



Where's Pericles when you want him?

Boris Johnson believes politically defined targets are limiting not promoting access to heritage and culture

By Boris Johnson

You see, if you were an ancient Athenian politician and you went bald, things were so much easier. You didn't have to worry that the electorate would harp on about it, as they do when confronted by a bald Tory leader, no matter how brilliant.

Take the case of Pericles. The Athenian leader was a bit of a slaphhead with a dolichocephalic skull; but instead of going around enduring the jeers of the ancient tabloid media, he had a very cool solution. He just wore a hoplite helmet, morning noon and night.

I know this because I have just bought, from the British Museum's magnificent shop, the last plaster cast of the 2nd-century Roman copy of the 5th-century BC bust of Pericles by Kresilas. It weighs 23.5kg and is totally fab, if you ignore a few blue crayon marks, which enabled me to knock a few quid off. I stood before it in the shop and reflected that I was only three removes away from the position of the sculptor who stood before one of the greatest statesmen who ever lived. Cor! I thought to myself as we bubblewrapped it. Pericles, eh!



And then it occurred to me that I ought to go and look at the sculpture proper, the one that is only two removes away. So I wandered into the Duveen galleries and pondered again the mysteries of the panathenaic frieze. Are the 192 riders symbolic of the 192 survivors of the Battle of Marathon, that archetypal triumph of Western civilisation over barbarism? Just what are those maidens about to do with that towel?

And as I left, my feet aching, my brain glutted, I remembered the object of my mission. Normally he was there on the left as you go in, on a kind of proprietorial plinth. I turned to the attendant. Where was the marble bust of Pericles, son of Xanthippos? I'm sorry, sir, said that kindly man. He's in room 15 and room 15 is shut.

Shut? I said. That's right, he said, shut because of staff shortages. In fact, he said, there were more rooms shut these days than there were nine years ago when he joined.

Anyone who loves the BM will agree that its current director, Neil McGregor, is offering inspirational leadership. The Great Court is a triumph. It feels like

a world-class museum, a proper rival to the Louvre, and any attempt to remove those Periclean marbles would of course be an indefensible mutilation.

But if I were the Greek ambassador, I think I might have fired off an immediate demarche. Oi, I would have said to Tony Blair, how can you people claim to be the valid custodians of so much that is greatest in 5th-century Athenian sculpture when on July 1, at around 5pm, a person couldn't even get to see Pericles? You Brits may think that the owl of Athens haunts the squares of Bloomsbury. But you can't even display Pericles, the man who called these marbles into being! And if the Greek ambassador started a bit of hysterical oimoi pheu pheu-ing at this point, he would have my entire sympathy. Why are there staff shortages?

Partly because all British museums have been told by Labour that they must be free, without a commensurate increase in funding. It is true that the BM has been free for the past 251 years, and quite rightly.

But it is now forced to compete for the same quantity of grant-in-aid with hundreds of museums that used to charge, and which are now finding things very difficult. Take the Natural History Museum, which has seen a 100 per cent increase in footfall, to the point where seeing the dinosaurs in half-term is like filing past Lenin, but which has only received a 2.6 per cent increase in grant.

This is not the moment to reveal the coming Tory museum manifesto, still being forged; but here are some tinklings from the smithy. If a museum wants to charge Japanese tourists, why should it not do so? This is not imposing entrance fees. It is just giving them the freedom to do so, should they decide to take it; and you could give them more freedom to borrow, freedom to choose their trustees, and above all, freedom from filling in endless forms.

What's the point of hiring employees to prove to the DCMS that you are increasing "access" to minority groups when a landmark of world culture is shut in room 15 because of staff shortages? There's only one minority that gets access to Pericles, and that's the people with X-ray vision.

Labour has no idea how onerous and counter-productive its demands can be. English Heritage told me it was obliged to produce an extra 100,000 visitors to its sites from certain disadvantaged groups. This necessitated the recruiting of nine "outreach officers" at a total cost of £800,000. Result: 50 sites were forced to curtail their viewing hours!

Tremendous! And they talk about access! We all want greater access. But surely the directors and curators are the best judges of how to achieve this, rather than some political commissar, decreeing how many shall go through the turnstiles and from what group.



The gulf between Labour and Tories is now much bigger than in either 1997 or 2001. It is now about two approaches to government, and there is a profound moral difference between them.

Having lost the major economic arguments, about state control of the economy, Labour has found a new way of expressing the Left-wing impulse. It means diktat and prescription, and in many ways regulation is the new nationalisation.

It means substituting the discretion of the state for your discretion (smoking, snacking, smacking, hunting, you name it) and substituting the discretion of the Secretary of State for the discretion of people who work in the public services. It has produced all manner of quotas and targets, and an explosion in the number of people supposedly enforcing them.

It is a problem in the arts as much as in any other part of the economy, and it needs to be checked.



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