A Political Strategy For The Macedonian Diaspora

By Victor Bivell

An earlier version of this article was published in the Today Denes newspaper, September 21, 1993

It is now over three years since the Republic of Macedonia declared its independence and began to seek international recognition, and over three years since the Government of Greece began its latest international and public campaign to thwart that recognition. What lessons does this period of intense international rivalry hold for the Macedonian community around the world?

So far over 70 countries have recognized the Republic of Macedonia. Some of these countries have few or no citizens of Macedonian origin. Yet the three countries with the largest Macedonian immigrant populations - the USA, Canada and Australia - have been among the slowest to recognize the Republic. The US was the 59th country to recognize Macedonia, Australia was the 60th*(1)*, and at the time of writing Canada had yet to do so.

Even then, recognition by the US and Australia was tempered with recognition under the so called temporary name that includes the qualification "Former Yugoslav" and in Australia's case with a number of onerous conditions regarding the flag and establishment of a Consulate*(2)* which were unacceptable to both the Republic of Macedonia and Macedonian-Australians.

The reasons for the slow and conditional recognition are tied to the relations that these three countries have developed with the Greek state since it was founded in 1832, and the existence in these countries, beside large communities of Macedonian origin, of even larger Greek communities.

Thus at the political level the lesson is painfully clear. Despite the fact that many Macedonians in the diaspora have worked hard and unselfishly for recognition of the Republic, and others have worked equally hard for human rights for the Macedonian minority in northern Greece, the respective Greek communities have been winning the race for influence with the ruling politicians in the US, Canada and Australia. At least for the present.

Reasons and Strategy
Why has this happened, and how can it be corrected as quickly as possible?

If we take Australia as an example, the most relevant factors would seem to be the considerably greater size and the better political organization of the Greek community compared to the Macedonian community.

The Greek community is estimated at between two and six times the size of the Macedonian community. This greater size and potential voting power has been exploited by some with the message that on the Macedonian issue Greek-Australian voters will vote according to which political parties and politicians support their position, despite that position being identical

1

with Greece's foreign policy.

The imbalance between the two communities has been further complicated by the perception that the Greek community traditionally votes for the Labor Party. Thus the recognition of Macedonia has not been decided on its merits, but on the political desire of the Labor Party to retain the so called "Greek vote" and the desire by elements in the Liberal Party to win the same vote.

At times this has led to a "Greek auction" where particular members from one party have tried to outdo the other party in what they can promise the Greek community at the expense of the Macedonian community. Perhaps the most disgraceful example of this has been the attempt by the Kennett Liberal Government in Victoria to change the name of the Macedonian language despite this being against all expert advice and against the will of the Macedonian people.

This unfortunte process has highlighted deficiencies in the democratic system, and has been recognized as a dangerous trend against multicultural co-existence in Australia. The main correctives to this trend have come from the Australian public, the other ethnic communities, and the media, which have been sympathetic to the Macedonian position.

The relative sizes of both communities may also help to explain why the Greek community has been better organized politically, a situation indicated by a number of key political comparisons.

Currently, the Greek community has five politicians in Federal parliament, the Macedonian community none; the Greek community has 10 politicians in State parliaments around Australia, the Macedonian community none; the Greek community has 11 Labor Party branches in Victoria, the Macedonian community has only had one.

Several politicians of Greek origin have played an influential role in the slow and qualified recognition of Macedonia and also in the subsequent attempts to introduce the "Slav" prefix to describe the Macedonian people and the "Slavonic" suffix to describe the Macedonian language.

(In fairness it should be mentioned that many Greek-Australian politicians have not been publicly active on these issues.)

Also relevant to the political balance are the existence of Greek nationalist groups that for many years have specialized in political lobbying that is highly pro-Greek and in effect anti-Macedonian. The Hellenic Council of NSW, the Pan-Macedonian Association of Melbourne and Victoria, and the Melbourne-based Australian Institute of Macedonian Studies are well documented as being among the most active lobby groups in this regard.

Over the years these groups have produced a considerable body of material that has been circulated to Federal and State politicians and other influential people. Much of this material is considered by Macedonians to be misleading and at times extreme and offensive. However, the groups have enjoyed a certain level of success simply through being organized and persistent.

Fortunately, there are many able Macedonians who have worked hard to raise awareness about the Macedonian position, and these have achieved some notable victories. Although their many efforts were insufficient to deliver immediate and unqualified recognition of Macedonia, the issues around recognition have not been finalized and this and other outstanding problems of concern to the Macedonian community indicates a continuing need for current and future political activism.

How the Macedonian community can increase its level of political influence in Australia and improve the balance of political power is thus a crucial question. At least two things are required. These are:
* recognition by the Macedonian community of the extent of the problem, and
* a clear and achievable strategy that will deliver results in the shortest time possible.

Such a strategy needs to address all the key issues raised by the co-existence of Macedonian and Greek communities in Australia, their relative population size and political representation.

Community Size
The perceived difference in size of the Macedonian and Greek communities in Australia could be mitigated to an extent by a proper reckoning of their numbers.

For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics is unable to say how many people in Australia are of Macedonian origin, despite knowing precisely how many Italians, Chinese, Greeks etc. This is because until 1991 it classified Macedonians by country of birth as either Yugoslav or Greek. During this period the main, albeit inadequate, indicator of the number of Macedonians was the Census question on language spoken at home.

With recognition of the Republic of Macedonia by Australia has come an Australian Bureau of Statistics country code for Macedonia that in the forthcoming 1996 Census will allow immigrants from the Republic to be counted separately.*(3)*

Another problem with the Census is its inability to differentiate Macedonians who have come from Greece from ethnic Greeks. Macedonians who put Greece as their country of birth or birthplace of their parents are counted as Greeks, not Macedonians. This has overstated the number of Greeks and understated the number of Macedonians, influencing the perceived political balance.

For many years Macedonians have requested a method that allows ethnic Macedonians from Greece to be counted as Macedonians. Until this is provided, it may be more politically beneficial for Macedonians from Greece to put Macedonia as their country of birth rather than Greece; and likewise for their children when answering the question regarding the country of birth of their parents.

If any Macedonian does put Greece as the country of birth, it is imperative that they also put Macedonian as the language spoken at home and Macedonian Orthodox as their religion, as this will allow them to be identified as Macedonian and to be subtracted from the total number of Greeks.

If community estimates of the number of Macedonians are close to correct then proper use of the new code for Macedonia and of the questions on language spoken at home and religion should make a substantial difference to the relative totals for both communities.

Other strategies to assist in the proper reckoning of numbers would need to tackle the caution that many still experience in declaring themselves Macedonian, and a methodology to win back those Macedonians who because of denationalization and assimilation in Greece have developed a Greek or partial Greek identity.

A community education campaign emphasizing the confidential nature of the Census may assist those people who are still afraid to be themselves and those people who have affected a public Greek identity but in private still maintain their original Macedonian identity.

Parliament
Another cornerstone of Greek influence in Australia are the many politicians of Greek origin in the Federal and State parliaments. When the Greek community has a problem, such as with Cyprus or Macedonia, Greek-Australian members of parliament are able to assist in organizing Greek community leaders and groups to meet with the relevant Ministers and parliamentarians.

Instances where this has happened are detailed by Andrew Theophanous in a paper titled The Role of the Greek Communities in the Formulation of Australian Foreign Policy: With Particular Reference to the Cyprus Problem. This controversial paper was delivered to a conference on the topic of The Greek Diaspora in Foreign Policy held at the Institute of International Relations in Athens in 1990.

While the Greek community has found the doors of parliament wide open, Macedonian representatives know that trying to arrange meetings with Ministers when they do not have a Macedonian in parliament to help with the footwork can be hard work.

The lack of a parliamentarian of Macedonian origin may also help to explain why between 1991 and September 1993 no questions were asked in Federal Parliament about Australia's position on the recognition of the Republic of Macedonia, despite the intense international rivalry then current.

It is tempting to believe that a Macedonian-Australian in parliament with an interest and commitment to the issues which affect the Macedonian community may have made a substantial difference to the way in which the issue of recognition and consequent developments were handled by the Government.

Such a representative would be a considerable asset as at present Macedonians are dependent on the goodwill of the 200 plus federal MPs, all of whom are of non-Macedonian background and only a few of whom are actively involved with the Macedonian community and its concerns.

The Political Parties
Another cornerstone of Greek political influence in Australia has been the 11 or so Greek Labor Party branches in Victoria. These branches allow the Greek community to field its own

candidates in party and general elections. If one person is unsatisfactory, they can be replaced with another.

Thus the Greek community has a power base and a guaranteed voice in the deliberations of the Labor Party when it is both in and out of Government.

The contribution of these branches should not be underestimated. Macedonians can write, meet and talk with Labor politicians all they like, but ultimately if the Labor Party were to go against the wishes of its ethnic branches it would risk splitting the party and losing a chunk of its members and votes, something that is unlikely to happen. Thus through this simple device the Greek community has been able to limit the political influence of the Macedonian community.

If the Macedonian community wishes to rectify this imbalance, it needs to encourage as many Macedonians as possible to join the political parties, particularly the educated, articulate and politically aware. This encouragement should extent to all the parties, be the individual's choice Labor, Liberal, Democrat etc.

There are many places in Australia where the Macedonians are numerous enough to form large branches or to join existing branches in strong numbers. In many instances winning control of one or several local branches would be relatively straightforward.

These include the localities of Thomastown, Lalor, Epping, Reservoir and Geelong in Victoria; Rockdale, Kogarah, Bankstown, Richmond, Wollongong, Port Kembla, Newcastle and Queanbeyan in NSW; North Perth, Balcatta and Balga in WA; and Canberra in the ACT.*(4)*

There are sufficient Macedonians elsewhere around Australia to form many more strong centres.

In these electoral areas, Macedonian-Australians are numerous enough to influence election results for Lower House seats. Additionally, there are sufficient Macedonians in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia for each community to give a Senate candidate or State Upper House candidate a respectable head start towards the requisite quota of votes in their State.

The third level of government, Local Councils, provides limited opportunities to influence international and national issues. However, it is often the best way to help a local community in practical ways. It is also the level of government in which Macedonians have already achieved some electoral success.

Public Life
Unfortunately, becoming active at Federal, State and to a lesser extent Local Government levels is something that Macedonians in Australia have not yet been attracted to in the natural course of settlement and life in this country. At present there is little doubt that the Macedonian community needs more capable people to take an active role in public affairs at all levels.

Fortunately, there are many suitable Macedonian-Australians, particularly among the first and second generation professionals born in Australia.

However, motivating these people to become active in public affairs has so far proved a considerable challenge. Thus there are many Macedonian-Australians who have the requisite skills and professionalism to make a contribution, but who for various reasons have not done so.

Some of these people may wish to bypass their current or local Macedonian community structures and become directly active in Australian affairs, a path which due to their Australian upbringing or other reasons they may find easier or more natural.

Whichever path the individual takes, the Macedonian community should actively encourage all suitable people. It should actively encourage an understanding of the Australian political system, the skills to work with non-Macedonian Australians, and a genuine interest in improving the life of Macedonian-Australians and other Australians.

At the same time it should discourage the nationalism, egotism, verbosity, infighting and destructiveness that sometimes pass for Macedonian political activity in Australia.

Community Structures
Overcoming the Macedonian fear of political involvement and its consequent insularity could be assisted through a broadening of the type of structures that comprise the Macedonian communities.

Although there are many Macedonian organizations, many of these are dance, welfare or pensioner groups. These are valuable in themselves but a greater variety of opportunities would be offered with more hard core intellectual organizations such as political, business and professionals' groups, which at present are few in number.

With a greater variety of organizations, each community would then have a structure whereby those people who show leadership potential could rise through the ranks and continue to rise.

At present, an individual who shows ability may rise to be president of one or other organization, perhaps even president of the local community, but beyond this there is nowhere else for them to go. Others, also ambitious, may soon cut them down to make room.

If Macedonians were better organized and more active politically, these people could continue to rise by following well worn steps through the Macedonian community organizations and political support groups into the major political parties.

The path could then lead all the way to the top. And a Prime Minister of Macedonian origin is not such a bad idea; simply a little far-fetched at this stage.

Meanwhile, the art of cultivating politicians by inviting them to major community functions appears to have been forgotten.

Community Profile

The political imbalance between the Greek and Macedonian communities in Australia is mirrored in a number of social comparisons, which in turn influence the political balance.

Consider SBS Television. The Greek community receives over 169 hours of Greek language broadcasts per year, the Macedonian community receives between two and three hours per year.*(5)*

The Greek community has its own Greek language news report each week. Nothing for the Macedonians. The Greek community has news reporters and many other full time staff on SBS. The Macedonian community no one.

SBS Television badly needs a Macedonian touch and it is important to get some Macedonians working there to help right the staffing and programing imbalances. As is the case with parliament, Macedonians can write a million letters to SBS and demonstrate outside, but they will only change things from the inside.

There are other examples of such imbalances.

It is also important for Macedonians to examine the many options for marketing the Macedonian culture and raising their public profile in the wider Australian community. For example, Macedonians have an original, varied and hearty cuisine, but only a handful of restaurants across the whole country. Does anyone else think this is odd? Macedonians have a large and original canon of music, but little of this is appreciated outside the community. Perhaps there is a role here for instrumental music and songs in English or translation.

The Chinese model is instructive. The Chinese way of gaining a high community profile is to create a China Town. Every city has one and everyone knows where it is. How many Macedonia Towns, or perhaps more appropriately, Macedonia Villages, are there?

One can image if there were well established Macedonia Villages and the Greek Government had tried to change the name of the Republic. The concept of a "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Village" would be absurd, especially if you were hungry and looking for a restaurant.

There are many other strategies available to the Macedonian community in Australia and around the world to increase its political influence and social standing.

However, an immmportant point here is that political influence takes time. Greece has been courting the Western World since before its independence in 1832. In contrast, Macedonia gained its independence and turned to the West in 1991, 159 years later.

There is much to do.

References

1. Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs, News Release: Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Canberra, 15 February, 1994.

2. Ibid
3. Australian Standard Classification of Countries for Social Statistics, Revision 1.03, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 1994.
4. Community Profile, 1991 Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 1993.
5. Special Broadcasting Service Annual Report 1990-91, AGPS, Canberra, 1991, p122.

This article was published in the book Macedonian Agenda published by Pollitecon Publications

Copyright: 1995

Source: www.pollitecon.com