



Australian Hellenic Council NSW Inc.

A coordinating body for the Australian Hellenic community

LOBBYING FOR GREECE



In 1978, barely four years after the formation of the American Hellenic Institute (AHI), the *Washington Post* ran a piece about how the “Greek lobby” was marshalling opposition to the proposed repeal of the US arms embargo imposed on Turkey following the illegal invasion and occupation of that island. Its author acknowledged the “spokesmen and guardians of Greek-American interests on Capitol Hill” and wondered if the US legislators would end up playing Goliath to the Greek lobby's David.

Although the times have changed, and with them the issues confronting Greece and Cyprus, the power and the passion of US lobbying for Hellenism remains undaunted, according to Nick Larigakis, the President of the American Hellenic Institute, in a series of lectures which he gave to Greek-Australian audiences in Canberra, Melbourne, Perth and finally Sydney during his recent whirlwind trip to Australia.

Lobbying is the art of advocacy with the intention of influencing decisions of democratically-elected governments. As Larigakis explained, lobbying must be taken seriously and not done on a part-time basis or in *kafeneion* style. The AHI employs a number of people to monitor developments affecting US interests which concern Greece and Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean and to respond appropriately in order to set the record straight, whether by media release, letters to newspapers, social media engagement and ultimately direct lobbying on Capitol Hill and the White House.



Nick Larigakis' address at AHEPA hall in Sydney

Larigakis explained how the AHI – which was founded in 1974 after Turkey's illegal invasion of Cyprus - maintains a significant lobbying presence in Washington and also enjoys the ear of government officials in both Athens and Nicosia. In the case of the AHI, the secret to successful lobbying is to do it as citizens of the United States and to mount a case, with proper arguments, in support of the US's common interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and the ever-strengthening relationship with Greece.

This is illustrated in a number of ways. In recent years, Greece has become a bulwark of Western interests in the region in the face of a deteriorating Middle East and an increasingly bellicose and unstable Turkey. The military co-operation between Greece and its American and NATO allies has improved significantly with the impressive naval facilities in Souda Bay, Crete recently described as the "best in the Med". As the US Ambassador to Greece recently remarked:

"Greece is an important pillar of stability and democratic values in a region that faces numerous security challenges. The United States is appreciative of the close cooperation and mutual support we have with our Hellenic allies. We participate regularly in joint military exercises, our students work together on combined military education and, moreover, we train together. In fact, American and Greek forces have trained together more in the past year than at any other point in recent history."

But Greece still faces testing times. The negotiations over Cyprus have seemingly stalled and even if they resume Nick Larigakis warned that they will once again run into a "Turkish wall". The Turkish leader, Erdogan, is attempting to grab for himself Sultan-like powers and is seemingly prepared to do anything it takes to consolidate his position. Greece and the powerful Hellenic diaspora, particularly in the US, Canada and Australia, needs to respond and put pressure on their respective governments to call out Turkey's abuse of human rights, its continuing illegal occupation of Cyprus and its frequent and provocative violations of Greek air space and sea lanes.

Larigakis acknowledged that in Australia's case there is the historical issue of Gallipoli which potentially blurs the lines of direct engagement with the Turks but reminded his audience that

Australia is a Western democratic country that upholds the rule of law and supports human rights and must therefore act accordingly when Turkey transgresses.



Nick Larigakis with Greek Community representatives in Melbourne and with the Lord Mayor of Perth

On the issue of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Larigakis noted that Greece itself has compromised on its previous hard line position by offering to accept a composite name for its northern neighbour that incorporates a geographical qualifier to the name “Macedonia”. Unfortunately, FYROM continues to promote irredentism and now the government in Skopje is under threat from Albanian nationalists which potentially threatens the future stability of this part of the Balkans. In this case, as Nick Larigakis observed, “it is better to prevent a crisis than to react to a crisis”. Hence the need for a powerful lobbying presence to support Greece.

Larigakis also touched on the frequent incursions of Greek air space by Turkish fighters and lamented the irony, let alone the huge cost to the Greek economy, of Greece having to scramble F-16 fighters to chase its NATO ally out of its skies. But he stressed that the Greek military was ready and primed to meet any challenge.



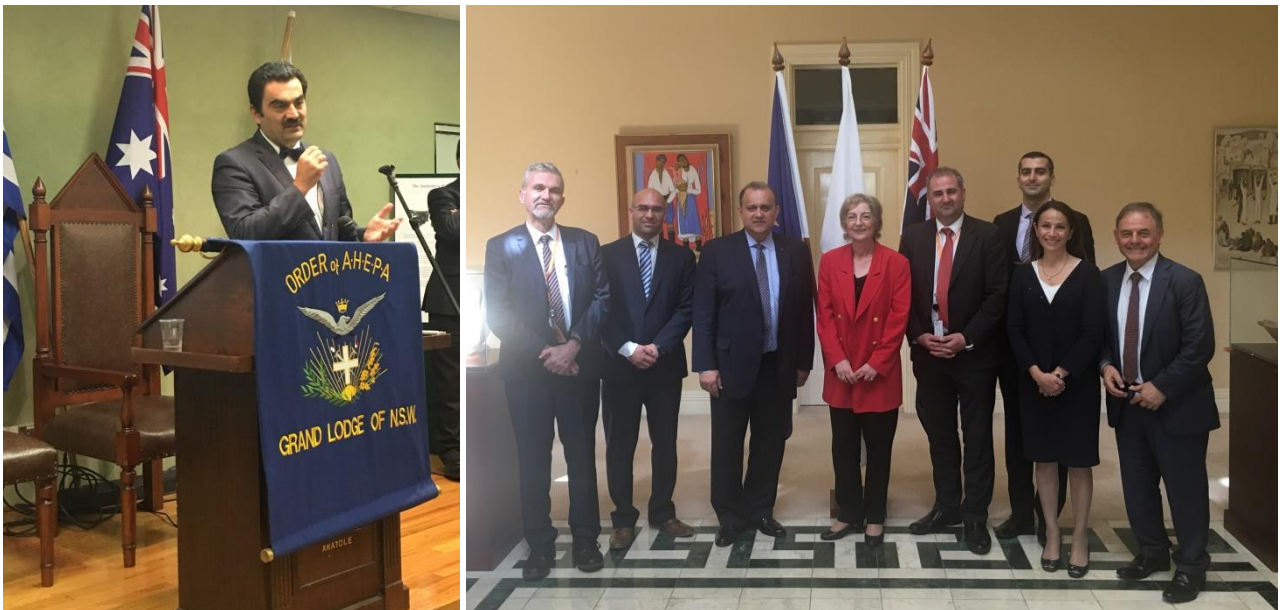
Nick Larigakis enthralled audiences in Sydney and Melbourne

At the end of his Sydney lecture, Nick Larigakis provided an overview of the AHI’s attempts to attract the youth and to engage the next generation of the Hellenic diaspora. The AHI helps organise annual study trips to Greece and Cyprus where young Americans of Greek descent meet with foreign ministry and

military officials and other leaders in both Greece and Cyprus. For example, these students actually encounter the realities of the ongoing Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus (with its desecrated churches and cemeteries). A number have gone on to pursue careers in public policy and administration as they rediscover their Hellenic roots. Certainly in the students' case, as the Romantic poet Shelley reminds us, "we are all Greeks".

Another initiative is the annual Future of Hellenism conference which the AHI stages in different cities across the US to bring together formidable speakers to discuss and confer on the issues that confront Hellenes around the world.

Larigakis urged his Australian counterparts to seize the day and pointed out that a concerted Australian Hellenic lobbying effort needs to be based in Canberra, the seat of the Federal Government, if the Greeks in Australia genuinely want to make a difference. The Australian Hellenic Council strongly agrees with those sentiments.



Consul General Dr Stavros Kyrimis in Sydney and the AHI-AHC delegation with the Cypriot High Commissioner in Canberra

In thanking Nick Larigakis for his passion and enormous dedication, the Greek Consul-General, Dr Stavros Kyrimis, reminded the audience that the Greeks of the diaspora are potentially more powerful than even the Greek military forces if they properly harness their collective strengths,

As demonstrated by the activities of the American Hellenic Institute under the astute leadership of Nick Larigakis, lobbying for Greece is something to which we should all aspire.

Dated: 12 April 2017

George Vardas

Secretary Australian Hellenic Council NSW