

Why the Latest Initiative to Reunify Cyprus will Fail: The Six Pillars of the Cyprus 'Problem' and the Impregnable Roof

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In 2008 three developments created the fire of hope in me that Cyprus would not only be reunified in my lifetime, but that it may happen within two or three years. Nearly three years later only a few embers remain, awaiting the moment when they too will be extinguished.

In February 2008 I participated in my first Cypriot (Greek) presidential elections and despite many reservations I voted in both rounds for Demetris Christofias, the leftist leader. I believed that he was the best hope to reunify the island, by bringing the centre-right party, Democratic Rally, which has about equal electoral support as his own, behind him over the new negotiations he would initiate with the leftist Turkish Cypriot leader, Mehmet Ali Talat. The other reason I voted for him was because he was the only candidate promising educational reform, specifically to the primary and secondary school humanities and social science text books, which would replace the ethno-nationalist narratives with an inclusive discourse that recognised Cyprus' historical cultural and religious diversity and Greek Cypriot responsibility – along with the other players – for the division of the island and its people.¹

The fire of hope was fanned when within months Christofias and Talat managed to open the historical Ledra Street that divides Old Nicosia and which has been closed since 1964. I was there. It was a surreal experience. I wanted to get to the other side as soon as possible, stopping only to speak to my friend, Tabitha Morgan, the resident BBC correspondent, before walking aimlessly for hours on the Turkish side of Nicosia. According to her article – for I was too emotional recall what I had told her – I said: 'I am crossing because it is an historical moment ... Sixty yards used to separate us and now there is nothing.'² I was of course right and wrong: 60 yards separated us physically, but light years separated us in other aspects. On the other side I made a purchase – a small souvenir broom with numerous evil eyes on it; it symbolised for me that with the opening of Ledra Street all the evil of the past would now be swept away. I still have this broom, but the evil is still with us.

The third event was Alexander Downer's appointment as UN Special Envoy to Cyprus. At the time I was serving my mandatory three month military service in the Cyprus National Guard.

1 A. Varnava, 'Moving forward after the presidential elections', *Cyprus Mail*, 2 March 2008, [<http://www.cyprus-mail.com/cyprus/moving-forward-after-presidential-elections>], accessed 18 November 2010.

2 T. Morgan and D. McElroy, 'Cyprus barrier: an open and shut case', *The Telegraph*, 4 April 2008, [<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1583934/Cyprus-barrier-an-open-and-shut-case.html>], accessed 18 November 2010.

Before his appointment – when his appointment was only a rumour – I received a call from a local journalist while at ‘boot camp’ (although I got out of wearing boots because of my bad foot, bad back and age) while sitting under the eucalyptus trees out of the blazing Cyprus sun. I then received a further call when Downer had been appointed. I was asked what I knew about Downer and whether I thought he would be the right person for the job. I remember answering that he was a tough and parochial conservative politician, who would not be afraid of warning all the players involved, but especially the Greek and Turkish Cypriot elites, of what failure to reunify Cyprus would mean. The local journalist published the following based on her interview with me, views which I still firmly believe in.

‘Dr Andrekos Varnava, Assistant Professor in History at the European University Cyprus, who grew up in Australia said Downer had mixed results as a Foreign Minister. He referred to the unwavering support for Washington.

“He was also, very controversially, instrumental in maligning refugees who were fleeing Afghanistan and trying to make their way to Australia, accusing them of not being refugees because they had paid their way [and thus had money to survive] from a third country, where, as the argument went, they should have stayed,” said Varnava.

He described Downer as very passionate but parochial. “I have called him a hawk. He is also particularly stubborn. All these traits are fine, indeed they are to be expected of a politician,” he said. “Being a diplomat is totally different but I do not see why he cannot be a diplomat.”

Varnava thought Downer could be good for Cyprus in that both sides could do worse than be reminded that this was the last chance for a solution, by someone charming as well as humorous “but also quite waspish”, who would not mince his words.

“He will tell it how it is and I think he will be good at getting both leaders to remain seated at the table when either or both would be tempted to get up and leave,” said Varnava.³

I believed and still believe that Downer’s political career placed him in a unique position compared to other UN Special Envoys for Cyprus. As a politician he was tenacious, stubborn and parochial, but as a minister dealing with counterparts and foreign diplomats he could also be diplomatic and tactful, and his father had been a successful diplomat. As foreign minister he was instrumental in the successful peace agreement in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, which ended a long running civil conflict, and in 1999, after successive Australian governments had neglected the plight of the East Timorese under Indonesian occupation, Downer assisted the UN to hold a referendum in East Timor and in negotiating the entry of the INTERFET peace keeping force which helped pave the way to independence.

3 J. Christou, ‘Could Downer be a mixed blessing for Cyprus?’ *Cyprus Mail*, 5 July 2008, [<http://www.cyprus-mail.com/features/could-downer-be-mixed-blessing-cyprus>], accessed 18 November 2008; For other stories with my views see *The National*, 1 July 2008, [<http://www.the-national.ac/news/worldwide/europe/cyprus-settlement-back-on-track>], accessed 18 November 2010; M. Droushioti, ‘Will Downer be the trick?’, *Politis*, 20 July, 2008, p. 6; A. Michaelides, ‘On Downer’, *Politis*, 2 November 2008, p. 20.

The election of pro-reunification candidate Demetris Christofias, the opening of Ledra Street, and the appointment of Alexander Downer were not enough, however, to bring about fundamental progress towards the reunification of the island. These three developments created the fire of hope for the reunification of the island, while the clouds of failure and division hovered over the fire, waiting to extinguish it.

The problem that Downer and all concerned with trying to reunify Cyprus have is that there are structural problems that are not easily surmountable and for which little has been done over the decades and the last three years to overcome. I call them the 'six pillars of the Cyprus problem'. They are by no means the only problems, but they are the most important – going right to the heart of the long running and continued stalemate. They are the clouds that hover over the flames of hope. In no particular order they are:

Turkish Deep State and Confederation

For the last decade there has been a battle between the moderate Islamists who have been in power and the traditional secularist elite, most of whom have been close to what is referred to as 'the Turkish deep state' – military and political establishment – that has been involved militarily and politically in Cyprus since the late 1950s. The moderate Islamists have been winning most of the important battles, but the war has not been won, and the Turkish deep state, which would only accept a confederation on Cyprus or partition, could be a cause for concern. Their views in Cyprus are represented by the former Turkish Cypriot leader and arch-bogey man regarding reunification, Rauf Denktaş, whose ethno-nationalist party is now the largest in the legislature and its leader, Dervis Eroglu, is the Turkish Cypriot leader and chief negotiator since April 2010. As an elected leader, Eroglu cannot be sidelined, nor should he be marginalised, but it is certainly difficult to see reunification on the horizon when one of the partners has fundamentally opposed a federal reunification all his life. The question that arises is to what extent can the moderate Islamists, who desire Turkey's entry into the EU, and Downer, convince Eroglu that the Turkish deep state and the notion of a confederation do not represent the best interests of Turkish Cypriots and Turkey, but that reunification of the island under a federal bi-zonal constitution does.

Political Equality and Power Sharing

Then there are Greek Cypriot elite divisions over the nature of a bi-zonal federal state. According to the 1960 Constitution the Greek and Turkish communities of Cyprus were equal communities. This safeguarded Turkish Cypriot concerns of marginalisation, but strongly dissatisfied Greek Cypriot elites, who believed that as the demographic majority they should be the dominant community. By and large these feelings still exist, although within different contexts. The right-wing ethno-nationalist Greek Cypriot parties closely affiliated to the Church, the Democratic Party (DIKO) and the European Party (EVROKO), along with the ethno-nationalist and

moderately socialist (along Baathist lines) Movement of Social Democrats (EDEK), lead the elite voices opposed to political equality and power sharing. During the most recent negotiations on the governance chapter, Christofias and Talat agreed on a model that incorporated both direct presidential elections on a separate communal vote and a rotational presidency between a Greek and a Turkish Cypriot. Christofias then suggested a weighted cross-voting system that would require candidates to appeal to all communities to which Talat did not seem opposed. In any event, both models were opposed by the extreme right-wing elites in both communities. Although much progress was made on this chapter it has not been closed.⁴

Territory and Property

An even greater stumbling block is how much and which territory each constituent state should contain and what is to happen to the properties of those who fall into the constituent state of the other community. Since the 1963-1964 clashes the Turkish Cypriot elites have encouraged the geographic separation of the two communities, which the war of 1974 made a reality. Meanwhile, since the 1974 war the Greek Cypriot leadership has encouraged displaced Greek Cypriots to believe that they would return to their homes and receive all their properties back. The fact that the leaders of both communities agreed in 1977 to a bi-zonal federation did not seem to alter this discourse. Annan V, the plan put to two simultaneous referendums in 2004, which was supported by Turkish Cypriots but not Greek Cypriots, stipulated that about ten per cent of the territory currently held by the Turkish Cypriots would be given over to the Greek Cypriot constituent state, while Greek Cypriots owning properties falling in the Turkish Cypriot constituent state could reclaim one dwelling, one third of their property, with the rest being compensated. On territory, it appears that the Turks were willing to give more (namely parts of the Karpass Peninsula), but the Greek Cypriot leader at the time, Tassos Papadopoulos, was not interested because he opposed the plan, but this remains to be seen in any future negotiations, especially because the Turks oppose giving up coastal areas. On the issue of returning properties there are major divisions across the Greek and Turkish divide, but also within each community, across the ideological spectrum. It is true that Greek Cypriot elites generally want the right of displaced persons to return or their properties recognised and the Turkish Cypriots, referring to the principles of bi-zonality, do not, but the main cleavages appear within the two communities themselves. Turkish Cypriot ethno-nationalist elites do not want any Greek Cypriots living in the Turkish Cypriot constituent state; while Greek Cypriot ethno-nationalist elites want all displaced Greek Cypriots to return. Nobody has stopped to think about what the displaced people themselves want.

4 E. Kaymak and H. Faustmann (2010) 'Cyprus', *European Journal of Political Research*, XLIX, pp. 923-938.

Virgin Birth Issue

This is a 'non-issue' which is made into an issue by the ethno-nationalist 'rejectionist' camp. During the years of the Annan Plan, 2002-2004, the ethno-nationalist Greek Cypriot elites clamoured to damn the Annan Plan because, they claimed, it would create a new state. In fact the plan would have instituted a new constitution, but not a new state; much like how France went from first, second, third, fourth and finally now to fifth republic, the new federal republic of Cyprus would have been the second republic. Conveniently, however, it appeals to the ethno-nationalist rejectionist camp to put this claim forward because they wish to appeal to the legitimacy of the Republic of Cyprus as the recognised government in the island, despite the fact that the first republic collapsed in 1963-1964 and the island has been governed through various 'states of exception', including the exclusion of the Turkish Cypriots.⁵ If ever the two leaders came close to an agreement, all should be prepared to expect this non-issue to reappear again.

Victims and Perpetrators

The majority of Greek and Turkish Cypriot elites and the majority of both polities accept that they are victims, but refuse to accept that they are or their ancestors were also perpetrators. Many from both sides blame 'the other side', 'the motherlands', or 'the foreign powers', but very rarely do you see any politician blaming their own community. Recently, while on a short visit to Cyprus, I attended a fascinating seminar by Howard Varney, the Chief Investigator of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, who was also closely involved in the East Timor Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation, and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁶ Varney listed three essential pre-requisites for any truth and reconciliation process to succeed: 1) a break with the horrors of the past; 2) the past must be confronted in order to move forward; and 3) for 2) to happen the root causes of the conflict must be understood, not only so all can move forward, but also so they do not happen again. In order to understand the root causes, Varney spoke about 'dependable facts'. Unfortunately for Cyprus, the majority of the elites in both communities, and the majority of both polities, are unwilling to accept responsibility for past actions (and inactions) and therefore they are unwilling to recognise that they are both victims and perpetrators. The fact that a truth and reconciliation commission is not on the political agenda and figures on the agenda only if the island is reunified – thus as a constitutional requirement – makes sense only if you are not serious about reunification. There is no reason why reconciliation should come after reunification and indeed it would aid in bringing

5 C. Constantinou (2008) 'On the Cypriot States of Exception', *International Political Sociology*, Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 145-164.

6 Organised by Dr Christalla Yakinthou, The International Center for Transitional Justice – Cyprus, in conjunction with the Glafkos Clerides Institute for Eurodemocracy, 3 November 2010.

about reunification. But in a conflict, even a cold conflict, the two sides are always looking to blame and undermine the other side, so they can never accept responsibility, unless they decide to end the cold war.

Commentators and Academics

When Varney spoke about 'dependable facts' it made me think: well who is going to find and indeed analyse these 'dependable facts'? The Cyprus conflict, unlike the other cases discussed – Sierra Leone, South Africa, East Timor and others – originates at least as far back as 50 years ago when the republic collapsed during the civil war of 1963-1964. Soon there will be few victims and perpetrators alive to speak about their suffering and their acts of violence. Most of the leaders, at least those who were 'ringleaders', are dead. Much of the reconstruction of what happened in the past and 'dependable facts' needed would have to be done through archival evidence. I then stopped to think, despairingly, that there were very few historians of Cypriot history who could be depended upon to do this; indeed most historians and political scientists (although less so) belong to the ethno-nationalist elite political circles that deny any responsibility for what happened and have been instrumental in perpetuating the conflict itself. The same can be said of many academics that are not Greek, Turkish, or Greek or Turkish Cypriot – they inevitably favour one side over the other, failing to provide a balanced account.⁷ Not only are these persons not professional, but they also unite to undermine and marginalise the serious historians in such ways as book publishing purported to be scholarly, book reviews, conference tours, and so forth. How can the Greek and Turkish Cypriot elites, who would no doubt want to have a say on who is on any truth and reconciliation commission and on any historical commission, ever be trusted to choose or agree to persons who are professional or not affiliated to any political party or ethnic group?

Finally, what connects these six pillars – the roof that holds them in place – are the attitudes and the power of Greek and Turkish Cypriot ethno-nationalist elites. Once the roof is lifted, the pillars will still be there, but they will be exposed to the elements – to the new reality that is reconciliation and reunification. Better yet, if the roof is crushed, then some of the pillars will also crumble. Unfortunately, some of them will always remain and will always be a constant danger to any reunified Cyprus.

The Greek and Turkish Cypriot ethno-nationalist political parties that champion the most extreme positions for the 'solution to the Cyprus problem' are quite powerful; in the Greek Cypriot case they form the four smaller parties (if we add the Greens) represented in the parliament, and the larger two of them, DIKO and EDEK, are usually part of a coalition government; in the Turkish Cypriot case, the ethno-nationalist parties, with the exception of Talat's period in office

7 See for instance A. Varnava, review of William Mallinson (2009) *Cyprus: A Modern History*, (2nd edition), London: I.B. Tauris, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, forthcoming, 2011.

(2005-2010), have always been in power. The dynamics of Turkish Cypriot politics are more straightforward than those of Greek Cypriot politics: you have the left-wing pro-reunification party and you have the extreme right-wing party that supports partition or a loose confederation, with a third party that is closer to the right than the left. In the Greek Cypriot case the ethno-nationalist elites who desire a solution on their maximalist terms do not simply belong to certain parties, but they also exist within the moderate and pro-reunification parties. In both cases they are amongst the economic, religious and intellectual elites; they dominate the media; and generally are present in all walks of life. They monopolise discussions on the Cyprus conflict, on the identity of the island and its people (either Greek or Turkish – not recognising Cypriot diversity, including national/historical minorities, nor Cypriot identity),⁸ and on what type of future Cyprus and its people should have. Divergent views are ridiculed, damned as treacherous and marginalised. Even something so important as a visit by someone so experienced and knowledgeable as Varney failed to attract much attention and little attendance – around 20 people. Meanwhile, at the same time, the media was focusing on a sensationalist book titled *Simademeni Trapoula* [Marked Cards], written by Achilleas Aimilianides (lawyer), Michalis Kontos (academic) and Giorgios Kentas (academic), all prominent supporters of a ‘no’ vote in the 2004 referendum, that criticises Alexander Downer and contains private email correspondence between members of the UN negotiating team and Downer’s views on leading Cypriot politicians. This book prompted three members of parliament – all notorious ethno-nationalists – DIKO’s Andreas Angelides, EVROKO’s Rikkos Erotokritou and EDEK’s Marinos Sizopoulos – to push through parliament a motion that the House Institutions Committee scrutinise Downer’s role. Despite the opposition from the ruling AKEL, its coalition partner DIKO, former coalition partner EDEK, and the most extremist right-wing party EVROKO, have now instituted a farcical official inquiry into how Downer does his job, reflecting the power of ethno-nationalist elites who want the negotiations halted and Downer out.⁹

Special envoys, like Alexander Downer, can only achieve so much. They can keep the parties at the table, share their expertise and that of other experts at the disposal of the UN, offer their guidance and observations, but ultimately it is the elites of the people in question that must take the hard decisions, make those tough realisations and create the space from which reconciliation

8 See A. Varnava, N. Coureas and M. Elia (eds.) (April 2009) *The Minorities of Cyprus: Development Patterns and the Identity of the Internal-Exclusion*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

9 See S. Evripidou, ‘AKEL: Downer Grilling Akin to “Public Tribunal”’, *Cyprus Mail*, 21 October 2010 [http://www.cyprus-mail.com/un/akel-downer-grilling-akin-public-tribunal/20101021], accessed 19 November; J. Agathocleous, “Downer Inquisition” to go ahead’, *Cyprus Mail*, 22 October 2010 [http://www.cyprus-mail.com/alexander-downer/downer-inquisition-go-ahead/20101022], accessed 19 November 2010; S. Evripidou, “Downer Debate” postponed as Deputies Complain of Gaggling’, *Cyprus Mail*, 5 November 2010 [http://www.cyprus-mail.com/cyprus/downer-debate-postponed-deputies-complain-gagging/20101105], accessed 19 November 2010.

and reunification may be achieved. The Cypriot people cannot wait for the international community to reunify their island, even though the international community does have the theoretical knowledge and some practical experience that the Cypriots do not have. Christofias and Talat started to make some small inroads towards creating the space that could have led to reconciliation and eventually reunification, but these were small inroads and they were interrupted by the traditional dominant discourses of the ethno-nationalist elites that criticised their every success, exaggerated their every failure and questioned the compromises both were willing to make.

Alexander Downer (and any other special envoy) could only but fail in reunifying Cyprus because the structural causes of the Cyprus conflict and the continued division of the island have not been addressed, and because the ethno-nationalist elites from both sides are unable or unwilling to recognise that reconciliation and reunification can only be achieved with an end to the Cyprus 'cold war conflict' and the recognition of the mutual responsibility for the Cyprus 'hot war conflict' of the 1960s and 1970s. Whether the initiative comes from both sides or one side, whether it comes from the top, or is propelled from below, at some point, both sides must understand the root causes for the conflict before they can put the conflict behind them in the future that is reunification – a future that unfortunately seems very distant.