STUDY REPORT

Tom Koutsantonis MP
Member for West Torrens

Destination: Athens, Hellenic Republic

4th General Assembly of the World Hellenic Inter-Parliamentary Union

Sunday 21st to Tuesday 30th July 2002
As required under Section 15 of the Members of Parliament Travel Entitlements Rules, I submit my travel report for your consideration.

The WHIU is a body that can and will play a pivotal role in developing ties between Australia and South Australia and the elected representatives of the Hellenic Republic at State and Federal levels in the respective legislative bodies.

This dialogue will allow for a mutually beneficial transfer of information on common interest, a strengthening of our common cultural heritage and identity, as well as developing a frame work of cooperation on specific issues of interest to our legislatures and my electorate.

Needless to say the mere opportunity to meet other elected representatives of Hellenic origin in the Republic will be beneficial for the State of South Australia in promoting trade and cultural diversity amongst the vast Diaspora of Hellenes all over the world.

The common experiences of migrant’s from the Hellenic Republic to nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Europe allow me to better understand the range of issues affecting my constituents and how the government of the Republic can assist in these issues. There are also attempts to ease the burden of Australian Taxpayers on pension benefits for dual citizens of the Republic and Australia.

The Prime Minister held high level talks with officials and Ministers of the Republic on this very issue. One of the aims of this congress was to address the common problems developed nations like Canada, US, UK and Australia are facing in negotiating with the government of the Republic on these issues. It was resolved at the congress that there should be a common approach to these issues given the common experience of Hellenic communities in these respective nations.

Given my electorate has the highest concentration of migrants from the Hellenic Republic and was the initial choice of settlement for these migrants in South Australia; I thought it opportune to attend and participate in the WHIU.
This meeting will officialize the existence of the WHIU with an adoption of a constitution and an election of a new executive. My presence along with other Australian parliamentarians ensured that Australia was represented well on the executive of this new body given the large number of elected representatives in Australian Parliaments of Hellenic heritage.

The Parliament of the Hellenic Republic and the Presiding Member has made available resources and funds for the establishment and running of this body. Office space and staff of the Hellenic Parliament have been assigned to the WHIU and answer to the elected executive of the WHIU.

This is a ground breaking achievement, for a foreign parliament to allow an organisation to run and allow dialogue on behalf of the Hellenic Republic to make recommendations and function under the leadership of foreign parliamentarians is ground breaking and exiting. It is based on a model adopted in the State of Israel.

A body of this size and scope will aid citizens of South Australia have a greater connection with the country of their birth and help our Government better communicate with Hellenic Republic on a wide range of issues.

Recently the Premier, Hon Mike Rann, announced our government would help fund legal action on behalf of South Australian citizens against the State of Turkey for its illegal occupation of the Republic of Cyprus. There is a large Cyprian/Australian community in South Australia and our citizens have a right to expect their government to support human rights violations they have suffered.

The Government of the Hellenic Republic is very supportive of the Premiers initiative and I can inform the Parliament that the Government of the Hellenic Republic is very grateful for this initiative and relations between the two Parliaments are at an all time high. These initiatives were discussed at the WHIU and other MP’s from Canada, US and the European Union are beginning similar action from their communities.

The Prime Minister of the Republic and the Foreign Minister made specific mention of the state of South Australia and our Premier, given the Republic assumes the Presidency of the European Union this year, the contacts and goodwill that have developed plays well for South Australian companies operating in Europe and also the reverse can be said as well, European
countries and companies now have a greater understanding of what and were South Australia is.

The promotion of Human Rights and the rule of law make South Australia and safe investment opportunity.

The ministers of the government of the Republic made themselves available for informal and formal discussions; the access to government officials in my opinion is unprecedented.

One of the great assets of European migration to Australia after the war has enabled Australia to gain an advantage into these markets. Especially when the concentration from one country, like the Hellenic Republic is so large, it is an opportunity we should exploit and benefit from.

Australia has an excellent reputation in Europe, and that is something we can build on, the Premier was the first head of Government to begin talks with the Hellenic Republic on a volunteers programme for the Athens 2004 Olympic Games.

The Secretary General for Hellenes Abroad, Mr Dimitri Dollis, a former deputy leader of the Victorian State Labor Party, recently visited South Australia and met with the Premier to sign a document of understanding relating to a volunteer exchange programme with the South Australian Government.

Mr Dollis is the founder of this body and brings to it a uniquely Australian perspective.

This is an example of the mutually beneficial nature of the WHIU, the Premier has been invited back to the Hellenic Republic to discuss greater ties between the two states. These discussions will involve trade and cultural issues. The WHIU is an integral part of that process, to better enable and facilitate these processes.

The meeting of the WHIU is held in the Senate Chamber of the Hellenic Republic, all members are invited to speak on issues affecting their constituencies in relation to Hellenic citizens (all people born in the Republic, and who migrated, enjoy citizenship of the Republic as do three generations of descendants born outside of the Republic.) These forums are held with the
Ministers of the Republic responsible for these issues.

An interesting development occurred when migrants of the Republic might be granted voting rights in General Elections for the Hellenic Parliament. A move I believe we should encourage, though not for elected members of legislatures of Hellenic heratige.

This would enable countries like Australia to have a greater say in the affairs of European Nations and could have great benefits for trade agreements.

In conclusion the study trip, which was fully reimbursed, enabled me to further the cause of South Australian interest in the Hellenic Republic and promote the State.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to attend and allowing me to reimburse the full cost to the trip back to the South Australian Parliament.

The trip was not at the taxpayer’s expense and I am happy to submit my report to you for your consideration.

Yours Sincerely

Tom Koutsantonis MP
Member for West Torrens