

# Progressive Leadership Is The Balkan Antidote

By Victor Bivell

*This speech was given at the Third Annual United Macedonian Diaspora Global Conference, Washington DC, 25 June 2011*

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I'm very pleased to be here and to have this opportunity to speak. Let me begin by saying the reason I'm here is because a number of the leading Macedonian organizations in New South Wales asked me to be here to represent them.

My trip was organized by the Aegean Macedonian Association of Australia and supported by over 14 NSW organizations. There are too many to mention here, but their names will be on the printed version of this presentation.

Those organizations want to convey their support for UMD in organizing these annual world conferences. They want to convey their support for UMD's advocacy for the diaspora to work together. And they send their greetings and goodwill to all the delegates here who work to improve the life of the Macedonian people.

They also wish to express their views on several issues that are so important for Macedonians everywhere.

These organizations convey their full and total support for Macedonia's name, for the Macedonian identity, and for the Macedonian language. Many also feel strongly about the Macedonian symbols.

The discussion before I left Sydney was clear - these are integral to who we are, and cannot be compromised in any way. These organizations would like all so called "negotiations" over Macedonia's name to end. Now.

The Greek Government, the Bulgarian Government and the Albanian Government must recognize in full the Macedonian people in those countries. This includes the Macedonian identity, language, culture and history.

It is time for these countries to give more than lip service to human rights and human dignity. It is time they proved they are genuine about becoming civilized countries. It is time for these countries to find progressive leadership that can lead them in the right direction.

The Macedonians have already compromised - we are not demanding the return of the land that was taken in 1912-13. If those countries can find within them progressive leaders who are genuine about rights and dignity, who can compromise instead of make absolute demands, the territorial integrity of those countries will be strengthened, not weakened. There is no reason why these countries and the Macedonian people cannot enjoy a common future in a united Europe.

That's a positive vision, and to achieve it all we ask for is our rights and our dignity.

That's the feeling in Sydney and NSW, as best as I can convey it.

I'd now like to make a few observations and comments purely on my own behalf on several other issues. So please forgive me if some of the organizations I mentioned above may not happen to agree with everything I say.

I mentioned the need for good leadership in Greece, Bulgaria and Albania, but good leadership is also crucial for Macedonia. I'll give two examples from Australia.

This conference is celebrating 20 years of Macedonia's independence, and as it happens I've been a Macedonian activist for 20 years. It was Macedonia's independence that helped to re-awaken my Macedonian roots and get me involved to try and make a contribution. I chose to do that through publishing on human rights and politics. Particularly from the Aegean angle as my family is from what is now Greece.

One decision I made very early on was not to get involved in fighting other Macedonians. I wanted to keep my eye on the ball. The ball was human rights and ending the institutionalized racism in Greece. I did not want to fight other Macedonians, or get distracted by disputes with fellow Macedonians.

I still feel this way, but it means there are certain issues I haven't got involved in. But I'll now make a comment on one of those issues, because it has ramifications for Macedonians everywhere, and it goes to the heart of why good leadership is so important.

Some of you may know that the Australian Macedonian community has been torn apart for about the last 14 years over what is called the "church dispute".

In the early 1990s, Greek opposition to Macedonia's recognition, and the efforts of the local Greek lobby to change the name of the Australian Macedonians by adding the "slav" prefix and to change the name of the Macedonian language by adding the "slavonic" suffix, were great unifiers of our people. Under attack, the Macedonians in Australia were united in a common cause and common identity.

So it is ironic and quite sad that the biggest disruption to that unity has come from an internal Macedonian source. That was the arrival in the mid to late 1990s of the church dispute. Nothing has split the Macedonians in Australia as this has.

Put simply, the dispute is about who owns the church properties that were built by the Macedonian immigrants.

Personally, I can't think of a more useless dispute. The argument is not over whether to build more churches. Not over where to build more churches. Not over who will pay for more churches. Not even over how to get more people into the churches.

But over whose name should be on the title deeds - the community and immigrants who built the churches, sometimes by mortgaging their homes, or the bishop or church.

As stupid as it is, this has been going on for 14 years. About 14 years!

In the spirit of going where angels fear to tread, here's my point of view. I look at it this way. In the Bible it says "by their fruit you will know them". I love that expression. It's served me

well over the years. And it's so simple and wise. Let me read the full quote: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will know them."

So, I put this challenge to the leadership of the Macedonian church. What are your fruits in Australia? Are you a prophet or a wolf? What are your fruits?

When I look around, this is what I see. I see Macedonians who were once united now divided, I see anger, I see court cases, I see the wasting of what I'm told are millions of dollars in legal fees, I see the community spirit struggling, I see our people demoralized, our youth disengaged, I see Macedonian people looking for real leadership.

The leadership of the Macedonian church needs to explain itself. Why is having its name on the assets more important than Macedonian unity and the Macedonian community spirit? What does it care for more? The spirit, or mammon? The community spirit, or materialism? The Macedonians in Australia are waiting for your answer.

My second example about leadership is political.

Some may disagree with me, but I think that over the past 20 years, on balance, Macedonia's political leadership has done a good job. Despite the adverse international circumstances, Macedonia has survived, it is well regarded, and it should have and hopefully has got a fantastic future. Macedonia's political leadership has done well.

But there are three areas where more needs to be done - developing a strong Macedonian economy, human rights in the neighboring countries, and making better use of the diaspora.

Now, the diaspora is not a Santa Claus sack where you reach in one day and take out a church asset and reach in another day and take out a few votes.

The diaspora is a resource that needs to be used properly.

When it first came to power the current government made a good start in that direction.

But that momentum has not been maintained. I suspect it has done a better job in Europe and North America than it has in Australia, where its record is patchy, though it is better than all previous governments.

In Australia, the problem is this. No Macedonian leader has shown any real interest or commitment to the Macedonians in Australia.

There are around 200,000 people of Macedonian descent in Australia, or close to the equivalent of two Bitolas.

Yet in the past 20 years, the only serving president to visit was Boris Trajkovski, during the Olympic Games in 2000, and the only serving prime minister to visit was Nikola Gruevski in 2009.

Mr Gruevski was originally going to spend a week in Australia, but I read that a late minute meeting in Brussels cut this to a few days.

He spent a day if that in Sydney. One day. Ditto in Melbourne. Over the past 20 years all of the prime ministers of Macedonia have spent a combined total of one day in Sydney and one day in Melbourne. One day in 20 years.<sup>1</sup>

Now we know Australia is far away, but it's not Pluto. What should the Macedonians in Australia think? What does this say about how the Macedonian leadership views the Macedonians in Australia? What does it say about how they are making use of, or failing to make use of, the diaspora and the contribution we can make.

So I put this challenge to Macedonia's political leadership. Nikola, why was Brussels, or wherever that meeting was, more important than the two Bitolas of Macedonians in Australia? When will you and future prime ministers take Australia's Macedonians seriously?

It can be done. Way back when Yugoslavia was breaking up, the leader of Croatia visited Australia and was on the national news. His message was simple: 'Bring your family, bring your capital, bring your skills and help build Croatia'.

I've been waiting 20 years for a Macedonian leader to come to Australia with a similar message.

It's not too late.

We can all make a contribution to building the Macedonian economy. It's something as activists we should all promote. The theory is there. But the message would be so much more effective if it came from the government.

That's what leaders do.

I suspect I've used most of my allotted time so let me conclude with some comments on what I do – which is publishing.

Publishing for the Macedonians is a privilege. There's not a lot of money in it and there's not a lot of glory, but it is an honour. And I'll tell you why.

Because the Macedonian people have real stories to tell. As a publisher I long ago learned that every human being has a story worth telling. It may be only a one page anecdote or it may be a 500 page book, but everyone has something unique and worth telling.

In the case of our people, so deep and rich and full is the well of Macedonian stories that when I publish for the Macedonians I feel that I am dealing with people's hearts and souls. Those stories have the power to touch people and to move them deeply.

People ring me or email me to say they have just read a particular book and they were so moved that they just had to tell me, that they are so proud that we have books as good as other people, that they have just read about a relative or seen a picture of a relative for the first time.

It is these expressions of appreciation that stay with me, that make me believe that publishing for the Macedonians is something of real value.

But there is a problem. Most of our people's stories won't be told. They will be lost, forever. "Lost forever" could almost be the epitaph for much of Macedonia's history.

The Ilinden generation and the Balkan Wars generation are gone, and so too most of their stories. The Greek Civil War generation is mostly gone. Another 10 or 20 years and their stories will be lost forever too.

We need to change that. We need more publishers, more editors, more authors, more journalists, writers, documentary makers, film producers, historians, family historians, oral historians, translators, collectors, curators, web masters and so on.

We need to inspire these people to get to work. And we need to do a lot more with the material we already have. There is more than enough material to keep everyone busy for a very long time.

It is by telling these stories that we can release our own demons, both personal and as a community. It is by telling these stories that we can change the attitudes of the governments in the neighbouring countries. And telling these stories is the least we can do to make sure that our people's history is not lost forever, that their suffering was not for nothing.

Finally, let's not forget that 2012 and 2013 are the one hundred year anniversaries of the First and Second Balkan Wars, of the invasion and annexation of Ottoman Macedonia by Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia.

Please, let's not forget to commemorate these events. To my mind some key dates are 8 October 1912 when the First Balkan War began, 17 October when Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia entered the war, 12 November when Greece captured Salonica, 16 June 1913 when the Second Balkan War broke out, and 10 August 1913 when the Treaty of Bucharest was signed.

Let's not let these dates go unmarked. Please, book your spot outside a Greek or Bulgarian embassy as soon as you can.

I could say a lot more but I'll leave it there for now and thank you for listening.

\*

*The organizations that supported Victor Bivell's attendance at the UMD Conference were:*

- *The Aegean Macedonian Association of Australia;*
- *The Macedonian Aegean Association of NSW;*
- *The Macedonian Orthodox Community Sveta Petka, Rockdale, NSW;*
- *The Bitola Cultural and Social Association of Sydney, NSW;*
- *The Macedonian Orthodox Community of Queanbeyan and Districts, "Sveta Ilija";*
- *Macedonian Orthodox Community of the City Of Greater Wollongong, Sveta Dimitrija "Solunski";*
- *The Macedonian Orthodox Community of Newcastle, "Sveta Bogorodica";*
- *Macedonian Welfare Association of Port Kembla, NSW;*
- *Aegean Macedonian Cultural and Sporting Association "Kotori" Richmond;*
- *Gjavato, Kazani and Dolenci Cultural Association of Sydney, NSW;*

- *Macedonian-Australian Pensioners Association of Cabramatta, Sydney - Metodija Andonov "Chento"*;
- *Macedonian Cultural Artistic Association "Makedonka" of Sydney*;
- *Macedonian-Australian Pensioners Association "Goce Delchev"*;
- *Macedonian-Australian Museum of Australia Trajan Belev "Goce"*;
- *and others.*

1. When writing this section I briefly researched whether Macedonia's first prime minister, Nikola Kljusev, visited Australia. I have since learned, anecdotally, that he came to Australia in October 1991, visiting Perth, Sydney and Melbourne. This speaks well for Mr Kljusev as a leader. However, the 18 year gap between Mr Kljusev's visit and Mr Gruevski's visit means that my point stands.

**Source: [www.pollitecon.com](http://www.pollitecon.com)**