

# Twenty-one Years with Cyprus

**Keith Kyle**

I first came to Cyprus in 1983. At the time I was on the staff of Chatham House (a London think tank whose formal title is the Royal Institute of International Affairs) and on the board of the Minority Rights Group. Until the previous year I had also worked as a reporter and presenter for BBC Television, specialising in international problems. But these various commitments had never until then taken me to Aphrodite's isle. What did take me there was an issue within the Minority Rights Group, whose principal activity lies in the publication of monographs discussing clearly and dispassionately situations of ethnic friction around the world. Briefly the problem we then faced was that when it came to Cyprus one draft study was held by some members of the Group to be too pro-Turkish and another draft was held to be too pro-Greek. I was appealed to as a person who was accustomed to explicating difficult problems but who had no previous track record on Cyprus to fill the void.

I was greatly helped in approaching this task by my friendship with a Chatham House member, the late Nancy Crawshaw, whose lengthy study of *The Cyprus Revolt* was an excellent way into the subject and who supplied me with many useful contacts. Similarly my longstanding friendship with Costa Carras, one of the founders of the Friends of Cyprus organisation in London, was and is of great assistance. I decided at the outset that my instincts as a former BBC reporter and the character of MAG required me to deal evenly with Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots despite the awkwardness that the Turkish Cypriot north was, in the perspective not only of Greek Cypriots but also in that of the international community, Turkish occupied territory. To carry out my research I visited the two parts from London separately.

I made wide contacts in both parts of the island. The name of my publishers, stressing minority rights in a manner which in most situations but not in Cyprus (nor in Sri Lanka) would be recognised as friendly to the smaller community, was going to be a problem in the north. Fortunately I had read enough of Mr. Denktash's speeches to come to him forearmed for the challenge he threw out to me at once when we first met. When I came to write my report I was careful to spell out near the beginning of it that the rejection by the Turkish Cypriots of the concept of minority rights was of the essence of the problem.

My report was published early in 1984 and it was a matter of some satisfaction that, insofar as I was aware, no one regarded it as being biased in either direction. But I was not finished with Cyprus, not by a long chalk. Though many Cypriots feel that the world is insufficiently aware of the Cyprus Problem my experience has been that once anyone has become engaged with it he is liable to be hooked. It owes its strong drawing power to the fact that, although it concerns the fate of less than a million people, it involves issues and interests that are fundamental to the relations between peoples. Also Cypriots (of both kinds) are prodigious generators of paper and sponsors of conferences and seminars. My own files on Cyprus reach up to the ceiling and have frequently visited the island. To my delight as an historian I also find most books on the subject to be enormously rich in appendices, containing the full text of (selected) documents.

Costa Carras observed to me when I first became involved with Cyprus that demographically it was unfortunately placed. If the smaller community had numbered five per cent or less minority rights (which are by now fairly well defined) would clearly be the answer, as appears to be the case in respect of the Armenians, Latins and Maronites. If the Turkish Cypriots had amounted to forty per cent there would clearly have to be a partnership state. An 18:80 ratio is awkwardly in between; it broadly resembles the position of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and the position the Irish Protestants would be in if there were to be a united Ireland. As it is in Northern Ireland the Roman Catholics are forty per cent plus and ever since the Good Friday Agreement the British have been attempting to assemble a regime based on there being two equally valid communities; we in Britain are painfully aware of the inherent difficulties and dangers of such a project.

It is understandable that Greek Cypriots should have very real difficulty in accepting the full implications of 18 being equal to 80 in so many respects within a united island. There is a habit in international circles of speaking of reaching a 'fair and just solution' of whatever may be in contest. But the plain fact is that such a solution regardless of regional strategic context is normally not on offer. Does anyone suppose, to take one other case, that any available solution to the Palestine problem will be 'fair and just' to the Arabs, who used to be the majority population of Palestine? In the case of Cyprus the high-level agreements of 1977 and 1979 established a framework – a bizonal, bicomunal federation – which would seem to represent a recognition by the larger Cypriot community of geostrategic realities. But what attempt was made to educate the population about the tough implications of what had in principle been conceded? To be blunt Turkey's military success was not going to be forcibly reversed by the UN or the US or anyone, anymore than was Israel's in the case of Palestine. Therefore the fairness and justice of any solution would need to be conditioned by what Turkey could be induced by political pressure to give up.

Although there were possibly two occasions when greater flexibility on the Greek Cypriot side could conceivably have led to a breakthrough, it is in general fair to ascribe to Mr. Denktash (and his personal influence with the Turkish establishment) the primary responsibility for the repeated failure of the UN Secretary-General's exercise of 'good offices'. But the very fact that this generally left the Greek Cypriots in occupation of the moral high ground seems to have enabled them to avoid close examination in public of what a bizonal, bicomunal federal system would actually involve. Specifically it requires a two-component federation on an ethnic basis. This is a notoriously difficult proposition in the absence of mutual goodwill and a determination to make the system work through informal channels. Michalis Attalides, in his paper on 'The Political Process in Cyprus and the Day After the Referendum' has been the latest to point out that 'this aspect of a proposed federation in Cyprus has never been the object of extensive public discussion.'

The Annan Plan was an attempt to spell out in thousands of words what the long-agreed formula would mean. It was not by any means the UN's first such attempt but it is probably true to say that, in its various formulations including its fifth and last it was the version which showed the most consideration for Turkish Cypriot and Turkish viewpoints. But Annan was clearly being influenced by constructive developments on the Turkish side, resulting in the marginalisation of Mr. Denktash, and also by Cyprus's rapidly approaching membership of the EU, which seemed to make the satisfaction of certain Turkish requirements much less significant.

In my opinion the UN Secretariat and other mediators (primarily the US and the UK) had become so focused on the task of outmanoeuvring Rauf Denktash that they had taken their eye off the Greek Cypriot ball. They assumed that the two main parties, representing seventy per cent of the electorate, could be relied upon to deliver a pro-Annan result in the referendum. That was clearly a mistake. The volume and intellectual vigour of Greek Cypriot criticisms of the Plan from the time of the publication of its first version should have given warning of the coming *debacle*.

The authors of the plan made some mistakes. It was surely inadvisable to churn out hundreds of pages of the final version only days before the vote, giving the impression of a desire to bounce the electorate into accepting the small print. The economic provisions were unimpressive, suggestive of expensive bureaucracy and also on other grounds open to responsible criticism. Some of the last-minute concessions to the Turks and Turkish Cypriots, of which the continuation indefinitely of the Treaty of Guarantee was a prime example, offered a cloth ear to well-known Greek Cypriot sensitivities. But, in the public statements of President Papadopoulos there are suggestions of a more fundamental challenge. 'The functionality and workability of the new state of affairs', a phrase he has used more than once to sum

up his opposition to Annan 5, sounds very like an objection to the logical consequences of any two-part federation, which if tested to breaking point will break. Similarly 'the just resolution of land and property issues in accordance with the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights' would mean that any number of Greek Cypriot property-holders in the North could take advantage of the precedent of the Loizidou decision to render meaningless any provision to reassure Turkish Cypriots that they will not find themselves outnumbered in their unit of the federation.

The President is right: a bizonal, bicomunal federation does not sit well with the principles of European law. But yet the EU agreed with Annan in being prepared to go remarkably far (farther than I had expected it to go) to accommodate a Cyprus settlement.

Contrary to the impression that is sometimes given of wilful external interference, it has always been the strategy of the Government of Cyprus to involve other countries and international institutions in the attempt to solve the Cyprus Problem. These have done their best by their own lights, even at some sacrifice of legal principle. The Greek Cypriots, who after all have to live with any solution, have decided, as is their privilege, that their best is not good enough. The EU may, as the Friends of Cyprus have advocated, offer to help improve the economic aspect of the Annan Plan. The FOC plan for use of a system of cross-voting – whereby Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots would have the same agreed percentage input in each other's elections for federal bodies – might be looked at again as an aid to preventing intercommunal gridlock under a new federation. But basically it is now for local political leaders, Turkish Cypriot as well as Greek Cypriot, to show what they can do without outside input. Outsiders like myself will wish them well.