350 are in the process of being returned. Our current estimate is that about 2,000 objects have been stolen.

Q6 Chair: Presumably, work is under way to track those down.

Sir Mark Jones: Yes. We are very grateful to Ittai Gradel, the Danish dealer who alerted us to what happened. We are also very grateful to all the other people who are now helping us.

One of the reasons why I am so keen that we not only complete the documentation and digitisation of the collections but make them as accessible as possible is that, really, in the end, the most sustainable and best security for collections is that they are widely known and widely used. What was wrong here was that these 2,000 objects were really known only to one person, and that person decided to take advantage of that.

Q7 Chair: We know that an apology was issued to Dr Gradel after everything that happened. Has the museum made any changes to the way it handles whistleblowing and whistleblowers as a result of him expressing his concerns?

George Osborne: The short answer is yes. There is a new policy if an external person, like Dr Gradel, were to contact the museum in future. That would be immediately elevated up to the director and chair of the trustees. The board of the trustees and the audit committee would be informed. That was not the case before, although some of those individuals were informed back then.

Secondly, the internal whistleblowing code has been updated. There was a whistleblowing code, but the trustee body has just adopted what we



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regard as the most up-to-date best practice whistleblowing code, in case there are members of the museum staff who feel that they could not speak out—about not just this issue, but any others.

- Q8 **Chair:** George, originally Dr Gradel's claims were not necessarily dismissed but undermined to a certain extent. What role did you and your fellow trustees have in Hartwig Fischer's decision to resign as a director?

George Osborne: In the period around 2021, when the email was received, an investigation was carried out; essentially, Dr Gradel's claims were dismissed. Obviously, with hindsight—even with foresight at the time, actually—that was a mistake. I wasn't the chair of the trustees. I became aware towards the end, in October 2022, when Dr Gradel contacted a fellow trustee. Then, at the end of December, Hartwig Fischer told me that things were missing in the strongroom, and we called the police in.

After that point, the trustee body had questions about the management and the breadth of the management. Then Hartwig Fischer decided to retire, with the support of the trustee body, in early summer this year. The news of the thefts then became public—we made the news public; we had been asked by the police to keep it secret until that point, but once they had carried out some of their investigation we were allowed to make it public. Then Hartwig Fischer said some things about Dr Gradel that he would freely acknowledge were not the right things to say and he offered his immediate resignation—having made those things public, having said those things. That was accepted by the board. The board did not try to resist the resignation.

- Q9 **Damian Green:** Mark, as you say, you have been back there a month. What is your initial assessment of the museum's capacity to respond to this crisis?

Sir Mark Jones: I have actually been very impressed both by the staff and by the work that they are doing. It is a matter of real pain to staff that this has happened, and it is something that everyone takes very seriously. But obviously you realise also that the British Museum is an incredibly busy museum. There are more than 5 million visits every year. There are a million children coming into the museum. We have exhibitions travelling around the world and around Britain. We have partners everywhere. It is a very lively, busy organisation, and if you talk to people about their job, as I have been doing, it's difficult not to be impressed both by their commitment to the job and by the energy with which they are doing what they do.

- Q10 **Damian Green:** So staff morale has not been affected?

Sir Mark Jones: It has been affected, but it has not been affected to the extent that people have gone into a slough of despond. They are working away, and many people of course are not thinking about this day to day.

- Q11 **Damian Green:** What about potential donors?



Sir Mark Jones: Actually, very heartwarming, most of our donors have assured us that they are with us, and some of them have made donations that are intended to help us to deal with this situation. I'm not sure that people would have told us, but we have yet to be aware of any donor who is, as it were, stepping away from their support for the museum.

Q12 **Damian Green:** Stepping back a bit, as an outside observer with nothing but benevolent feelings about the museum, it feels to me as though museum governance 101 ought to be knowing what stuff you have and where it is. This is clearly not the case.

Sir Mark Jones: No, that's right. That obviously sounds extraordinary, but let me try to explain why the situation isn't quite as simple as that.

One of the things that the British Museum has always done and does now very actively is to take part in excavations, and what happens with excavations is that very large assemblages of archaeological material come in. In some cases, they are really enormous—a million objects. Then they are worked on in the museum, and at the end of the process, probably a sample is taken into the collections and the remainder is disposed of.

We operate the portable antiquities scheme. Every year, somewhere between 50,000 and 60,000 finds come into the portable antiquities scheme, and many of those are then identified and conserved in the British Museum. People leave us stuff in their will. What happens then is that we have a large influx of material and it takes time to work it through. So without going on, it isn't quite as straightforward as, say, the National Gallery, where you have a small display collection, which obviously you are totally on top of, all the time. I have been talking to our friends in archives; I think the British Museum is best thought of as an archive of human material culture, and archives do have this problem, which is that they are always in a situation where new material is coming in.

So that's one side of it. The other side of it is that we have accumulated, in the course of the last couple of hundred years, quite a lot of material that came in for its documentary value but which is beginning to be recognised to have historical value. For example, we have large collections of plaster casts of antique sculpture. When we acquired them, they were just like a document of what had been seen, but now, of course, they are also documents of the history of taste and, indeed, of the condition of the objects when the plaster cast was made, which may have been 100 or 200 years ago. So they, like our historic photographs, are transitioning in many cases from being documents that help us in our work to being collection items that are important in their own right. So there is much more going on than one might think.

Q13 **Damian Green:** I get that it is more complicated than I may have thought as a benevolently minded outsider, but is it true that only half the museum's collection is properly catalogued?



Sir Mark Jones: There are different categories. When I started work, my job was to write, in a big leather ledger, details of objects that had not yet been properly registered. That was considered to be good-quality documentation. Now what we think of as good-quality documentation is a good record of the object, accompanied by a good photograph of the object, digitised and accessible.

We have quite a lot of objects registered in the way that I described, but that have not yet been put online. We also have quite a lot of objects that are online, but do not have an associated photograph. So one task is dealing with unregistered objects—about 1 million of those—and other tasks are taking the 300,000 objects that are registered but not digitised at all and digitising them, and taking the 1.1 million objects that are digitised but have no photograph and making sure that they are associated with a photograph. There are layers of activity.

- Q14 **Damian Green:** Broadly speaking, you have 8 million pieces, and 1 million are not catalogued at all and 1.1 million you do not yet have photographed.

Sir Mark Jones: Yes, that is broadly right. Far from being a particularly unusual and regrettable situation, that puts us ahead of most museums operating on the scale that we do.

I should say, just to be clear about it, that parts of our collection we will never describe individually. For example, we have a collection of about 1 million lithics or stone fragments from north Africa, and we do not intend to photograph and describe every one of those. Some big archaeological assemblages will always be treated as assemblages, which means that of the 8 million, we think it is sensible to try to deal with only about 6 million as fully documented objects.

- Q15 **Damian Green:** George, you talked about digitisation, and one quite dramatic report said that if it takes an hour to identify, handle, photograph and digitise a collection piece for cataloguing, and you have 8 million pieces—although we can reduce that to 6 million—it would take a team of four 685 years to complete the catalogue if they work non-stop, eight hours a day, seven days a week. How long will it be before the catalogue is in a state that you are happy with?

George Osborne: Five years is the short answer. Within the next five years, our intention is to digitise the collection in the way that Mark described. Sometimes that will be as collections—I think we have something like a million cigarette cards, and we will not catalogue every single one of those—but our intention is to digitise the collection fully within the next five years. We think that that will cost about £10 million. We are not asking the taxpayer or the Government for the money; we hope to raise it privately.

More than this being a record, we want to use the moment to make the record much more accessible. Part of the challenge for the British Museum, which contains all these objects from cultures and civilisations from all around the world, is that we get people asking for those objects



back. Part of our response can be: "They are available to you. Even if you cannot visit the museum, you are able to access them digitally." That is already available—we have a pretty good website—but we can use this as a moment to make that a lot better and a lot more accessible. That is what I meant when I said to you at the beginning, Chair, that this was a deeply regrettable and shocking incident, but that we can try to use it to ring changes that the museum should be making anyway.

Q16 Simon Jupp: Good morning. Mark, I will come to you first. What is the reputational impact of this for the museum?

Sir Mark Jones: I think it is significant. It gives people the opportunity to say: "You at the British Museum have always assured us that the things in your care were completely safe, but what about these two objects? They weren't very safe, were they?" Having said that, however, if I were to tell you about our relationship with other museums around the world and so on, I think that our reputation with our colleagues internationally remains pretty strong.

We have an extraordinary range of contacts across the globe—I mean with indigenous peoples whose material culture we look after, and with something like 200 museums in Britain, a very large number of museums elsewhere, training programmes and archaeological digs in Iraq and Benin City, among other places. Our network remains very supportive and believes, as is the case, that the British Museum is doing a lot of amazing and good work around the world.

Q17 Simon Jupp: I am really relieved to hear that. I am sure that many people watching will be as well. Have you noticed any wobbling of willingness from other institutions to work with you as a result of this incident?

Sir Mark Jones: No, I have not.

Q18 Simon Jupp: In terms of planned loans, exhibitions and things like that, has anything had to change as a result of this, maybe because of security precautions? I know that you have already outlined some of the changes you have made to the way that staffing operates with certain places within the museum. Have you had to change anything as a result? Upcoming schedules, exhibitions and so on.

Sir Mark Jones: No, everything is going ahead as planned. I have certainly been in meetings and have gone to speak to people who have been worried by the theft and have wanted me to take them through what we are doing and reassure them that their objects are safe if they lend them to us. So far, everyone has been reassured and everything is going as planned.

George Osborne: One thing is that we are intending to put on display the objects we have recovered. There is a lot of public interest in these objects. As Mark was saying, 350 have now been recovered and title has been transferred to us, so we have the makings of a good exhibition that was not previously planned.



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- Q19 Simon Jupp:** Have you had to do an awful lot of work to calm people who have previously worked with the museum to make sure that that relationship remains stable and co-operative?

George Osborne: The short answer is no. I have been contacted by a lot of individuals in other museums, both in the UK and internationally, partly to offer their sympathy and partly to say, "What are the lessons that we should be learning in our museum? Can you help us?" Certainly, we would not have gone down this path, of course.

However, I think that what is interesting is that when we conclude the independent review and publish the recommendations, I suspect that some of them will have a reach beyond the British Museum to other museums that will think, "Okay, well, that is interesting. The British Museum have done this in response to their problem. Maybe we should look at our own procedures."

- Q20 Simon Jupp:** You do not anticipate, then, that getting loans in future from all sorts of places all over the world will be more difficult as a result of this.

George Osborne: No is the short answer.

Simon Jupp: Good news. Mark?

Sir Mark Jones: This is a shocking thing that has happened. The overall reputation of the museum and its staff, though, has not been significantly undermined by that because everybody knows from their personal contacts that these are good people doing a good job.

The way it works with loans, really, is that they tend to be reciprocal. The British Museum lends a huge amount. It lends a huge amount in the UK and it lends a huge amount internationally. So, the culture of museum lending is about this international and national reciprocity, and that has not been undermined.

- Q21 Chair:** Do you think there could be more that the British Museum could do? The Committee was talking earlier about how museums have such a key role to play in the levelling-up agenda and supporting regional museums. Bearing in mind that you have millions of objects and very many of them are not on public display, is there more, as part of this review, that you think the British Museum could do to share some of these hidden objects?

Sir Mark Jones: We have quite a strong tradition of working with other museums in the UK. We have seven full partner museums in Newcastle, Norwich, Truro, Manchester, Carlisle, Glasgow and I have probably left one out. These are strong, continuing relationships where we work with them, lending material but also helping with the display of the collections. Last year, we lent to 122 museums in the UK, which is quite a lot. Obviously, each loan is a number of objects; it is not just a single object. And, of course, we lend internationally as well.

The operation of the portable antiquities scheme means that there are more than 220 museums in the United Kingdom that have received finds

from that scheme. What I would like to say is that we are very active, actually, in working with local and regional museums throughout the UK.

George Osborne: If you don't mind me adding a point: as someone who has been the chair just for two years, the British Museum clearly did not go down the route that the Tate or the V&A went down, which was to have "BM North". The approach of the British Museum has been instead to have a whole network of these strong partner relationships, which I think we are doing more to breathe life into and energise in recent years. This was starting to happen before I arrived.

For example, in Norwich there is an incredible project that Mark mentioned to transform the city castle there into a brilliant set of medieval galleries. I went to the opening of the Manchester Museum's South Asia galleries. That is a very difficult subject to handle well, particularly in Manchester. I used to be an MP near Manchester. It is brilliantly done, with the full support of all the different south Asian communities in Manchester. Doing more of that, rather than having satellite museums as a response to levelling up, is how the British Museum has proceeded.

When I arrived, I thought I would think about that and challenge it, potentially. I actually came to the conclusion this was the right approach, rather than trying to create a brand new museum in Manchester or wherever. We have to make sure that all these partnership museums get our full support and that they have access to the best things in our collection.

When we decant the museum as part of this big renovation of the western sculpture range, which is what many people would know as the main bit of the museum, we are going to have a huge opportunity to send these objects around the country, and potentially around the world, on loans for a number of years while that building work continues.

Q22 **Chair:** That could be a remarkable opportunity not only to spread our culture and heritage to different corners of the UK but to boost footfall at smaller and regional museums. We were talking about when Dippy the dinosaur went to the Bovingdon Tank Museum and the nave of a cathedral. Those unlikely bedfellows can be quite magical in some ways when culture can spread.

George Osborne: As Mark mentioned, we had the highest number of children's visits in the past year in the British Museum's history. More than a million children visited. If you have a question about what did covid do, we now have a record number of children visiting the museum. That is helping children and schools whose families would not necessarily be able to afford the visit, or the school would not be able to afford the visit, to make it part of a meaningful day in London, rather than just opening the door to the museum.

That is all part of the things that we are doing. We have also started to take objects to some specific schools. We took an Egyptian Coptic vase to a school in Middlesbrough. They were studying ancient Egypt in the



classroom and suddenly they had an ancient Egyptian object in front of them.

Chair: Talking of ancient objects, shall we talk about the Parthenon sculptures?

Q23 **Jane Stevenson:** I thought you were going to say “Jane”—[*Laughter.*] One of the big draws of the museum is the Elgin marbles. I would like to know the museum’s response to the Greek Culture Minister’s recent comments that the British Museum’s treatment of the sculptures is “flawed, incomplete and problematic”.

George Osborne: I will go first and Mark can join in if he wants to. The Elgin marbles were purchased by Parliament 200 years ago on behalf of the British nation, from Lord Elgin, who was the British ambassador to the Ottoman empire. It is worth noting that they have been controversial ever since. Lord Byron at the time argued strongly to Parliament that they should remain in Greece. They have gone through periods where there has been a lot of talk about them and periods when that has not been the case. Of course, there is a lot of interest in them now.

We think they play a very important part at the museum in telling not just the story of ancient Athens and its role in the world, but how that sits alongside other great civilisations. The British Museum is one of very few places in the world—there are some others, like the Louvre and the Met in New York—where you can come and see all these great civilisations alongside each other and learn the connections between us, not just our own individual histories.

All that said, I think it is worth exploring, and I have been in direct conversation with the Greek Government about this, whether there is some kind of arrangement that would allow some of the sculptures to spend some of their time in Greece, and what the partnership would be that was born of that. Obviously, it is not a particularly happy situation where we have had this stand-off with Greece for many decades, and the level of scholarship and engagement that we have with many other countries is not one that is replicated with some Greek museums. We want to create a proper partnership. That would mean objects from Greece coming here—objects that have potentially never left Greece before and certainly have never been seen in this country—and it would mean objects from the Parthenon collection potentially travelling to Greece.

Obviously, if this was an easy problem to solve, it would have been solved in the 1810s, 1820s, 1830s and ever since. This is a problem that British Governments of all colours have wrestled with, that the British Museum has wrestled with and that Greek Governments have wrestled with. I am not saying it is an easy problem to solve, and we may not succeed, but I think it is worth the effort of seeing whether we can find a way through that is to the mutual benefit of Greece, Britain, the British and Greek publics and, indeed, the many citizens from many other countries that happen to visit both Athens and London.



Sir Mark Jones: If I could add something, of course conflicting demands are worrying. If you are a person who works in museums, as I have done, there is another side to it. What is exciting for people like me is that people care so much about objects, and they really matter to them. Although it may be a little over-optimistic, I often feel that these contested objects are also the things that are likeliest to give rise to really exciting and energetic partnerships between the different stakeholders in them. I hope that we can find a way to share other objects that are contested because, just quite pragmatically, something can be there on display for 20 years without stopping and nobody ever looks at it, but if occasionally it moves from one place to another, people get very excited about it again and they re-engage with the object. I am quite positive about the idea that objects should be shared.

- Q24 **Jane Stevenson:** When two countries evidently have an enormous affection for and ownership in a set of artefacts, that is an impossible circle to square. I have sat in the Parthenon room many times. Do you think a loan would go down well with your visitors? Would that room look a little bit odd with fewer bits of it, or would you put replica sculptures in their place on a temporary basis?

George Osborne: We would have to consider all these things. As part of the redesign of that part of the museum, there is a whole question of what to do with the Duveen gallery—the name of the gallery where the Parthenon sculptures are. It will, at the very minimum, have to be renovated because it needs some pretty urgent repairs to its infrastructure, and sometimes the gallery has been closed because the roof has leaked, which is obviously completely contrary to what we want to do as a museum that is open to the public. There are all sorts of questions about how you would display it, how you would bring it to life.

One thing that struck me was when these objects arrived in Britain, they caused awe and wonder and have inspired all sorts of people—like Rodin was inspired by what he saw. We have to find ways, using modern technology and modern display techniques and perhaps telling more of the story of how the sculptures came to be in Britain, that engages a modern public in them and creates that same sense of awe and wonder.

As Mark says, if—it is a very big “if”—we can pull off a mutually satisfactory agreement with Greece and there is a transfer of objects, I bet there would be thousands of people queuing to come to see the objects that came from Greece on loan to us, so there are lots of exciting things we could do. We could do them without an agreement with Greece, but I think an agreement with Greece would supercharge that. I still think it would be odd for the museum, and indeed the country, to say we are not even going to consider this question. That has been the case for many decades. The museum did not really consider it and Britain has not considered it, and I think it is worth trying. As I say, it may well not succeed, but it is worth a go.

- Q25 **Jane Stevenson:** Do you think you can take the British public with you, and should they have a say in this?



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George Osborne: I hope you are not suggesting I hold another referendum.

Simon Jupp: No thank you.

George Osborne: I aimed off a lot when it came to opinion polls in my previous life, but opinion polls suggest that the British people are not wedded to the Parthenon sculptures being in Britain for all time and never leaving. Public opinion surveys say that, actually, a majority of the public would be happy to see some kind of agreement and partnership; but as I say, if this had been easy to solve, it would have been solved. It is a very long-standing issue. I think it is worth repeating that it was controversial when Parliament took its decision 200 years ago, and it is controversial today, but why not try to solve it? That is my view.

Sir Mark Jones: I think there might be reciprocal loans. It is possible that we would see things in London that we would never see otherwise, so there could be a real upside to it.

- Q26 **Jane Stevenson:** Thank you. On the modern taste for removing statues that are culturally sensitive and considered inappropriate, what role do you think the museum has in educating, and leaving things in place to convey the long-term message and history of these objects? What could you be doing that you are not doing yet?

George Osborne: It is a big subject. The history of tearing down statues and defacing objects is also the history of humankind. The chapel in the House of Commons was used as stables by Cromwell's army and desecrated, and now it has been restored. No one would expect loads of statues of Stalin and Lenin to be dotted around the former Warsaw pact countries. Things get pulled down—that is part of history.

The British Museum helps preserve some of the culture that otherwise might get caught up in these great changes, revolutions and the like. I personally think that people want to hear more of the story around objects. I don't think we should aim off the controversy. Sometimes the British Museum and others have felt that they do not want to touch the story because it is too embarrassing or defensive. I think a museum that is confident and on the front foot should tell the story. Particularly now that you can just look at it on your phone, why not read the story of the Elgin marbles on the walls of the British Museum, rather than on your iPhone? Why not hear the story of how the Benin bronzes ended up at the British Museum when you are there in the British Museum, rather than having to read a book or someone else's article about it? I don't think we should be shy about engaging in the controversy.

We feel that we have a good case for why the British Museum exists, why it is one of the most popular museums in the world, why it is one of the most visited places in Britain, and why a million schoolchildren come every year. We think we have a good story to tell, and we think we have an important national and international mission. If you feel all those things, don't run away from the controversy; run towards it a little bit, and don't



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be embarrassed about it. You should not be embarrassed about trying to find solutions to difficult problems, understanding that you might not succeed.

Sir Mark Jones: The British Museum is absolutely full of images of people who behaved very inappropriately. Think of the Roman emperors before you go further. The fact is that antiquity is not a place to look for moral lessons in behaviour.

Jane Stevenson: A good point to end on.

Q27 **Julie Elliott:** I don't know how I follow that. First, let me say, representing as I do a constituency 300 miles from here, that the importance of your collections going out to the regions is huge. The majority of children in Sunderland have not been to London, and are not coming to London any time soon, because the cost is so prohibitive. I cannot over-stress how important it is that your collections go out.

I want to look beyond the loss of the items, because there is a future for the British Museum after this. Mark, what are your priorities for your time as interim director?

Sir Mark Jones: The real truth is that in the six months that I am director, we can only hope to begin on things. Obviously, we cannot actually achieve the whole of something in that time.

Q28 **Julie Elliott:** You can set things in train.

Sir Mark Jones: What I would say, if asked, is that my first priority is the security of the collections. That obviously needs attention. No. 2 is that we need to restore morale in the museum; it has been a bit shaken. That is really important. No. 3, which we have already talked about, is this big project to improve the documentation and digitisation of the collections. That will feed into something that needs to happen at the same time, which is completely redoing the energy network of the museum, making it a much greener and more sustainable place, and beginning seriously our work on the masterplan, which involves the redisplay of the entire collection.

Q29 **Julie Elliott:** George, is the income of the museum enough to meet its needs?

George Osborne: Obviously we would like more money, but we are very mindful that we receive generous support from the taxpayer. We can operate within our budget, and where we need additional resource, we have not gone to the Government and asked for the additional money—for example, for the cataloguing project that Mark was talking about. I think trying to find further and diverse sources of income is a good project for the museum.

Q30 **Julie Elliott:** Are you doing that?

George Osborne: We have travelling exhibitions. We have two types of overseas exhibitions. In some, we do reciprocal exchanges, so we might lend something to the Louvre and the Louvre might lend something to us.



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We also have travelling exhibitions that are commercial, and that we charge for putting together. They have been really successful. More of that kind of thing also makes the collection more accessible to those around the world. We are broadening the base of the sponsorship. We have 70,000-odd friends of the British Museum, and we are making sure that they feel that they get a great service from the museum and are connected to the museum. We have patrons; again, we could have more of those. There are lots more things we would like to do, but I would not say that we are in an acute financial situation. We are not an institution that is on the verge of bankruptcy, partly because the team who work with Sir Mark have done a very good job in managing the finances over years when money has been tight.

Q31 Julie Elliott: You have mentioned the roof leaking; have you got the money to sort out the roof?

George Osborne: Well, that's a very good point.

Clive Efford: Are you fixing the roof while the sun is shining?

George Osborne: We are very keen on fixing the roof when the sun shines. That is a huge project. It is an enormous building. I was involved when I was an MP in some of the conversations about restoring, renovating and repairing this building. You all know that is a really complicated and difficult task. Well, the British Museum is another enormous and historic building, with 6 million people going through it every year. We are about to undertake a big renovation and repair, and a rebuilding of bits of the museum. Hopefully there will be some exciting new architecture, as well as our renovating the existing architecture.

As Mark mentioned, we have just started a huge energy project—we have applied for planning permission and got some funding. The utilities of the museum are at the moment ancient gas boilers, so it is too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. We are aiming for a net zero energy solution, and that will cost many tens of millions of pounds, just to do the energy, but we have support for that. I think we are confident that with a combination of public and private support, we will be able to fund the big projects that the museum needs to undertake.

Q32 Julie Elliott: Good. As we move forward, the board will look to recruit the successor to Dr Fischer. What are the key things that you are looking for in that person? What do you need to move the museum forward?

George Osborne: I will just say that because Mark stepped up when his museum needed him, we have a little bit more time to find that right person, so I'm hugely grateful for that. It's a difficult combination. You have to manage a large public institution, which employs around 1,000 people. You have to manage the largest tourist attraction—pretty much—in the country. You have to manage something that is also a research institute and a library, as Mark said, of material objects for the whole world. You have to command the respect of the academic community, while also handling all sorts of questions, such as negotiations with Greece, Britain's colonial past and how that is interpreted at the museum,



and so on. It is a very, very complicated job, so finding the right person is something we take very seriously. We are in the market at the moment. We are hiring a search firm, and we will advertise in the next couple of weeks for the director. We are all systems go on that.

Q33 Julie Elliott: Are you confident you'll get good candidates?

George Osborne: I am confident we will, because in this world, it is one of the best jobs. I think that the interesting balance that we will have to consider—I will be completely frank—is academic scholarship versus experience of managing large, complex organisations in the public sector. Mark Jones has academic scholarship and experience of managing large organisations, but people like Mark are quite hard to find. This is not something at all that I am asking for, but we pay museum directors in Britain very much less than museum directors in the United States, for example, so it is not as straightforward as saying that you can just go out and hire some star director from the US. It is a different culture here, and also a different culture from on the continent of Europe.

This is a public body. The British Museum was established by Parliament, originally to hold two of the four extant copies of the Magna Carta. They did not want it to be a royal collection, back in the 18th century; they wanted it to be a public museum that has this complex relationship with the state and the public, and running that is hard. It is a fascinating, brilliant and unbelievably exciting job to do. In a parallel life, I would have thought that this would be a fantastic thing to do, but I am only the chair.

Q34 Chair: As part of the redevelopment of the museum, the iconic reading room has been largely closed to the public since 2013. Are there any plans to bring that back into use?

George Osborne: Yes.

Sir Mark Jones: George and I are both very strongly of the view that the reading room needs to be open to the public. First of all, it is of huge historic importance. Secondly, it is a beautiful and amazing structure, and a wonderful reading room, but it will take a bit of work, I'm afraid.

George Osborne: Yes. It is one of the things that I was determined to do as chair. As you find in life, you think, "I'm the chairman of the British Museum; surely I can just open the reading room?", but life is more complex than that. It is open to the public now, on booked tours, which it wasn't previously. Mark and I have some hopefully exciting plans to open it. Since the British Library relocated, it has been, for a while, a temporary exhibition space and so on, but it is a library, so you want to find a way of returning it to—not to being a library, but to being somewhere where people learn about things; and it is physically at the heart of the museum.

I had not previously been in it in my life. Then you walk into it and you go, "Of course. It's this room." It is one of those rooms that you have seen a thousand times in images, and it is very tied up with British history over the last couple of hundred years.



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Chair: Finally, a national treasure—Clive Efford.

- Q35 **Clive Efford:** Thank you, Chair. Can I go back to Dr Gradel to clarify something that I have always found a bit confusing? He was the whistleblower who brought all this to light, and he was much criticised at the time by the people in charge of the museum, but he actually bought the 70 items that he believed came from the museum. At what stage during his purchase of those items did he raise the alarm that they might come from the British Museum? Was it before he bought them? Did he buy them out of some sort of benevolence, to say, "I've picked these items up and I want to return them to the British Museum"? What was going on?

George Osborne: My understanding of this is very much subject to the review and the police investigation, but it is that he is a very reputable antiquarian dealer.

Someone online is selling objects. They present them as objects that they have inherited, and he starts to buy them. He then gets suspicious that they come from the British Museum. He also gets suspicious about the identity of the person selling them; he thinks it's an individual working at the British Museum. He alerts the museum. He wants that reassurance that the items are not stolen. The museum gives him the reassurance that they are not stolen, which obviously is a huge mistake, and is subject to the review. Even then—and I think that at that point, a lot of people would say, "Great! I'm buying these objects; whatever my suspicions, the British Museum has told me that they're fine"—he comes back a year later and says, "I know you've told me that these objects are not stolen from the museum, but I really think that they are." He goes directly not to me but to one of my fellow trustees, Paul Ruddock, who had been chairman of the V&A, and says, "I'm really convinced that these things are stolen."

I think he has done absolutely the right thing, and I should say that 350 objects on Friday had their titles transferred to us. It was thanks to Dr Gradel that we got 350 of the objects back, and he is helping us to trace where some of the other objects might have gone.

- Q36 **Clive Efford:** That explains it a bit, but the other thing that puzzled me was that of more than 70 items that he purchased, only three were digitally catalogued. If there is not a catalogue, how does he know that those other items were stolen? Did he know that when he was whistleblowing, or did he find that out after he had contacted the museum? Did he have a better idea of what was in your stores than anybody else did?

George Osborne: Again, I need to be careful because this is really at the heart of the police investigation and the independent inquiry. Mark made an important point at the beginning of this hearing, which I would hope that Parliament—and, through Parliament, the Government—hears, which is that the easy thing to do in a situation like this would be to shut down the collection. "Lock it up. No one's allowed to go into these strongrooms. No one's allowed to see these objects. That's the best way of stopping them being nicked." But we only know that they were being stolen



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because someone from the outside was familiar with the collection and did know about the collection.

It turned out that the more people knew about the collection, the better security that was for the museum, because the individual who was entrusted with the care of the museum, we believe, was responsible for their disappearance, which is why he was fired. The Dr Gradels of this world are part of the alarm system of the museum, because they can say, "We know this collection really well, and things are missing," even though many—but not all—of the items stolen were unregistered and undocumented. The fact that he was so familiar with the collection helped us, so I would say that the more that you can make it available, and the more that the public and scholars can see it, then if someone trusted on the inside is stealing, the more that we can spot that.

- Q37 **Clive Efford:** The reason why I ask is that Morgan Belzic, a doctor in archaeology at the French Archaeological Mission in Libya, is quoted in the *Telegraph* as describing London's art market as "one of the most involved in antiquities theft and looting...It can move objects very easily and quickly out of the country. It's one of the least controlled markets in the world. There's a lot of complacency, a lot of negligence and, of course, some dealers are directly involved with the illegal trade". Do you recognise that description of London?

Sir Mark Jones: No, I don't really, but there certainly is a lot of illegal trade, and the British Museum, like all the other major world museums, has a strong policy on that. We neither acquire nor exhibit nor borrow any objects that do not have a proven history, certainly back to the UNESCO convention of 1970 and preferably beyond that. The reason why we have that policy is that we want to make it absolutely clear to people who acquire illegally excavated or illegally exported objects that those objects will never be legitimate. They will never be able to boast about them or put them in a public exhibition. We hope that that will reduce prices in the illegal antiquities market and make it not worth people's while to engage in that kind of illegal trade.

- Q38 **Clive Efford:** Thanks for that. I would like to ask about the challenges that the British Museum faces. Are they different from other museums and cultural organisations?

Sir Mark Jones: Yes, they are, because museums vary enormously. The Natural History Museum, for example—I am probably going to get this wrong—has 80 million objects, and the National Gallery has a low number of thousands, so there is an enormous spectrum. There is also a spectrum between museums like the National Gallery or Tate, which have collections of pictures that are there to be displayed. It is always a shame when things that were made to be displayed are not. At the other end, you have places like the British Museum or National Museums Scotland, and part of what they are doing is collecting for archival purposes so that you can use these as sources of evidence, so that you can go back and use new techniques to better understand the way that people lived in the past, the



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way they worked objects, the way they traded and so on. Museums are very different.

- Q39 **Clive Efford:** I expected you to talk about value, and the value of items that are particularly small and easy to transport and steal. Is that a particular challenge for the British Museum, as opposed to other museums? It does appear to be, as a consequence of what has gone on here.

Sir Mark Jones: Yes; small, valuable objects are obviously always at greater risk than large objects or objects with no value.

- Q40 **Clive Efford:** Is that a particular challenge for the British Museum?

Sir Mark Jones: Yes, I suppose that is probably right. It certainly has collections that are marketable. The entire collection of coins, for example, is full of things that are small and transportable. But what really happened here is twofold. I should explain that when people talk about gems, these are not gems in the valuable sense. It is a term that describes a certain kind of ancient artefact. Many of them are made of glass and are not of intrinsic value at all, and none of them are made of gemstones. It is not those kinds of gems. The big problem here is that they were not properly documented. They were not properly published, so it was possible for someone to take objects from that collection without being found out.

- Q41 **Clive Efford:** Given that you have those problems that are peculiar to the British Museum—there are so many items that need to be catalogued; it is going to take a long time—do you think the Government really understand the situation that the British Museum is in and the particular problems that it faces?

Sir Mark Jones: Yes, I think so. I would regard our sponsor Department as being really supportive, and we value that support.

- Q42 **Clive Efford:** Do you think the Government is hands-on enough to support you in what you are trying to achieve?

Sir Mark Jones: Yes, I do.

George Osborne: Yes. There has been a consistent support for the British Museum. The big Foster roof and the Great Court was a Tony Blair Government project. The creation of an amazing new facility in Reading where we store a lot of our items was a project under the Cameron Government that got the go-ahead. The current Government have given us support for the new energy centre. Whatever the outcome of the general election, I am sure we will also have the support of the local MP Keir Starmer.

Clive Efford: On that note!

Chair: Thank you very much. Just before we let you escape, is there anything that hasn't come up that you feel we should be aware of? No? Okay. I thank you both for your time and patience today.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Parkinson and Maria Balshaw.

- Q43 **Chair:** For our second panel, we are joined by Maria Balshaw CBE, chair of the National Museum Directors' Council and the director of the Tate, and by Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay, Minister for Arts and Heritage at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Thank you both very much for joining us.

Lord Parkinson, can I start with you? To what extent is your Department involved with the British Museum? It is one of your arm's length bodies. When did you first hear about the loss of items from the museum?

Lord Parkinson: We are closely involved. The British Museum is one of the 42 arm's length bodies that DCMS works with and one of the 15 national museum groups that we work with and sponsor. We have a sponsor team within the Department who work with each of those museums and speak to them regularly. They were informed about the initial allegations that were made and the investigation that was conducted in early 2021, which, as we know, was when the museum concluded that there was nothing of concern. As we now know, that was the wrong conclusion. We were informed subsequently, when further allegations were made and a further investigation done, that this matter was being looked at again.

- Q44 **Chair:** To what extent has the Department had any involvement in helping to retrieve some of the items that have been lost?

Lord Parkinson: We are working very closely with the museum since they have gone public about this and rightly launched the independent review. The Secretary of State has spoken to the chairman of the museum on a number of occasions. I have spoken to the interim director, Sir Mark Jones, who you have just heard from. Our permanent secretary has had conversations as well. We have also had meetings with the members of the review team. At our encouragement, the review team now also includes an additional member with experience in charity law. We have been discussing with them regularly since we were informed about this, particularly since they have been public about it. Like everybody, we are eager to see the outcome of the independent review, the lessons that need to be learned and the steps that need to be put in place to retrieve as many of these objects as possible and ensure that it cannot happen again.

- Q45 **Chair:** Notwithstanding the fact that there are independent reviews and police investigations going on into this, what is your take on the way the museum has responded to this?

Lord Parkinson: As you heard from the previous witnesses, there is a live police investigation and the ongoing independent review. Some of the reflections I will have will depend on what comes out of those, but we are glad that the independent review has been set up, and we are glad that it

is independent. As I say, we are glad that it now also includes somebody with experience of charity law.

I heard the contrition and regret from the chairman of the trustees and the former director. This has clearly been a great shock and source of dismay to the museum and its many staff. Certainly, it has caused dismay and concern across the sector. We are glad that they are taking the steps that they are to understand how it has happened and the lessons they need to learn.

- Q46 Chair:** To repeat the question that I asked the previous panel—I do not know whether you had arrived at that stage—to what extent were you surprised at the lack of cataloguing and that the loss of so many items could go on over such an extended period?

Lord Parkinson: At the lack of cataloguing slightly less so. Although I have been Arts Minister for the past two years, I do not come from a curatorial museums background. Like members of the Committee, I am surprised at the extent of the collections of the British Museum and other comparable institutions, but given its 270-year-old age, I understand the challenges in documenting the collection, although there are different patterns among the departments of the British Museum and among the different museums with which DCMS works. Like everybody, I am surprised and dismayed that what, according to the allegations, appears to be an inside job has occurred. That is fortunately very rare in the museums sector, but it is a deeply troubling matter to hear about.

- Q47 Jane Stevenson:** Are you treating this as an isolated incident just affecting the British Museum? We have had 560 objects logged as missing from the Imperial War Museum, for example. Is this issue wider than just one or two museums?

Lord Parkinson: We are not treating this in isolation. We have written to our other national museums and some other of our arm's length bodies, as you would expect us to, to ask for assurances about their processes. Through that and through the inquiries that they are getting from the outside world, they are being forthcoming about items that are missing or unaccounted for in their collections, but there are a variety of reasons and explanations for that. I think it is important on behalf of the sector to stress that some of those numbers should not cause immediate alarm. Dr Balshaw can explain some of the context from her experience in the sector.

We have written to our other organisations to seek their assurances. The majority of museums and galleries in this country are not directly arm's length bodies of DCMS—we have a more distant relationship with them—but I still visit them when I am around the country, and I am yet to find a museum or gallery that has not, at its board of trustees level and its executive level, thought about its own processes in the light of the reports that have emerged about what took place at the British Museum.

- Q48 Jane Stevenson:** Thank you. Dr Balshaw, has the Tate suffered theft that you are aware of?



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Maria Balshaw: The Tate has not lost or had any object stolen from any of its stores or collections.

Jane Stevenson: Ever?

Maria Balshaw: In terms of the time that I have been here and records that we have preceding my time as director. We have no recorded instances.

- Q49 **Jane Stevenson:** Are you looking at the museums sector and seeing that certain collections are more vulnerable to theft? Do you think certain types of exhibit are more open to theft and to being targeted than others?

Lord Parkinson: There is a distinction to be made between items on exhibit and items in store. What is alleged to have taken place at the British Museum did not concern items that were on public display. Those are harder to steal—they are behind protective cases; there are security guards; there is CCTV. The allegations about the British Museum concern items that were not on public display and were mostly for academic research and study. We await the outcome of the independent review and the police investigation to see what lessons need to be learned, but it is clearly in that area that lessons need to be learned for the British Museum and perhaps, therefore, for others.

- Q50 **Jane Stevenson:** Will you be asking other national museums to consider their entire security of storage items?

Lord Parkinson: We have already written to the other ones to seek assurances about the processes that they have in place, and we are pleased by the assurances that we have been getting from them. As more details emerge from the independent review, we will continue to have those conversations with the museums and galleries, but I know that they are having those conversations internally already.

- Q51 **Jane Stevenson:** Finally, we have seen internationally some protests in museums and damage to paintings. Do you think that the museums sector has to respond to a world that is a bit more open to protest at the moment? Dr Balshaw, are you taking any steps?

Maria Balshaw: The reassuring thing that I can share with the Committee is that there are probably more attempts to make protests and damage objects than are ever actually realised. Our security is based on the principle of observing before something happens, so I would want to give reassurance that that is under continual monitoring by museums large and small. We share information and best practice on how to ensure that our collections are safe.

- Q52 **Jane Stevenson:** Lord Parkinson, are museum staff being trained to look out for this?

Lord Parkinson: Yes. There is a long history, sadly, of protesters down the centuries, for various reasons, targeting cultural institutions and works of art to try to make their points. It is an issue that the sector has been



grappling with for a very long time. As those trends change, they consider it as well. Certainly, in my discussions with museums big and small, I have been asking them about the steps that they have been taking. But it is part of a long history, sadly.

- Q53 **Chair:** Maria, you were very definitive a moment ago when you were asked whether the Tate had ever lost anything from its collection. Given what we have heard today about how the British Museum denied that items had been lost or were unaware that items had been lost for quite a considerable period of time, how can you respond so reassuringly? How can you be so sure?

Maria Balshaw: As Sir Mark Jones pointed out earlier, the size and type of collections that museums hold vary hugely. In Tate's case, we routinely audit our collection. It is a little under 80,000 objects, so its scale is quite different from the British Museum's, and every object has a record, which is in our collection. We have a complete catalogue—an inventory of items—which means that we know where things are and could therefore identify if they were lost, misplaced or even stolen. Our records demonstrate that that has not happened since we have had that catalogue in place.

- Q54 **Julie Elliott:** Good morning. Lord Parkinson, I want to go back to an answer you gave to Jane Stevenson. You said that after the event you had written to other museums and were satisfied that everything was fine. If you had written to the British Museum before this happened, would you not have received such a reassuring answer then as well?

Lord Parkinson: Through our sponsorship of the museum, we talk to them in a number of ways, but of course, the facts that have come to light beg a number of questions that it is worth asking of them, but also of other institutions.

- Q55 **Julie Elliott:** I am just concerned; writing a letter and receiving a letter back saying, "Yes, everything's fine" does not to me sound that thorough. It does not seem to be pushing—to say, "Well, why do you think this?"—or was that what the letter was about?

Lord Parkinson: For the other institutions, it is about asking the immediate questions that spring to mind when we see what appears to have gone wrong at the British Museum, but that is in the early stages. There is the independent review, which is looking into this in detail. I am sure that that will throw up other questions that other museums and galleries will want to ask themselves. We will ensure that they are asking those questions and that, for those we work with and sponsor, we have the answers and are assured about them.

In relation to the British Museum's own inquiry, we are meeting the joint chairmen of the independent review. We have seen its terms of reference and have taken some further steps, including having senior DCMS representation on the museum's audit and risk committee to make sure that we are watching closely the steps that it is taking as it carries out that review.

- Q56 Julie Elliott:** Dr Balshaw, you have mentioned how the Tate ensures the safety and preservation of its collection by the way you have things catalogued and the audits and so on and so forth. How much of the national collections do you think are appropriately catalogued?

Maria Balshaw: I am not able to speak about the details of the individual institutions that make up the national museums because I simply do not have access to all that information. What I would say is that the events at the British Museum, of course, have meant that all those national museums have reviewed their own situation.

The fact that, as your colleague was able to point out earlier, the Imperial War Museum is aware that 559 objects are currently lost or misplaced suggests that they are across their recordkeeping and are aware of the extent of any movement within a collection that is 33 million objects. That gives me some reassurance that they too are aware of their responsibilities in terms of maintaining catalogue and proper records and the safe care of the collections.

- Q57 Julie Elliott:** Are there any institutions that we could look at—museums or other institutions across the world—as exemplars of how you do this? Are there any places that you can think of that we should be looking to?

Maria Balshaw: Often the UK museums are looked at as the standard for how you should maintain collections. The UK Spectrum standards and accreditation, which underpins the way in which we look after all our national and most of our regional collections, is often used as the standard by which other international museums work. So we have very clear parameters that we all strive to work to.

Some museums' collections are so large and continually evolving that a proportion of them are not yet catalogued, but I think we have a very clear sense of the standards that we should be aspiring to.

- Q58 Julie Elliott:** Is there a case for a unified catalogue of our national collections?

Maria Balshaw: There is an ongoing project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council called Towards a National Collection, which is looking at the opportunities and potential for digitising all the nation's collections and linking those up using AI and emerging new technologies. It is an immensely complex job because of the incredibly varied nature of collections across the UK.

Having a single library-like catalogue for all the nation's collections might sound like a simple thing, but some museums hold oral histories, some hold objects and some museums are effectively forms of community practice. That variety of museum work is what actually makes UK museums stronger. As a sector, I think we are doing the research to allow our collections to be accessed and used for research and for the public benefit already.

Having every single record of every single type of object—large, small, valuable or not valuable—is perhaps not quite what is needed. Actually

meeting the standards that we clearly have in place is what we should all be doing as museums.

- Q59 **Julie Elliott:** Lord Parkinson, what is your view on a unified catalogue of national collections?

Lord Parkinson: The Government does support museums in cataloguing. For instance, we are contributing £200 million towards the Natural History Museum's Unlocked project. They have a collection of 80 million items and they are digitising them and sharing them, so that scholars and academics but also curious members of the public from around the world can interact with that incredible collection, wherever they are.

We are keen to see more digitisation and wider sharing of the UK's national collection. It is for the enjoyment and education of people around the world.

- Q60 **Kevin Brennan:** Lord Parkinson, I know you're a music fan, because I saw you at a concert the other evening. You might therefore know the great George and Ira Gershwin song, "A Foggy Day in London Town", which has the memorable lyric, "I viewed the morning with alarm / The British Museum had lost its charm". What damage do you think this has done to the reputation of the British Museum?

Lord Parkinson: As the museum itself has said, this is—was—a sad day for the British Museum.

- Q61 **Kevin Brennan:** Would you describe it as a disaster for their reputation?

Lord Parkinson: I think it is deeply regrettable. It has caused dismay and concern across Government and across the sector.

- Q62 **Kevin Brennan:** You don't think it's a disaster?

Lord Parkinson: I would like to see the outcome of the independent review before making final judgments about the scale of what has happened and the reasons why. But the British Museum is a world-class institution; it has a long and proud history. As I heard the chairman of trustees and the interim director explaining, it is continuing doing its excellent work while also asking the questions of itself that it needs to ask in light of this very concerning incident. So we are concerned about it, but we await the outcome of the independent review and the police investigation before, I suppose, I choose my adjectives.

- Q63 **Kevin Brennan:** Let us put it this way, then. Do you think that it has potentially wider implications for the reputation of the UK museums sector across the piece?

Lord Parkinson: As I say, it is mercifully very rare for what appears in this case to have been an inside job to happen; that is a rare occurrence in museums, not just in the UK but around the world. It has caused dismay across the profession. Lots of people move between different institutions. They know the British Museum well and are concerned to hear about it. But, as I say, we—with our other arm's length body museums—have written to them about the processes they have in place. We see no



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reason to be concerned that what seems to have happened at the British Museum may have happened in other museums.

- Q64 **Kevin Brennan:** Maria, you mentioned that UK museums are looked at as a place where you can expect to find high standards that international organisations, or other organisations in other countries, would wish to replicate. Is that reputation under threat from this scandal?

Maria Balshaw: I think it is fair to say that the international museum community was both shocked and deeply dismayed that something like this could have happened; at the same time, they are also aware that the museums in the UK maintain very high standards for the care of their collections. We at Tate, along with colleagues at the V&A and the National Gallery, are in very active conversation with our international peers.

Theft by somebody who works within the museum is probably the most shocking thing that any of us could ever anticipate, and I think that across the profession there was really deep dismay.

- Q65 **Kevin Brennan:** Do you think there are any implications for attracting items on loan to UK museums as a result of this scandal?

Maria Balshaw: I have not encountered that. We are still able to borrow and lend objects from Tate's collection.

- Q66 **Kevin Brennan:** And have you heard from anyone else in the sector that they are having any problems in that regard?

Maria Balshaw: No, I haven't.

- Q67 **Kevin Brennan:** You don't anticipate that being an issue at all?

Maria Balshaw: No, I don't think that will be an issue. I think that the larger concern is the shock and surprise for very hard-working museum professionals who pride themselves on putting the care of the collection first, in terms of their own professional standards. There is just dismay that one of their number could have done this.

- Q68 **Kevin Brennan:** Beyond this scandal, is the UK currently successful at being able to attract items from around the world? Are there any other issues about that the Committee ought to be aware of in our work looking into and taking an interest in museums?

Maria Balshaw: You might see newspaper reports today that there is a Rothko show currently in Paris to which Tate lent Rothko's extremely important Seagram murals. We lend internationally to very prestigious institutions, and we also borrow from extremely important collections and institutions. Our processes to allow that to continue are very thorough and highly respected across the sector. That is the case for the museums within the national portfolio, as it is with museums across the UK.

- Q69 **Kevin Brennan:** This is slightly boring question, but has Brexit made any difference to that process?

Maria Balshaw: No, it hasn't. The trust and reciprocal relationship between European and UK museums is as strong as it has ever been.



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Q70 **Kevin Brennan:** As you will know, other cultural institutions that we have taken evidence from have had problems with the movement of objects, people and so on. But it is not an issue for you in the museum sector?

Maria Balshaw: It has not caused us issues at Tate.

Q71 **Kevin Brennan:** Have any of the other members of the body you represent reported any issues of that kind to you?

Maria Balshaw: I can't answer that question, I'm afraid.

Q72 **Kevin Brennan:** Well, you can answer it. You can say that they haven't.

Maria Balshaw: I don't know.

Q73 **Kevin Brennan:** Exactly. I wasn't asking you whether you knew; I was asking whether anyone had said anything to you about it.

Can you also briefly explain the indemnity scheme that the Government runs around insurance? Perhaps, Lord Parkinson, it would be appropriate to ask you about that. Does any of this have implications for that?

Lord Parkinson: We run a Government indemnity scheme that saves museums around £100 million a year in commercial insurance costs. It is another instance of the way that the Government support the sector. It allows museums big and small to be able to take part in that exchange of items on loan, which means that people can see collections from around the world and also compare things to works of art and cultural objects from different time periods and civilisations.

Kevin Brennan: Other than to mention that St Fagans Museum in my constituency won museum of the year just before the pandemic, that is all from me.

Q74 **Chair:** Well done—nice plug!

You both heard the evidence from our previous witnesses. From some of what they said, I took the impression that despite the trauma of everything that has happened, it actually has shone a very useful light on the situation up until now—the need for things to be digitised and recorded effectively and the benefits of having items, rather than being locked away in dusty strongrooms, actually out there in different corners of the country and the world, being appreciated by those who would like to see them. Is that experience unique to the British Museum, or do you feel that other parts of the sector will have picked up some learnings from what has been experienced by the British Museum?

Maria Balshaw: I think an incident of this seriousness asks all museums to look again at the safety and security of their collections. That is what we did at Tate. Our trustees had their last meeting in our large collection store, and were walked through every aspect of the handling, care and access of objects, so that they could check, with me, that we had all the appropriate measures in place—which we will always continue to strengthen.



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Nearly all national museums lend generously to collections across the UK. At Tate, we have more than 50 organisations that work with us as part of a sharing network called Plus Tate, whereby they have privileged access to the national collection so that they can use those objects in their own exhibitions. They are in institutions in places that are as varied as Shetland, Llandudno, Penzance or Middlesbrough, and that is part of our national role. The V&A, the Science Museum and the Imperial War Museum all have locations outside London, and they lend to many other regional collections. The reciprocity across those collections is one of the great strengths of UK museums.

Q75 Damian Green: I think you were in the room to hear the British Museum team say they were very keen for a new arrangement for what I grew up calling the Elgin marbles, and which I observe the museum itself now calls the Parthenon sculptures, which makes it clear where they think they belong. Is there a Government position on what should happen on that?

Lord Parkinson: We call them the Parthenon sculptures because that is where they came from. As the chairman of the museum explained, they were legally acquired, and this issue has been the subject of debate ever since that purchase. The Government is clear: the British Museum Act 1963 prohibits the museum from deaccessioning items—that is, permanently removing them from their collection—and we have no plans to change that law.

But the Act does not prohibit the museum from generously lending items to institutions throughout the country and around the world; it does that all the time. It has done that with some of the Parthenon sculptures in the past. It lent to the Hermitage Museum in Russia when we had better relationships with the Russian Federation than we do today. We support the museum in making loans to other institutions that recognise the museum's ownership of them, and they do that for many items in their collection.

Q76 Damian Green: As you say, they were talking about the possibility of a loan. You would support that.

Lord Parkinson: Across all the items in their collection, if they wish to loan them, there is no prohibition in law and that would not concern me. But for a loan to take place, the recipient of the loan obviously needs to acknowledge the British Museum's ownership of the item, and it needs to be a loan that is returned.

Q77 Damian Green: That is precisely the nub of where I was going to get to. Call me cynical, but it feels to me that if the Parthenon sculptures ever get back to being displayed at the Parthenon again, the chances of them coming back to this country are quite remote.

Lord Parkinson: That would be a matter for the museum and the Greek Government to discuss and to reassure each other and His Majesty's Government about.



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Q78 Damian Green: I am still not quite clear. Would you support them in that?

Lord Parkinson: They have loaned some of the Parthenon sculptures to museums in other countries in the past, and we have supported that.

Damian Green: But not in Greece.

Lord Parkinson: If a museum in Greece accepted the British Museum's ownership of them and it was clearly a loan that would be returned, I would see no reason to say that that is contrary to the British Museum Act 1963, but, like you, I would have lots of questions about how it is described and how that is assured.

Q79 Chair: The British Museum Act 1963 is often cited as the reason why things cannot be disposed of or shared more broadly, particularly when it comes to contested items. You said there are no plans to change that piece of legislation, but it is quite old. Is there an argument for reviewing the legislation and seeing if there are ways it could be brought more up to date?

Lord Parkinson: In between my two stints at DCMS, there was an interesting debate in the House of Lords about the National Heritage Act 1983, which, like me, turned 40 this year. Turning 40 is a moment for introspection, and for looking forward and back. We have no plans to change any of the laws that cover the national museums in this area but, as I said in that debate, it is important to remember that we have 15 national museum groups, which are covered by various Acts of Parliament. Some of our national museums are covered by different statute—for instance, the Horniman Museum, and that didn't prohibit it from returning legal title of some of the Benin bronze material in its collection. The pattern is varied, and most museums around the country are free to do what they, their trustees and their leaders think within the context of charity law and other statute. The pattern we have allows for freedom for the majority of museums in this country, while protecting a national collection from de-accessioning. I think that balance is the right one.

Q80 Clive Efford: The Museums Association issued a statement at the time this was all in the media, saying: "Theft by members of public—as in any other sector—does happen, but 'inside jobs' are extremely unusual." Lord Parkinson, you have said that it is very difficult for the public to steal because when things are behind display cabinets and so on they are more secure, but they are more vulnerable when they are in storage. So which is it? Are we being a bit complacent here? I get the feeling that we are being ushered along and being sold, "Nothing to see here. There's not a problem; it's just this one-off character. Let's get on with it."

Lord Parkinson: No, not at all. There is no complacency. We are deeply concerned by what has occurred at the British Museum and the allegations that are being investigated. I make the point that there is a distinction between the allegations there, which concern items in the collection to which only members of staff have access: it is very rare, as we have heard, for members of museum staff to be involved in theft in this way.



That is different from items that are on public display, which of course have additional levels of protection and assurance because they are on public display. But we are not complacent about it, and nor are museums across the country.

- Q81 Clive Efford:** I think you were in the room when I read out the quote from Morgan Belzic, doctor in archaeology at the French archaeological mission in Libya, who is quite scathing about the situation in London. I will read it again: "The London art market is one of the most involved in antiquities theft and looting...It can move objects very easily and quickly out of the country. It's one of the least controlled markets in the world. There's a lot of complacency, a lot of negligence and, of course, some dealers are directly involved with the illegal trade". Do you recognise that description of London? Isn't there a danger that the antiquities that are in storage in our national museums are vulnerable to that illegal trade?

Lord Parkinson: No, I do not recognise that picture. There are deeply committed professionals across the art trade. As the chairman of the British Museum said, there are people like Dr Gradel who are part of that wider warning system and protective ecology for museums. There are codes of ethics by which they do their business. The UK is a party to the UNESCO 1970 convention on combating illicit trade, and Government Departments and agencies work very closely with the sector to tackle illicit trade where it occurs. Border Force and HMRC both play an active role in that, and the Metropolitan Police's arts and antiques unit is consulted by police forces from around the world for its expertise. That is not because there is a large problem in London, but because they are vigilant partners in ensuring that there is not.

- Q82 Clive Efford:** Were all those measures in place before these antiquities were being sold from the British Museum? It took a whistleblower who was receiving them at the other end as a buyer to alert them to the fact that all the items had been trickling out over a long period of time from the British Museum, so it doesn't seem that those checks and balances are very effective.

Lord Parkinson: Like the chairman of the British Museum, I want to wait for the police investigation and the independent review before going into considerable detail about it. But, like him, I would say that the fact that Dr Gradel, who is a scholar and buyer, was concerned by what he saw and reported it, based on the professional code of ethics to which he and others adhere, shows that that is working, and would make also the distinction between the art trade and museum collections. The point is that the items that have allegedly been stolen in this instance should not have left the museum's collection. That is nothing to do with the art trade in London: that is to do with problems at the British Museum.

- Q83 Clive Efford:** I am implying no criticism of Dr Gradel whatsoever. None the less, what was going on was not picked up, was it? It took him—as an expert—recognising these items were for sale in the market and alerting those authorities that you said are being so vigilant. It was right under their noses and they didn't spot it. Going back to my original point, aren't



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we being too complacent here? What is happening to try to prevent this being allowed to happen in the future?

Lord Parkinson: I do not think we are being too complacent. All of us are keen to see the outcome of the independent review and the police investigation, which may throw up further questions that we want to ask and want to see answered.

Q84 **Clive Efford:** I will leave that there. Can I come to Maria Balshaw? What other issues face the museum sector that we should be aware of?

Maria Balshaw: The most chronic issue that museums across the UK face is the diminishment of core funding, particularly from local authorities, but also within the higher education sector and across the independent museum sector. That reduction in funding means that they are less able to deliver the public benefit they would wish to see from their collections, which includes activities like schools visits and community engagement work—the use of the collection by the people who are supposed to benefit from it. Museums are facing such stringent budgets and reductions in staffing levels that they are not really able to fulfil the public service that they would like to.

Q85 **Clive Efford:** Would you like to see more Government support for these museums?

Maria Balshaw: I think that Lord Parkinson and I would absolutely share the view that investing in the nation's museums and, through local authorities and higher education, investing in the regional museums most especially, would be of huge benefit to the UK public.

Q86 **Clive Efford:** You mentioned local authorities. To pursue that very quickly, before we finish, local authority funding has been hit extremely hard through austerity. Are you saying that there should be some form of direct funding and that you shouldn't have to rely on local authorities—which immediately start to fund their statutory duties, protecting that funding, so that museums, youth services and other things get squeezed?

Maria Balshaw: I am certain that everyone on the Committee will be well aware of the strain on local authority funding and will also know that Arts Council England, as well as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, invests very significantly in museums. Of course, as a museum director among a group of really committed and active museum directors, I think we would like to see renewed funding for the benefit that museums can give. I have no particular view on the mechanism by which that funding should come to us.

Q87 **Chair:** You heard from the previous witnesses about the challenges of the stewardship of large listed buildings. They are homes to many of our national galleries. I wondered more broadly about the Department's attitude to the protection of our heritage assets, and whether any work is ongoing on that. In my constituency, it feels that there is literally no responsibility whatsoever for maintaining the standard of listed buildings that fall within the curtilage of MOD property. There seems to be an approach of managed decline which, in layman's terms, suggests that



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listed buildings and other assets of national significance can just rot without anybody caring. More broadly, when buildings are in private ownership, the restrictions are imposed so punitively that it actually negates the ability to restore them and bring them back into use. Is the Department aware of that? Is it aware that the listing rules and the rules around renovation and repair are being imposed in such an unpredictable and scattergun way? Are there any plans to look at that?

Lord Parkinson: I have a lot of conversations about this topic. Last week, I was at the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth, where there is an accredited museum, and I heard about the complicated structures they have with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation to look after that building. At the start of the week, I was speaking to the Heritage Trust Network in Newcastle, with more than 200 local community groups, civic societies and others who look after a variety of properties. I speak to the Listed Property Owners Club, and I was at the parliamentary breakfast yesterday for the Historic Houses Association, which obviously represents people with significant historic properties in private ownership. We talk about all these things.

Through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, we are trying to make sure that the planning system gives the protections for heritage assets that we all want to see and, with colleagues across Government, we are taking part in a review of the energy efficiency measures that might be taken to future-proof those buildings and to help them to play their part towards achieving net zero while balancing the protections for their heritage significance. We have those conversations.

Q88 **Chair:** Conversations do not really solve the problem. To what extent are you talking to the heritage bodies about over-imposing punitive restrictions on people who genuinely want to save buildings from falling into disrepair and being lost?

Lord Parkinson: I chair the Heritage Council, which brings together a number of heritage bodies that have different views on this. Conversation is a part of it, because it allows them to explore where there are differences of opinion and why, and it allows us to reflect those in the reviews that we conduct and the legislation that we bring forward, such as the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill.

Chair: I think that is something we might want to look again at as a Committee. Thank you very much, both of you, for your time. Is there anything that you would like to add before we let you go?

Lord Parkinson: No. Thank you.

Chair: In which case, thank you very much for your time and patience with us today.