

## WHEN BEING GREEK IS NOT A DIRTY WORD



### Australian and Hellenic twin identities

**Disconnected and Re-engagement.** The following article is in response to all those who are currently finding being of Hellenic heritage a problem and are seeking methods of transport to a safe haven of cultural identity without having to justify their existence in an Australian environment. Australians are naturally a tolerant lot and are well known for sticking up for the underdog, fighting the good fight and helping a battler get back on his feet. Australians don't care where a person comes from as long as they can integrate into the Australian environment, abide by its laws and institutions, contribute to the welfare of its people and lend a hand when its society may find itself at odds with another country. The article also covers in brief, a question that is of concern to those Australians of Hellenic heritage, that of the status of future generations and their attitudes towards the maintenance and reinforcement of Hellenism in Australian society.

Have we disengaged from the mainstream of Hellenism? Are we disconnected from our Australian Hellenic communities? Are our youth on the right track regarding their Hellenic roots? Are we doing the right thing to reinforce the positive Hellenic traditions, language, religion and cultural aspects that make us who we are and do we readily identify ourselves as Australians of Hellenic origins. Although the article does not cover the experiences of Hellenism in America, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Great Britain, Russia and Egypt where Greeks are known to reside in some numbers, the concepts being explored in this article mirror the Greeks in those countries with some exceptions. The article therefore can be examined at the same level of understanding wherever Hellenism is found.

**Australian Hellenic justifications** Many of us who may find themselves at crossroads regarding their Hellenism need not worry as long as they do not need to justify their existence or the fact that they have chosen a path that may find themselves at odds with their Hellenic past. So what if many have married outside the Hellenic community. Will these mixed marriage affect the retention and handing down of traditions from one generation to another? Is it all that important and how does it affect the elderly or the parents? What if the children are not brought up in a Hellenic household does not mean that it's the end of the world. So what if some of them end up as guests of the Commonwealth as a result of their misdemeanours. So what if others enjoy a community that espouses gay and lesbian rights and that they enjoy their company. Do we forget and don't support those on drugs? What if people don't go to church and listen to the priest give out his sermon in Greek?

Who cares if Greek music is not played at home or that children stay out late at night? Is it right that the youth do not respect their elders and look down upon them? Who does it affect if a child is out of wedlock? What is being done to those who have separated and divorced? what action is being taken to re-engage them back into the Australian Hellenic community? Is there any harm in not knowing how to dance in Greek? Is it all right to place the elders in an old age home because the children are unable to care for them? Will the children visit their elderly parents if they are placed in a home for the aged? Is it wrong to emulate our Anglo-Celtic and Saxon brethren? Is it not right for an Australian of Hellenic heritage wanting to serve in the Australian Defence Force? Where is it wrong to integrate the best of all cultures and live in harmony within an Australian society? Questions that may or may not need solutions can only be found by those seeking them.

**What are the solutions if any.** The above and below questions beggar to be answered not only by the current generations but also involves the current youth of today and also that of the emerging youth currently still studying at school. How do we reengage the people? How do we reconnect to our heritage? How do we retain our culture religion and language in a society that is tolerant and welcomes the positive aspects of different cultures? Are we to be absorbed and embedded within Australian society without some form of identity that we can point to and say that this is where our we came from. Australians many times in the past 200 hundred years

had to face the same dilemma as the Australian of Hellenic background is facing today, but they in their wisdom were able to rise above the questions that vexed them by embracing Australia as their own and thus were able to retain their Anglo-Celtic and Saxon traditions and heritage that our Australian society is based upon today. We as Australians of Hellenic heritage are now faced with this same paradox that previous cultures faced in the past.

**When being Greek is not a dirty word.** How many of us growing up in Australia have shied away from our "Greekness" so to speak? How many of us tried to hide our origins in order to blend within the Australian environment? How many of us have neglected our heritage and belittled our origins because it was cool because we wanted to belong to our peer group. (Whatever that may be?) How many of us have anglicized our names because our Australian friends could not pronounce them. We have all been guilty of it at one time or another, even by anglicizing our children's names to ensure that they are not ridiculed at school.

Names such as Panayiota, becomes Patty, Pamela or even Betty. Panayioti becomes Peter or Petros and in some cases Panos. Bistolas – Pistol, Andreas – Andrews, Charalombos – Harris, Kyriakos – Ken, Kyriaki – Kyrie or Kerry, Mavros – Black and the list goes on and on, it is endless. Mind you there is nothing wrong with this as it makes life easier for everyone, but as time goes by the Hellenic aspect of the name loses its descriptive meaning. Taking your lunch to work in the authors day was an embarrassment to him. Carrying his lunch box with macorinatha, (spaghetti) and/or Dolmades and when it was time for lunch and as children we would share our lunches. Other kids would laugh and call us names. However as time went on and we visited our friends homes for dinner, what was on the table, spaghetti and meat balls. What a turn-up for the books. One learnt to obtain a thick skin in those days otherwise they would not have survived the cultural differences.

How many Australians of Hellenic heritage are there in Australia. Not many, a few, a lot, none, are but mere words in the English language to describe a percentage of people. In the absence of any reliable data, including that of the Australian Bureau of Statistics based on the Census; it is somewhat difficult and not possible to come up with reliable statistics that encompasses all of the Australians who have Hellenic origins. One has to look at the immigration figures and follow each individual through their marriages, births, baptisms, divorce, name changes by deed poll and death records to obtain an accurate, reliable and unbiased idea of who has Hellenic origins. Although the Australian Bureau of Statistics based on the Census gathers information based on religion and language provides a window into ethnicity it is not a reliable and accurate barometer of Hellenic origins in Australia. To compensate the unknown, Australians of Hellenic origins tend to inflate figures to indicate a greater majority than what is based on fact.

**Australian Hellenic identity crisis.** Those of us who grew up in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, suffered from an identity crisis that many have not been able to resolve, even in later life, and as such have not become involved in Hellenic community activities. Who therefore is at fault here, the individual, the parents, the community or the Australian environment that they were raised in? In the 1980s many families disintegrated as a result of internal and external pressures and it was no longer a cultural crime in the eyes of the community if couples divorced or became separated. It was also a time when individuals looked outside the community to find suitable companions for life and whom they were compatible with to raise families. Based on anecdotal evidence, what is also of interest was the rising divorce rates amongst these couples of mixed marriages. Again based on anecdotal evidence, many of the children lost contact with their cultural roots and embraced a culture that had no roots at all in their historical origins. These are termed the lost Australians of Hellenic background, who are still trying to come to grips with their unresolved cultural and identity issues.

An example of the 'identity crisis' is when some groups refer to themselves as 'Greeks' and only 'Greeks', others refer themselves as 'Australians', many refer to themselves as 'Greek Australians' and/or 'Australians of Hellenic heritage'. Whatever the case, each individual at one time or another is confronted with this dilemma and it is only resolved if their surroundings allows them the freedom to make the appropriate choice without peer group or cultural pressure. On the other hand, we have two extremes, one those who deny their cultural origins and the others whom refer to themselves as "wogs". Those who refer to themselves as "wogs" are, in the opinion of the author, the silliest of the lot, as they lack the emotional and cultural intelligence to make a decision that would identify themselves one way or the other; for there are no "wogs" in Australia.

Those who deny their cultural roots whatever that may be, are doing themselves a dis-service as their children would be denied any historical significance which may leave a void in their lives as they grow into adults. The other group that refers to themselves as "wogs" are also doing themselves a dis-service as they are denying their own cultural background and sending a message out to the remainder of society that they are not Australians.

You cannot have it both ways: you are either a Greek who has not taken out Australian citizenship; an Australian who has embraced the Australian culture without losing their cultural heritage, or a Greek Australian and/or Australian of Hellenic heritage.

**Oral survey of Australian Hellenic sayings.** An oral survey conducted by the author over a period of some 30 years whose aim was to capture the thoughts of Australians of Hellenic background during his generation. These oral notes were recorded in his diary to enable him and others who realized that Hellenism in Australia was at risk of being forgotten. It was also taken at a time when Australians were being faced with a generation who had no idea who they were, had no idea of the sacrifices of those who died at Gallipoli or the fields at the Western front (France); they had no concept of who the drovers were, the convict era and little of Australia's contribution in two world wars. Bruce Ruxton the president of the Victorian RSL along with his colleagues at the national level realized that something had to be done to revitalize and reenergize the youth of the day and educate them in Australian history and the achievements of their forefathers. Bruce Ruxton was the man for his day and subsequently his legacy and examples influenced the author to emulate him at the Australian Hellenic level.

Therefore it should not come as a surprise, that this interest in traditional values had grown to include others who were of the same ilk. The concept of retaining the cultural values and history of their forbearers and those who made the journey to this country quickly became a passion and the driver to see Hellenism survive in Australia. This interest in traditional values was also recorded to enable and assist those responsible for the maintenance of Hellenism in Australia and to provide a platform for the first, second, third and fourth generations Australians of Greek heritage. Some of the comments recorded are provided below:

1. "I never want to lose faith in "Greekness" and Greece. I love my Greek origins, but for Greeks, I weigh them on an individual basis and have no faith in them as a group".
2. "I love my Hellenism but don't wish to be associated with the community aspects as I do not find them stimulating or of any interest".
3. "Why should I attend the community cultural events or parades when I can watch them from the comfort of home on television or the internet".
4. "We who are of Hellenic background have much to learn from our Australian brethren".
5. "For some strange reason we are always suspicious and jealous of each other and looking to see what we can get out of a situation and not contributing back into our community".
6. "I am a "wog" and proud of it".
7. "I have no time for the Greeks, they deserve what they get".
8. "Greeks are only good with each other when faced with crisis on a monumental scale that affects all of them".
9. "The Greek newspapers in Australia don't have enough English sections to make it of interest to me".
10. "I wish my parents taught me Greek when I was younger, I miss that part of my cultural background".
11. "Mum and Dad would play Greek music at home and although I used to get embarrassed when I brought my Australian mates home, I think fondly of that music whenever I hear it again now as an adult".
12. "The Greek Orthodox Church has failed to live up to its image and is more interested in assets, money and influence than thinking about us Greeks here in Australia".
13. "The Greek media has failed to keep up to date with technology and is living in the previous generation".
14. "There is no such thing as the Greek vote here in Australia as we are not as united as in the past". "Its each man for himself when it comes to politics., It's just a joke".
15. "I never learnt how to dance in Greek and whenever I hear a particular song or music, something within me wants to get up and dance, even though I cannot dance Greek".
16. "When Mum and Dad divorced we lost contact with our grandparents who would always speak Greek or tell us stories of the old country". "It's too late now as they have all passed away".
17. "I am a Greek Australian and proud of it" and/or I am an Australian of Hellenic origins and proud of it".

18. "Why is the Greek Orthodox church getting involved in community politics" "It's no wonder why I don't go to church any more".
19. " I am not a wog, dago, spag, grease ball, but an Australian of Greek background".
20. "I am an Australian who has lost links with his Greek heritage".
21. "I think I have some Greek roots but I don't know how to locate them, as my relatives have passed away".
22. "I can't see the problem, you are either an Australian, Greek or Greek Australian (Australian Greek) whatever".
23. "I don't see the Greek Government doing anything to help Australians of Greek heritage".
24. "I love being a Greek, but I get embarrassed by what Greeks are doing to each other".
25. "We in Australia have lost our cultural and traditional roots because we don't believe they are relevant in today's society".
26. "We who are divorced and separated have no community or clubs that we can go to so that we can relate to others who have the same background".
27. "I have a Greek Orthodox background but have lost faith in the Greek Orthodox Community here in Australia, because they are not setting a good example".
28. "Hellenism, traditions and culture should be taught at home, otherwise where else are we to learn about our heritage".
29. "Being Greek is not a dirty word".
30. "We lack any role models who are not afraid to say they have a Greek background".
31. "Watching Greek sporting identities is the only time where I can feel proud of being Greek".
32. "We are losing many of our elderly to Aged Care homes and as result we are also losing a part of heritage through the absence of links to the past".
33. "We Greeks are always thinking how we can make a deal and what is in it for us". "What about giving back to the community".
34. "I am gay and that's why I don't go to Church".
35. "I wish there was an easy way to speak and write Greek"
36. "I was in Jail and I don't think my community wants me near them anymore".
37. "I am pregnant and my boyfriend has left me".
38. "I cannot find the way to get off drugs, I am hooked on them".
39. "I learnt to speak Greek at home".
40. "The church says it forgives but I don't feel that I am accepted".
41. "I am living with my Australian girlfriend and my parents don't want to see me anymore".
42. "Why don't communities adopt an old age home and visit the elderly. They still have much to teach the current generation, if only to tell their stories".
43. "We only spoke English at home, it was easier to communicate when our Australian mates came for a visit".
44. "We are making excuses and deluding for ourselves by placing our elderly in Aged Care Homes". The Elderly are our heritage, a veritable goldmine of knowledge of the past".
45. "There are no clubs or communities that cater for the youth, that's why we party at night at other venues".
46. "I love hearing Greek music and watching Greeks dance". "It makes me feel Greek".
47. "Just because I don't have a Greek background does not mean that I don't like things Greek".
48. "As long as my children are aware of their Hellenic heritage is good enough for me".

49. "Being a Greek in Australia is ok". "I am not ashamed of it, in fact I am proud of my Greek heritage".
50. "Where does one go to find out about their Hellenic past".
51. "Every time we Australian Greeks create something great, another Greek comes along and destroys the institution or structure".
52. "All Greeks love to be leaders such as a President of a community, his own boss and dislikes having to follow someone else's idea or vision for the common good of the Greeks".
53. "We must learn from our Anglo-Celtic and Saxon brethren and understand that the benefits of unity, discipline and being part of a team can produce positive results".
54. "We Greeks are an undisciplined lot and think we can fix the world's problems".
55. "The Greek language and religion are an important part of being a Greek".
56. "I wish our children would marry someone who is of Greek heritage, it would make life so much easier", so say the parents and grandparents.
57. "Our children have married "Xeni" (foreigners), how can we communicate and pass on our traditions and cultural values to their children".
58. "Greek history, food, music, dance and faith are an important part of identifying with Hellenism".
59. "I love both the Australian and Greek cultures".
60. "We should be proud of our names, why must we anglicize our Hellenic names".
61. "I don't find many Australian Hellenic communities appealing to my generation".
62. "I don't care if they marry outside our culture, as long as they remember their Hellenic origins and cultural values".
63. "The community leaders are reluctant to hand over the leadership reins to the youth"
64. "I wish I could afford to go to Greece and visit my Hellenic origins" .
65. "I wish our leaders followed up on their words of action instead of making themselves look good. We are not a stupid people".
66. "Those in leadership positions should look to deeds and creating institutions that will stand the test of time instead of just talking about it".
67. "Believing and promoting your heritage does not make you less of an Australian".

**Retention of Hellenism?** Is Hellenism in Australia to remain as it is or will it develop into something that is an imitation of Hellenism in an Australian landscape? What is very clear from the above comments, is that 'Hellenism', its culture, religion and traditions must begin at home. That Australian Hellenic community organisations should provide a stimulating environment where people of all ages can come together and share ideas of the old and blended with the new. Community centres therefore need to review their mission statements and objectives to create an environment that will embrace all individuals, no matter what their status is at the time.

The Greek Orthodox Church, the Greek news media and the Greek Government are all stakeholders in retaining a vibrant and active Hellenistic culture within the Australian environment and should be seen as encouraging the trend to retain Hellenic language, religion, traditions and culture of Greeks within the broader Australian Community. The other important stakeholders in this case are the parents of mixed marriages who strengthen their families by embracing both cultures and thus weaving them within the Australian fabric of society. In most cases, it is the women rather than the men who have married outside the Hellenic community that try and retain the Hellenic culture by ensuring their offspring's do not forget their Hellenic roots. Whether the children of these marriages acknowledge it, is another matter. What is important is that the parents of these mixed marriages instill in their children the positive aspects of the Hellenic culture and traditions. These facts again are based on anecdotal evidence and facts gathered over time and cannot be corroborated by hard documentation or unbiased statistical data.

**Stakeholder Responsibilities.** The above stake holders have much in common, but fail to reconcile any differences they may have, instead of looking at their self interests and do what is in the best interests of Hellenism in Australia. Communities should not always have to wear the brunt of responsibilities, but need support and encouragement to ensure that 'Hellenism' as a way of life survives as a cultural identity within the broader Australian, abiding by the laws of Australia and supporting its institutions and freedoms that we (Australians) take for granted.

Leaders, supporters and influential personalities within the Australian Hellenic community should emulate their Anglo-Celtic and Saxon brethren and do whatever is necessary to reinforce 'Hellenism' as a model of cultural identity for future generations, without any of the "negative and outdated baggage" that may be associated with it. Hellenism to survive must be supported and reinforced by the Australian and the Hellenic Governments, Australian Hellenic institutions at all levels, (Industry, Political, and Academia), the Australian Ethnic media, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia, the Australian Hellenic communities and by individuals themselves. It's a responsibility that cannot be shrugged off.

**Summation.** Therefore in summary, the challenges that the Australian Hellenic community is faced with is to acknowledge once and for all that it's ok to be an Australian of Hellenic origins, proud of their past and living in an Australian society according to its laws and institutions. Furthermore, current community leaders should also be seeking to strengthen their communities be re-engaging those people have strayed and/or have been absent and attempt to find means of revitalizing and reenergising their interest within the community. Leaders must review and build cultural centres that will retain traditions, dances, culture, histories no matter what the format, whether its oral, written, visual or living monuments. Do not neglect the small clubs and communities that were created and try to absorb them without paying the appropriate respects to those who created them in the first place.

Cultural centres must be implemented now, before those living in aged care homes who are the only living source of oral histories, food recipes, songs, dress, traditions, storytelling and a gathering of diverse cultural ideas before they cease to exist. Our Hellenic cousins in other parts of the world have in some cases failed to realize the significance of retaining Hellenism and have been absorbed slowly into the dominant culture that surrounded them. Past transgressions, grievances and petty jealousies should be put aside for the common good of Hellenism within the Australian environment and future generations will be thankful for their predecessors foresight.

**BELIEVING AND PROMOTING YOUR HERITAGE DOES NOT MAKE YOU LESS OF AN AUSTRALIAN. THEREFORE FOR HELLENISM TO SURVIVE IT MUST BEGIN AT HOME.**

References:

- A. Diary Notes – Peter Adamis – 1980 to 2002
- B. Photo – original model by Marble design -<http://www.marblebydesign.com/classics.html>