

## **An Examination of Australians of Hellenic Descent in the State Parliament of Victoria**

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Victoria, the second most populated State in Australia, is widely claimed to include as its capital the third largest Grecophone city in the world, after Athens and Thessaloniki. The Victorian State Parliament has more members of Greek and Cypriot (Hellenic) background, than any other jurisdiction in the Commonwealth of Australia. Continuing a series of analyses of the role of elected State and Federal representatives of Hellenic descent in Australia (Louca, 2001), this paper will focus on the Victorian State Parliament, but with reference also to current and former Victorian Federal parliamentarians. There is an exploration of the cultural, political, social and personal influences that guided these individuals to seek election to Parliament and their experiences as politicians with a Hellenic background.

As at the beginning of 2002, six sitting members in the Victorian Parliament have a Hellenic background. Four represent the Australian Labor Party (ALP), two the Liberal Party. They are:

Alex Andrianopoulos	ALP
Peter Katsambanis	Liberal
Nicholas Kotsiras	Liberal
Jenny Mikakos	ALP
John Pandazopoulos	ALP
Theo Theophanous	ALP

In addition to these current members, there are also two others who have retired from Parliament, or are deceased, Theo Sidiropoulos ALP (deceased)

and Dimitri Dollis ALP (retired).

Victoria is also the source of the most Hellenic background Federal representatives, including Andrew Theophanous, Independent (formerly ALP; defeated in 2001) and Petro Georgiou (Kooyong; Liberal Party). It is noteworthy that the first two women of Hellenic Australian background in the Commonwealth Parliament are also representatives for Victorian electorates, Maria Vamvakinou (Calwell), and Sophie Panopoulos (Indi).

Jupp estimates, based on Price's population proportions, that an "ideal" number of Greek members of Parliament would be in the order of about 15 (Jupp, 1984), Australia-wide. The total number of Hellenic background MPs currently in the Victorian Parliament represents over one-third of that "ideal" sum if, concurring with Jupp, a function of parliamentary representation was to proportionately reflect the total Hellenic Australian population.

In Victoria according to the census of 1996, 61,683 people indicated that they were "Greece born". In the category "Language spoken at home Greek" 119,577 people identified themselves in this category (ABS, 2000). In the measure under "religion Greek Orthodox including non-Greek" 205,359 people responded. From this census data, it can be concluded that the Greek Australian population measure for Victoria is between 120,000 and 200,000 persons.

Political involvement in the Australian polity is motivated and influenced by a number of factors, including political developments in Greece and Cyprus. This study intimates that as the Hellenic Australian community has developed and matured, it has embraced the political system of Australia. A result of this occurrence is the election to State and Commonwealth Parliaments of persons of Hellenic background.

Tsounis argues that Greeks did not get involved in "mainstream" Australian politics immediately following their migration, because they were focused on building their own communities and associations in Australia. In the first decades following the mass migration of Greeks, the numerous Greek organisations fixed on providing essential services in what was considered for a time a foreign land, that is, churches and community halls for

social, educational and cultural interaction (Tounis, 1971). Holton describes this internal focus as “ethnic communities adapt old concerns to Australian situations and/or develop new political concerns” (Holton, 1994).

The lack of involvement in the broader Australian political system by Greek Australians up to the 1970s may be attributed to a number of factors:

- (i) lack of English language skills;
- (ii) lack of social mobility;
- (iii) lack of knowledge of the Australian political system;
- (iv) low levels of citizenship or naturalisation;
- (v) exclusion through institutionalised discrimination and socio-political cleavages.

Greeks actively participated in Australian party politics in the 1970s, especially in the Australian Labor Party. Across Australia, party political expression for Greek Australians first emerged strongly in the Left. An explanation for this phenomenon is found in a demographic evaluation of Greek immigrants, who were mostly unskilled labourers. Their involvement in the ALP was cultivated by the creation of Greek-speaking branches in South Australia and Victoria. Theophanous points out that there were nearly a dozen such branches in Victoria by the late 1980s (Theophanous, 1988).

This does not imply that Hellenes were not involved in politics in Australia before the 1970s. Dimitreas states:

Lack of social justice and equal opportunity in the job market coupled with either indifference or active prejudice of general society organisations led many Greeks to either tacitly support or openly join radical political organisations such as the Communist Party of Australia. With the exception of the CPA, the other political parties excluded non-British migrants from their lists (Dimitreas, 1998).

In attempting to understand why Greek immigrants and their antipodean-born children joined the ALP, the analyses have attempted, through face-to-face interviews, to identify factors contributing to the party identification of Greek Australians with the ALP.

Members of Parliament offered their own interpretations that will be

expanded upon. Dimitreas suggests that in addition to the five points above the issue of conscription in the context of the Vietnam war was a factor. Some one hundred and seventy Greek Australians were conscripted and this enraged the local Greek communities (Dimitreas, 1998). Policy changes initiated by the Whitlam Government brought to a conclusion assimilation as the driving policy directing migration issues in Australia. The seeds of multiculturalism were sown, and influenced according to Dimitreas and Tsounis by the “Greek Left”, the Greek Orthodox Community and the Australian Greek Welfare group (Dimitreas, 1998).

Theophanous and Dimitreas also suggest the community divided between the Greek Orthodox Community and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, prompting Left and Right identification respectively. The continuation of home politics, that is the transplanting of the politics of Greece to Australia, in addition to the intensity of the religious and ideological conflict that emerged, helped characterise the party political identification of Greek Australians. The active involvement of Greeks, particularly Greek Cypriots, in the Union movement was also an important factor in the development of strong party identification and involvement (Theophanous, 1988).

This discussion on political participation raises a key query. Were these early forays into Australian politics a product of collective promotional activity and organisation, or a result of the efforts and action of individual endeavour? Karaisaridis identified that

as the success and numbers of Greek Australian background MPs have increased, there is a perception that this was a result of organised Greek community support. Without dismissing the influence of Greek branches in party structures, the role of an organised lobby to install politicians is overstated (Karaisaridis, 1996).

Some commentators, such as Healy, have poured scorn on Greek Australian involvement in the ALP as an exercise in so-called “ethnic branch-stacking” (Healy, 1995). Karaisaridis draws the conclusion that Greek background MPs have succeeded partly due to their personal abilities and contributions to their party, but also due to the levels of general support and respect that

they have gained within the party and broader community (Karaisaridis, 1996). This is also evident in interviews with Nick Bolkus and Steve Condous, whose comments concur with Karaisaridis' evaluation (Louca, 2001). The Victorian Hellenic background parliamentarians further support this, for example Katsambanis said "Is the Greek community supporting the Greek candidate, no I don't think so" (Interview, 2001:1).

In Victoria, Greek Australians have also been active in the Liberal Party, at around the same time as their involvement increased in the ALP. Alfredos Georgios Kouris ran several campaigns as a candidate for the Liberal Party, as early as 1976 (*Brunswick Sentinel*, 1976). During this period another candidate, Savvas Papasavvas missed out on election for the ALP by only 1% after the distribution of preferences (*Neos Kosmos*, 1976).

Hellenic background candidates stood for election in the early and mid-seventies, but it was not until 1977 that the first Hellenic Australian member of parliament was successfully elected in Victoria. Theo Sidiropoulos, the former Mayor of Collingwood, won his seat in a by-election, as the member for Richmond, and remained in Parliament for eleven years. He was active in the Greek community, as a first-generation Pontian refugee migrant to Australia from northern Greece. Involved in the Greek guerrilla forces during the Second World War and the Greek civil war, he was described in a speech to the Parliament, "[as an MP who] wore his socialism as a badge" (Theophanous, 1998). A strong campaigner for more language teaching in State-run schools, he had several successes. His personal philosophy as retold by a colleague was telling: "It is not you or me, it is us; it is not yours or mine, it is ours" (Theophanous, 1998). Those who entered the Victorian Parliament after Sidiropoulos consider him a pioneer. Sidiropoulos was also involved as an activist instrumental in the preselection of Brian Howe, former Deputy Prime Minister, to the seat of Batman in 1977 (Lopez, 2000). Sidiropoulos died in October 1998.

Alex Andrianopoulos was the next Hellenic Australian to be elected to the Victorian parliament. He was born in Tselepakou, Tripolis, Greece on 1 January 1955 and migrated to Australia with his parents and sister in 1965. The family settled in St.Albans. Andrianopoulos was a councillor in the City

of Keilor from August 1980 until 1984, and from 1982 until he was elected to Parliament in 1985 was employed as an electorate officer for the State member for Keilor, George Seitz. In 1984 he sought and won Labor Party preselection for the newly formed Legislative Council seat of St. Albans, which he held until it was abolished in the 1990–91 electoral re-division. He was then endorsed for the newly formed State seat of Mill Park, which he won in 1992. He is still (2002) the sitting member. Andrianopoulos held positions as Shadow Minister for Ethnic Affairs in 1993 and Secretary to Shadow Cabinet from 1993 until the September 1999 election. He was elected Speaker of the Legislative Council of Victoria on 3 November 1999 following the election of the Labor government. He is the first migrant from a non-English speaking background elected Speaker of the Victorian Parliament and the second MP of Greek background to be Speaker in Australia, the first being Jim Fouras in the Queensland Parliament (Handbook, 2001)

He describes his cultural identity:

There is no doubt in my mind that I am person of Greek origin, I guess I see myself as being Greek in [an] Australian environment. I would fit the stereotype that very many other migrants see themselves. I am proud of my Greek origin, I am proud of my Greek heritage, however I see myself as an Australian politician, or indeed a Victorian politician, rather than a Greek politician [as] many people describe me. I am a Greek by birth, Greek by attitude, by upbringing, Greek by religion, Greek by family environment, but nevertheless [some]one who has made the transition and has become an Australian or Victorian politician (Interview, 2001:2).

John Pandazopoulos, Minister for Gaming, Minister for Major Projects and Tourism and Minister assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs, was elected member for Dandenong in October 1992 (Handbook, 2001). He explains that he got involved in politics because he “doesn’t like to sit on the sidelines and comment like a lot of Greeks do” (Interview, 2001:3). He also said his family environment and the Whitlam Labor government shaped his political direction. He describes himself as a Greek Australian:

I’m a Greek Australian so I did what a lot of young Greek Australians do. I did all that stuff. [...] but again, there was a lot of rebelling like a lot of us

did. [...] I haven't really got many "Greek" friends from childhood days [...] There was quite a bit of rebelliousness against it, so I never did the Greek dancing and all that sort of stuff. I love Greek culture but I was trying to be a bit separate and be like everyone else, which is a pressure on you. But I think it has been valuable, that is to say it's been the best of both worlds really, when you reflect on it, rather than be all embracing and non-questioning of whatever you do. Community life for me hasn't been around [the] church but more around family and social contacts rather than Greek institutions (Interview, 2001:3).

Pandazopoulos said that his tendency "to question" was part of what led him to politics. He got involved in the ALP while at university during his first week on campus. A few months later, he was involved in the 1982 election campaign that led to the election of the Cain government. He was active in campus politics and was secretary of the Student Union. When I asked him if he was a member of his university Greek student club, he said that he was, but he was more interested in getting the Greek background students involved and coming out to vote for him in his student campaigns. Interestingly he also said that he did not experience a great deal of discrimination at this time. Although he followed this with a description of discrimination after some questioning:

[...] the questions of others about who you are. For example, [questions like] "when did you migrate" [...] Just because you have a "funny" long name doesn't mean that you were not born here (Interview, 2001:3).

In politics, he thinks that loyalty is constantly questioned. He said the question is often rhetorically posed: "Who do you support Australia or Greece?" He describes this behaviour as "not being worldly", choosing not to characterise it as racism (Interview, 2001:3). To illustrate this further he recalled an event in Parliament. Pandazopoulos said that another member called him a "little Greek prick" and he got the Speaker (Andrianopoulos) to suspend Parliament for it:

I deliberately tried to position myself to not be seen as a Greek politician, even though when I was a [local government] councillor there was a big story in the paper about the 'Greek Greasy Spoon' – you don't focus on the argument,

you focus on who they are or what they look like. In Parliament, I got called a “little Greek prick” once and I forced an apology; the Acting Speaker had to suspend Parliament for a little while and there was an editorial in the *Herald Sun* about it and he went and got advice because he didn’t hear it, and you get that sort of stuff. I’m in Parliament at the moment and there’s a particular backbencher [...] and every time I’m up there [on the floor of Parliament] he calls me “Spiro”. It’s not racist but it’s guilt by association; that you are not a minister representing all Victorians, you’re just “Spiro” (Interview, 2001:3).

Despite Pandazopoulos’ comments during the interview that he has what he describes as a lesser involvement in the Greek Australian community, Pandazopoulos said that there is still a tendency to be categorised as a “Greek” internally within the ALP. The phrase “How many Greeks can you have in Parliament?” was one comment he claims was raised when he was seeking preselection as a candidate for the ALP. He said another comment in a similar vein was “You know, there already are a few Greeks in the Parliament, you’re already over-represented”. Remarks like, “All the Anglos won’t vote for a Pandazopoulos” were another method utilised to employ discrimination, according to Pandazopoulos. He said “I get a sense that you are not treated as an equal” (Interview, 2001:3).

The Parliamentary Secretary for Education, Training and Employment, Theo Theophanous, was elected in 1988 to the Victorian Legislative Council for the Jika Jika Province. He has a public service and academic background, having tutored in politics and sociology at LaTrobe University. During the period 1991–92, he held the portfolios of Consumer Affairs and Small Business and was Minister Assisting the Minister for Manufacturing and Industry Development. In 1993–99 he was Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council and Opposition spokesperson on Industry and Employment and WorkCover (Handbook, 2001).

When asked to define his cultural identity he drew a distinction between cultural identity and ethnicity:

One’s culture can be defined fairly easily really. My cultural background is as a Greek Cypriot. I was brought up with the values and

ideals within the family of a Greek Cypriot. But that was supplemented by interaction with Australian culture. So I would have to say that my culture is really as an Australian of Greek background. My ethnicity might be a bit different. I suppose ethnicity is much more complex and probably you would describe my ethnicity as being Cypriot or as being Greek Cypriot, certainly as a Greek Cypriot background ethnicity, which is slightly different. And if you asked me what I identify myself with then I identify myself as an Australian of Greek background (Interview, 2001:4).

He stated that he is very proud of his Cypriot heritage. When asked what residual impact his cultural background had, he said it was of the experience of racism. He said:

The experience of racism is something which you can document in a number of different ways, and it succeeds at a personal level – [like] an experience at school. I remember the maths teacher at school, because my name in Greek is Theophanis Theophanou, my maths teacher put my name up on the board and described me as “Theo squared”, because it was a shorthand way, and of course everyone laughed. But while it might have been humorous, as a young child that kind of thing makes an impression and it means that you start not wanting to express your “Greekness”. Similarly, I remember one time when I went to school, my mother had made an eggplant sandwich, and used the big bread that you cut into big pieces. And somehow or other my lunch got mixed up with one of the other kids. And of course I opened the lunch and found this white bread with, I think, Vegemite, and thought it was pretty ordinary. The other child found this big hunk of bread with the eggplant fried from the night before and went around the school ridiculing me and saying, “Have a look at what he has for lunch! [...] What is it? No-one could eat this”. I suppose these days something like that for lunch is very desirable. [...] It’s all those little things that build the perception... [for example] the way Australian girls used to treat you. It was not a very pleasant environment for growing up back in the 60s. A lot changed in the 70s and particularly when the Labor Government was elected in ’72 (Interview, 2001:4).

Theophanous identified a residual Labor Party identification amongst wealthier Greek peers reflecting that party identification in the Greek Australian community was less tied to socio-economic background, but rather more strongly connected to the migration experience. He said that

people forget. I have friends who are lawyers and doctors – very wealthy people, and I sometimes say to them, “Why ‘Yianni’ do you support the Labor Party, given where you are [economically/socially]?” and they’ll say, “Well, the fact is, I wouldn’t be a lawyer if, in 1972, Gough Whitlam had not made tertiary education free”, and “I wouldn’t be a doctor, and that’s something I can’t forget.” Because in fact what he [Whitlam] did in 1972 was he made it possible for people like me and people like my brother [Andrew Theophanous] and a huge range of migrants to get into the professions and then have an impact on society (Interview, 2001:4).

The first Liberal Party Victorian state politician, Peter Argyris Katsambanis, is the parliamentary member for the Monash Province. Born in 1965 in Melbourne, he is a solicitor and holds degrees from the University of Melbourne (Handbook, 2001). Katsambanis has been involved with the Liberal Party from a young age, but became actively involved in politics when he joined the Melbourne University Liberal Club on his first day at university. He participated in several campus campaigns and was active in the promotion of voluntary student unionism. In 1995, he successfully sought preselection for Monash Province in the Victorian Legislative Council (Interview, 2001:1).

In describing his own cultural identity, Katsambanis stated he was

Australian born, Australian raised and of Greek origin, growing up in a society that is tolerant and accepting and open to new ideas and new influences. So I can say I’m Greek Australian, I can say I’m Australian Greek, but really, the important thing that you get with the cultural identity [...] is the fact that I am the product of the migration era, and being the product of the migration era, the generation that I come from is the generation of Australians that is open to the world, and views everyone as an individual rather than putting on labels. [...] It’s probably urban modern Australian and maybe inner urban modern Australian. I don’t know, I’m only a product of my environment, but I think the modern Australian, particularly my age group, my generation, the top end of the “Generation Xers”, or whatever the sociologists label us, we’re a product of that modern, open, inclusive, culturally diverse Australia. I still have a very strong sense of Hellenism, but I think it’s probably more as an historical marker and a reference point than as a natural influence. The most influential aspect of my Hellenism, if it is part of my Hellenism, is probably religious (Interview, 2001:1).

Katsambanis' account of the involvement of Hellenes in the Liberal Party repeats Pandazopoulos' reference to the Greek civil war that followed the Second World War. He felt that potentially Liberal-voting Greek Australians were maintaining the divisions of that era:

Both [my parents] were conservative. The civil war – none of the Greeks want to talk about it, particularly the people from the conservative side, which I think is sad. The civil war coloured Greeks and you were left or right and very few people were left in the centre. And I think those divisions came here and were perpetuated here [...] My view is that they brought that here [from Greece] and that remained and remains to this very day. But it manifests itself in the way they view themselves outside of their voting intentions in Australia. Because a lot of those people who might have been conservative and stayed conservative, consider themselves to be workers and still vote Labor, certainly right wing Labor and they weren't "lefties", but that didn't mean that they necessarily voted Liberal. It's a real paradox. In the '70s there was [even] an organisation called the Greek Australian Liberal Association, GALA (Interview, 2001:1).

Gender imbalance in Hellenic Australian parliamentary representation is a noticeable feature of the study to date, a feature not isolated to Victoria. The election of Jenny Mikakos MLC, as the member for Jika Jika Province in September 1999, is significant in the history of Hellenic participation in Australian politics. Born in Melbourne in 1969, like Katsambanis, she also practised as a solicitor, having obtained degrees from Melbourne University. Mikakos has lived in her electorate all her life and was a councillor with the City of Northcote in 1993–94 before she entered Parliament. (Handbook, 2001).

Mikakos claims that she never set out to be a politician but it was an incremental process (Interview, 2001:5). She joined the Labor Club at the University of Melbourne whilst studying and joined the ALP at that time. She said that she contemplated joining the party for some time before signing up. Soon after working for her local branch, she was asked to work for the then Treasurer, Tony Shean. The seat of Jika Jika, as Mikakos illustrates in the interview, has a large Greek community. She describes herself as second generation Greek Australian:

I see myself as second generation Greek Australian. I was born and raised in Melbourne. I obviously had a very strong Australian identity but by the same token I have a strong Greek identity also and I don't see a problem with reconciling the two. I think that we're fortunate to live in a country that is accepting of various cultures and you are able to embrace cultural aspects from more than one culture. I see it as a positive. Having that sense of belonging to two cultures is a strength, in terms of being more empathetic as a local member of Parliament. I am more empathetic to my constituents, many of whom are from other cultures, because of my background. I can relate better to their problems and it strengthens my own sense of culture and where I fit into a multicultural Australia (Interview, 2001:5).

Mikakos said that her first foray into seeking preselection was in 1995 in the Federal seat of Batman, driven by her conviction that the Victorian ALP required more women in the Parliament. Asked for an interpretation of the Batman preselection saga, infamous for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the unique situation in that two Hellenic Australians were standing against each other, Mikakos describes it from her standpoint:

Well firstly I nominated before Theo [Theophanous] did (laugh) – let's get that on the record. The Greek community has been involved in the Victorian ALP since the early seventies so it has a very long history of involvement in this branch of the party, and is very active in my local area. When I nominated, the local Greek branches were generally supportive, but to be perfectly frank about it we did have divisions in those branches between my supporters and Theo's support base. But the criticism made of him in the Greek media was that he was already a member of Parliament. He was, in fact, the leader of the Legislative Council in Victoria at the time, and the way the Greek community saw it was that it was time to support an addition to their representation. Most of the criticism was levelled at him for that reason (Interview, 2001:5).

Ironically, following her withdrawal from the Batman preselection, Mikakos was elected to represent the same electoral province in the Victorian parliament as her one-time rival, Theophanous:

Theo is actually my counterpart member for Jika Jika because we have two members for each seat in the Victorian upper house [Legislative Council]. So we have a very good working relationship but for me it was

important to do what I did [for Batman] because I was seeking to make a point. I was also seeking to be preselected. It wasn't just about making a point [...] I think the Greek community here and the Greek branches certainly learned a lesson about the need to try to achieve agreed outcomes and a greater degree of cooperation wherever possible (Interview, 2001:5).

Theophanous provides a different perspective on the preselection issue, expressing his confidence that he would have won the blessing of the Party, had the matter been pushed. He did not view the contest as one between two Hellenes, but rather himself and prominent unionist, Martin Ferguson: "The Batman preselection, which was a high profile preselection which took place over a period of three weeks, was essentially between myself and Martin Ferguson" (Interview, 2001:4).

He further stated that

bringing Martin [Ferguson] into the contest involved using the National Executive. He could never have won the pre-selection if it had been a fair pre-selection. Everyone knew this. It was an excuse that could be used on the basis that there may have been some branch-stacking in the area. But to use the excuse that there were two Greeks running and therefore we needed an Anglo, that might have been a latent part of this, but it was certainly not spoken by anyone. Because you would understand that anyone who said that would be pressing a very racist position, because it means if you ever have two people of the same ethnicity running for anything you should bring in an Anglo. And in any case Jenny Mikakos was just putting her foot in the water... (Interview, 2001:4).

The contrasting positions of the two protagonists in this drama, played out in the national print and electronic media as well as the Greek-language Australian media, created an unprecedented focus on the activities of Hellenes in an Australian political party. Ultimately, Ferguson prevailed in Batman. I hope at a later stage in my research project to expand on this event.

Liberal Party parliamentarian Nicholas Kotsiras was elected in September 1999 as the member for Bulleen. He was born on 13 March 1959 in Greece. A teacher and ministerial adviser before his election, Kotsiras describes his cultural identity:

I see myself as an Australian but I am very proud of my Greek heritage, culture, religion. My parents moved to this country for a better life and so I see myself firstly as Australian but I am proud of my Greek heritage (Interview, 2001:6).

Kotsiras said that he did experience some discrimination as a child, “but nothing significant”. He was also the target of accusations of branch-stacking in securing preselection, although he was backed by then Premier Jeff Kennett. In an interesting contrast to the experience of Bolkus (Louca, 2001:196) Kotsiras was also involved in the Macedonia issue. He stated that his involvement in the issue regarding the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia began before the election of the Kennett government in 1991:

There was a big rally and I remember going in with a number of other Greek background candidates to see the Leader of the Opposition [Kennett]. I walked into his office and I was surprised to see on his desk books on Greece and could not believe that someone was actually studying, or looking up on this issue. So we spoke at length and then he said, “Okay, I need to do a bit more research”, and two weeks later said, “Yes, I am convinced that what I am going to do is the correct way to go”, and he hasn’t changed since. But the initiative was his own, as I said, I walked into his office and there on his table were history books. What Jeff Kennett did, he did all on his own and he was persistent throughout his term (Interview, 2001:6).

Dimitri Dollis, a former ALP member of the Legislative Council was for a time the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. He resigned in 1998 after a long period in parliament. He has subsequently been appointed the General-Secretary for Greeks Abroad in Greece. He was unavailable for interview at the time of this research.

This paper outlines some of the emerging themes in my national study, particularly in the examination of these parliamentarians’ notions of self-identity, and discussion on ethnicity as socio-political cleavage. It seeks to identify cultural, historical and political influences that have brought these Greek Australians to participate in politics.

Common themes are emerging in this study. Hellenic Australian background parliamentarians are strongly influenced by their identity regardless of party-political affiliation. The political involvement of Hellenes in

Australia largely began in the left, in particular the Labor Party, but also readily emerged in the Liberal Party, as demonstrated by the attempts of Kouris. Several MPs started their careers in politics by being involved in local government. The majority have spent many years working within their parties and within their communities before gaining preselection and eventually holding office. It is also a common experience for these members to have accusations of so-called “ethnic branch-stacking” (Healy, 1995) levelled at them as part of the preselection process by opponents, and this is characterised as a distinct form of discrimination by the Greek Australian background members of parliament.

The study has found that all the Victorian Greek background parliamentarians are exceedingly conscious of their Hellenic heritage and that they all expressed a sense of pride in their background and cultural and linguistic heritage. For some, this difference from a dominant Anglocentric culture has created another level of social division or political cleavage that they have overcome to succeed as politicians. Keen to serve their local communities while remaining balanced in their approach to their electorates, they largely have significant ethnic diversity in their electorates, whether or not it is Greek or other non-English speaking background groups. They believe that they are treading a fine line, to ensure their detractors cannot label them as relevant only to Greek Australians. They are of course full and equal representatives of all their constituents, not just their culturally diverse support base, despite attempts to marginalise their contributions. In contrast, they are attaining higher office and are highly regarded by their colleagues, as demonstrated by the examples of Andrianopoulos and Pandazopoulos.

The shared common experiences of Hellenic background MPs have been described as a “special bond” between them. It is not uncommon to see them embroiled in controversy, for example, the experience of the Batman preselection of 1995. These Greek Australian parliamentarians support cultural diversity and multiculturalism and are keen to celebrate their hybrid cultures. From different generations, a mixture of Australian and Greece or Cyprus born, much of their political experience is common. There is much more to the story of Hellenes in Australian politics in Victoria. This paper

is a mere introduction to the sitting State politicians, underlining an understanding of the emerging themes and core issues: the universality of a Hellenic Australian identity, the experiences of cultural diversity, and triumph over discrimination and the struggle for justice and representation.

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