

IT IS OK TO BE GREEK WHEN YOU HAVE LIVED YOUR LIFE AS AN AUSTRALIAN

Abalinx.com - Peter Adamis - 22 April 2015



As we approach the 100 year anniversary of two important events in world history, let us take a moment to pay tribute to those who made this country great. First of all we pay our respects to those of a bygone era who over a hundred years ago; paid the ultimate sacrifice in lands on the other side of the world. Where our men and women fought and to those buried at Gallipoli - Turkey, the Western Front, Lemons Island, Thessaloniki - Greece, The Caucasus, Archangel - Russia, Egypt and Mesopotamia.

We salute those who died of their wounds, gas, lacerations, shell shock, and bombardment and stress directly related to their war time experiences.

Secondly let us spare a thought to the Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians and Jews who were massacred without provocation. These unfortunate people were removed from the face of the earth because of a few Turkish officials who took it upon themselves to commit genocide in order to empty Turkey of all Non Moslem peoples and replace them with the refugees from the territories lost by Turkey. The Turkish could not or would not implement policies that would encompass non Moslem communities within Turkey. On the over throw of the Turkish Sultan and taking power the new Young Turks enthusiastically announced that all of Turkey's peoples were to be deemed equal and all religions respected. This however did not last long and 1.5 million people disappeared from the face of the earth. A genocide that Turkey even now is slowly coming to grips with after years of denial.

Australia on the cessation of WW1 and W2 struggled to maintain a population that would be sustainable and to meet the needs of future generations. It needed a workforce to support its new industries such as the NSW hydro dam, the Victorian State electricity grid, to fill the void in the manufacturing, agricultural, defence and construction industries. Policy makers at the government level created and implemented policies that would attract and sustain Australia's long term manpower needs, paving the way for new migrants who did not meet with the accepted Anglo/Saxon and Celtic model profile.

The Greeks, Italians and the Eastern bloc countries, impoverished by war were all seeking relief from famine, starvation and deprivation and only too gladly filled the vacuum. These new migrants were not welcomed by the general Australian population as they did not appear to fit in with the alleged myth of the "bronze" ANZAC model and as such were subjected to abuse, mistreatment and racial taunts.

Sound familiar. I guess it does! It is not unheard of to hear via media reports of people being attacked verbally and in other cases physically mainly because of their appearance. After the Greeks and Italians, it was the turn of the Lebanese, Turks, Vietnamese, Somalis, Africans, and now they are targeted Chinese who are making Australia their home. The odd thing about the Chinese is that they have been part of Australian history from almost the beginning. Not even the cannibalistic aboriginals of Cook town in far North Queensland would deter the Chinese from coming to Australia. The Chinese are certainly a hardy lot and when you become acquainted with them you soon find that they live, live and bleed just like any other human being.

Life as an Australian in the fifties and sixties was tough on everyone and to survive as a migrant one had to fit or be left by the wayside metaphorically speaking. It also depended upon your outlook on life, the religion you followed, skin colour, what football team you barracked for looks, attitudes, sense of humour and whether you had what it took to belong. Before the arrival of Greeks, Italians, Eastern Baltic nations and migrants from the United Kingdom, the Irish were looked down upon by those born in Australia as second class citizens and in some cases as enemies of the "mother country" England because of the sympathies towards the Irish seeking independence from Great Britain. This was not unusual as there are many similarities between the Irish and Greek agrigarian style of living in the old countries.

World War 2 saw the final integration, acknowledgement and acceptance of the Australian Irish population and they in turn became influential in every field of discipline, whether it was of an academic nature or not. You would find the Irish in business, government, and military as well as in the political arena. Mind you, it was not an easy road for the Irish in the early days, especially if you lived in the slums of Collingwood, Richmond, Fitzroy and suburbs found on the fringes of Melbourne proper. Therefore post WW2 it was not usual for the new migrants who arrived to take the place of the Irish and other English speaking migrant groups prevalent at that time.

What is of interest is the same old stories being bandied about that these new migrants were taking the jobs of Australians, that the new migrants did not speak the English language, ate different foods, spoke in their native language in public, kept to themselves, were the cause of unemployment, cause of the rising levels of crime and did not integrate well into the Australian environment.

Yet these same migrants the Greeks and Italians would bandy together in order to share resources, experiences knowledge, jobs and retain their sense of values and traditional cultures. For the Italians, it was somewhat easier as they would come into contact with Australians who share the same catholic faith and as such were exposed more so to Australian attitudes and way of life than their Greek Orthodox brethren.

Today, some sixty years later, I often wonder what would have happened if the policies of Australia were not conducive to accepting new migrants to this country and how would they have coped with communities that kept to them. Luckily in this country we have had far sighted, intelligent men and women who have looked towards the long term interests of Australia and created policies that were no longer discriminatory but also discarded those policy paradigms that were no longer relevant. We are indeed still a lucky country, despite all the doomsday prophets that we are a divided country. In this country it's ok to call yourself a Scot, a Brit, a Welshman, an Irishman, an Italian, a German, Chinese and any other nation whose traditions and culture were not of this land, but as long as you follow the law of this country and respect its traditions and institutions. Finally, it is ok to be called a Greek when you have lived your life as an Australian.

I am of the belief that this nation we call Australia, is on the verge of becoming a great nation, a country which will stand as a model to other nations seeking policies that are conducive to strengthen the very fabric of society without the need to cross religious, skin colour and traditional cultural paradigms. Canada in my view is the other country that may be considered to be ahead in absorbing cultures and communities from a diverse background without losing its heritage, laws, traditions and institutions.



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