

REFLECTIONS

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George Papandreou's Honorable Legacy

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There is the often told story about Winston Churchill learning the devastating news of his party's electoral defeat, in July 1945, at the hands of a seemingly ungrateful British public, only to have his wife tell him that, given how exhausting the previous five years had been for him, this was perhaps "a blessing in disguise." Without missing a beat, Churchill famously shot back, "If so, the disguise was perfect."

On March 7, Greece went to the polls, and in giving the conservative New Democracy Party and its leader, Costas Karamanlis, a fairly healthy parliamentary majority—165 seats in the 300-seat parliament—the electorate not only threw out of power the Socialist (PASOK) Party, which had ruled Greece during 20 of the preceding 23 years, but also effectively put on hold the meteoric career of George Papandreou, who had been Greece's foreign minister since early 1999 (as well as the recently elected chairman of PASOK), and who, in the eyes of most knowledgeable international observers, was seen as being one of the few truly admirable European statesmen of our time.

One of the most striking things about the 52-year old Papandreou is that both in his private and professional life he has proved to be so unlike his grandfather (and namesake), prime minister at the end of the Second World War and again in the mid-1960s, a mercurial rabble-rouser whose liberal-cum-republican credentials (and even occasional *marxisant* pronouncements) never stopped him from cutting deals with the Right when it suited his own career advancement; and even more unlike his father,

Andreas Papandreou, founder of PASOK and himself prime minister through most of the 1980s and early 1990s, who—though intellectually distinguished, genuinely respected early in his life as an academic economist living in the United States, and unquestionably charismatic—turned out to be, in the main, an irresponsible demagogue masquerading as a populist and Man of the Left, who also cultivated in public a virulent streak of anti-Americanism.

By way of contrast, the younger George Papandreou (whose mother, like Churchill's, was American) has always behaved in a low-key fashion, with a personal lifestyle (unlike his father's or grandfather's) unmarred by sexual or other scandals. A relative late-comer to the riotous world of Greek politics, he gained respect—especially abroad—by showing himself to be smart, well-informed, unexcitable, and utterly unostentatious. Until very recently, he had concentrated almost entirely on international issues. At the Foreign Ministry, he surrounded himself with like-minded—and, by Greek standards, relatively young—professionals who were themselves cosmopolitan in their outlook and refreshingly unburdened by chauvinistic blinkers. (True to form, this closely knit group of advisors, many of whom had studied in Britain and the United States, were derisively nicknamed "the Americans" by the "superpatriots" within PASOK.)

In the event, as foreign minister, Papandreou never attempted to upstage his prime minister, Costas Simitis (who had succeeded Andreas Papandreou, both as premier and

party chairman, in 1996). And unlike his immediate predecessor at the Greek Foreign Ministry, the insufferably arrogant and bombastic Theodore Pangalos, who all too often behaved like a bull in a china shop and seemingly went out of his way to infuriate both Ankara and Washington, George Papandreou adopted from the start a diplomatic style devoid of histrionics or rhetorical overkill. Not for Papandreou, one noticed, the grandstanding previously indulged in by his own father (cozying up to Libya's Colonel Qaddafi, for example, mostly as a way of thumbing his nose at Washington), or by the previous New Democracy foreign minister, Antonis Samaras, whose ludicrous vendetta against the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has (unbelievably) left the "name issue" of the Skopje government still in limbo more than a decade later; not to speak of Pangalos' even more dangerous "flirting" with the Turkish Kurd guerrilla leader, Abdullah Ocalan, which not only infuriated Ankara but also turned most of the international community against Athens.

Instead, Papandreou concentrated his energies not only on improving Greece's image abroad, by working with rather than against Athens's long-time allies, but also on brokering realistic solutions to seemingly intractable problems—such as the numerous Greek-Albanian disagreements over illegal immigrants, minority rights, and the like. Even more to his credit, he did his best (at some cost to his own popularity at home) to patch up relations between Athens and Ankara, as well as between Athens and Washington.

Without ever "going to Canossa," Papandreou managed to make himself persona grata with both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations; and this despite Washington's growing irritation over the Greek security services' mysterious inability—until about a year ago—to get a handle on the "November 17" terrorist group, as well as over the constant anti-American clamor emanating from a Greek public os-

tensibly incensed by the U.S. intervention in Kosovo, the lead-up to the Iraq War, and "callous" American "indifference" to the plight of the Palestinians. (It should be added that chronic Greek animosity toward the state of Israel has grown more virulent in the recent past, in part as a result of Israel's "special relationship" with Turkey.)

Better Relations with Turkey

Without a doubt, Papandreou's most impressive achievement has been his dogged cultivation, through thick and thin, of better relations with Turkey. It is no exaggeration to say that he has tried to effectuate a veritable sea change in his countrymen's perception of their (habitually demonized) Turkish neighbors, and vice versa. Without air brushing out any part of the painful historical record, or pretending that ongoing Greek-Turkish misunderstandings and disagreements over a whole range of issues are not serious or worrisome, Papandreou nevertheless embarked on a courageous campaign calculated, bit by bit, to produce a trans-Aegean partnership based on a realistic appreciation of the substantial *mutual* benefits—economic, strategic, psychological—to be gained by the two sides through constructive cooperation rather than continuing resentment and suspicion.

Both by choice and by necessity, for Papandreou the true test case quickly turned out to be the Cyprus problem: could he help broker a reasonably fair solution involving the peaceful reunification of the divided island, acceptable to both of its ethnic groups, before the larger, Greek part of the island formally joined the European Union on May 1? Instead of agonizing endlessly over all the obvious obstacles to reunification, Papandreou chose to focus on the few equally obvious promising signs: not least the international community's willingness, at long last, to exert real pressure on Greek *and* Turkish Cypriots, forcing them to work out something mutually acceptable—at least as a first step—and, if need

be, against the received wisdom of their own politicians.

To be sure, Papandreou—and Simitis—would have made little headway had they not received substantial support from their Turkish counterparts in Ankara: notably from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who all along has viewed the nonresolution of the Cyprus question as a formidable impediment to Turkey's own hoped-for accession to the EU. Moreover, the Erdogan government evidently viewed Papandreou as genuinely sincere in his advocacy of Turkey's pending candidacy. This did not mean, on the other hand, that Papandreou entertained any Panglossian illusions either about Rauf Denktaş, the obstructionist Turkish Cypriot leader, or about the latter's patrons among the ultra-nationalistic "pashas" in the Turkish military and in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Papandreou simply never wavered from his principal goal, which was to try to mend Greco-Turkish fences once and for all, beginning in Cyprus.

And so, Papandreou's sudden departure from the Greek Foreign Office has, in a way, come about at a rather bad time: the continuing impasse over Cyprus has now reached a critical stage. As of this writing, U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan's plan, first floated last fall, for the reunification of the island—under a loose federative arrangement meant to include the breakaway Turkish-Cypriot northern third—before May 1, has hit yet another snag. Negotiations (held most recently in Switzerland) between the many interested parties appear to have come to a standstill. Worse yet, the U.N. secretary general's almost too-clever-by-half "fail safe" solution to the May 1 deadline obstacle—to wit, that the two Cypriot communities be allowed (read: be strong-armed) to vote for the Annan Plan, as recently modified, in simultaneous referenda to be held on April 20, thus in effect encouraging the two voting publics to go over the heads of their own (still bickering) political leaders—also

appears to be coming apart at the seams: not only (or not so much) because Denktaş is being his usual uncooperative self but because the Greek Cypriot side is itself now threatening to torpedo the Annan Plan for being insufficiently accommodating to its concerns. Specifically, the Greeks are now arguing that there are unacceptably restrictive clauses in the Annan Plan regarding possible future resettlement and property ownership claims by thousands of Greek Cypriot refugees, who fled to the southern sector at the time of the 1974 Turkish invasion, now wishing to be allowed to return to the northern (Turkish Cypriot) sector; that additional modifications—favorable to the Greek side—must be made to the new boundary line dividing the federation-to-be; that the 40,000-strong Turkish army contingent currently stationed in the northern sector must be evacuated sooner rather than later (with a view to the island's speedy demilitarization); and that no further immigration by (non-Cypriot) Turks from the Anatolian mainland be permitted.

In an ideal world, these (not entirely unreasonable) Greek complaints would be addressed, and perhaps satisfied, *à toute vitesse*: but this is not such a world. Besides, the Turkish Cypriot side has had its own (not entirely unreasonable) reservations about the Annan Plan: not least about their sector becoming quickly overwhelmed by the Greek Cypriots' demographic superiority. And yet a majority of voters, especially younger people, on both sides of the ethnic divide do apparently wish to arrive at some sort of workable reunification scheme not all that different from the current Annan Plan. This is certainly true of the economically deprived Turkish Cypriot community (*pace* Mr. Denktaş), which is anxious not to lose out on the expected benefits accompanying EU accession.

Ironically, had Denktaş not proved so obstinate and shortsighted in the delaying tactics he adopted throughout this past winter, while ostensibly looking out for a

“fairer” deal than that offered by the Annan Plan, the Greek Cypriot side would most probably have signed off on the plan, despite its own reservations, soon after the New Year. But the more Denktash dragged his feet—for all intents and purposes still arguing in favor of virtual independence for the Turkish Cypriot sector—the more time the Greek Cypriot side had, under its more hawkish new president, Tassos Papadopoulos, to discover that the Annan Plan was indeed “biased” in favor of the Turkish Cypriots. Moreover, there is a truly surreal aspect to this whole affair since the Greek Cypriot two-thirds of the island, internationally recognized as the Republic of Cyprus, will in any event join the EU on May 1.

Such an outcome, seemingly legitimizing the permanent division of the island, would be unfortunate on all counts—for the long-term welfare of the two Cypriot communities, for Greek-Turkish relations in general, and of course in terms of Turkey’s own pending candidacy for EU membership. This author is thus not alone in thinking that George Papandreou’s wise counsel is being sorely missed at this time, although one hears that he *is* still working, behind the scenes, trying to convince the Greek Cypriot side not to lose sight of the longer term goals while falling into the trap of playing Denktash’s own game.

Karamanlis’ Opportunity

We have, of course, no way of knowing how seriously upset Papandreou was by PASOK’s electoral defeat or by the proverbial “ingratitude” of Greek voters; he certainly knew that even among his own party’s faithful many people consistently criticized him for being too “soft” toward both Turkey and America—as well as for being (like Tony Blair, it was said) too “centrist” (meaning, not ideologically “pure” enough) in his views on social and economic issues. Still, a convincing case can be made that, the Cyprus saga aside, PASOK’s defeat may prove

to have been, at least in the short run, a blessing in disguise: for Papandreou, for Greece, and even for the United States.

To begin with, although elected party chairman shortly before the recent elections (with Simitis retaining the post of prime minister) in an attempt to woo undecided voters by dint of his more attractive personality (and squeaky-clean image), Papandreou can hardly be blamed for PASOK’s defeat at the polls. As is often the case in parliamentary democracies, Greeks across the political spectrum convinced themselves that after so many years of almost uninterrupted PASOK rule—and the various financial and other scandals that inevitably accompany such political longevity—the time had come for change. Of late, Greece’s economic picture had also been less than rosy. And so “throw the rascals out” gained a certain resonance with the voting public.

Yet, being out of power—but with more free time on his hands, and no longer chronically exhausted by his constant travels abroad—Papandreou can now concentrate on ending PASOK’s internal infighting (led by the party’s far left—and habitually anti-American—faction); establishing firmer control as party leader; and trying to turn PASOK, once and for all, into a genuinely modern, European-style social democratic party, even if this means forswearing many of his father’s outmoded tenets.

In the meantime, and as viewed more narrowly from an American vantage point, New Democracy’s electoral victory bodes well at least on one count. The good news is that with a little more than four months to go before the start of the Summer Olympics in Athens on August 13, and with much work still left to be done in terms of both construction and security measures, responsibility for the successful completion of these preparations is now entirely in the hands of a high-level triumvirate, all three of whose members are stalwarts of New Democracy: the new prime minister (who has wisely also assumed the Ministry of Cul-

ture portfolio), the mayor of Athens, and the head of the Greek Olympic Organizing Committee. (The last two, incidentally, are both women.) This fortuitous coincidence should in principle provide better coordination of all deadline-driven efforts notwithstanding the many S.O.S. signals emanating almost daily from International Olympic Committee inspectors. And if all does go smoothly in August, the Karamanlis government will undoubtedly improve its own—as well as Greece’s—standing in Washington.

That said, there remains, as noted above, one serious and pressing American concern over the change in government in Athens. This has to do with New Democracy’s newly installed foreign policy team, and especially with Papandreou’s successor at the Foreign Ministry, Petros Molyviatis, who is considered to be a “no-nonsense hardliner” on all issues involving Turkey. Might New Democracy unwisely decide to win cheap points with the Greek public—and its “brethren” on Cyprus—by “standing up” to the Turks beyond the call of reason or prudence—and in so doing scuttle the Annan Plan?

This would be a sad turn of events for both Cypriot communities as well as a myopic misuse of George Papandreou’s honorable legacy of constructive bridge building across the Aegean. He, for one, fully understood how important it was to induce, *sotto voce* and without theatrics, Turkish (and Turkish Cypriot) compliance to something approaching the Annan Plan—thus facilitating the even more crucial eventual accession of Turkey itself into the EU. Thankfully, so far at least, the new Greek prime minister has not shown any signs of deviating seriously from the official, post-1999 PASOK “line” on Turkey. And so, if Cyprus is peacefully reunited despite the current impasse, and a progressively more democratic Turkey—pursuing ever more friendly relations with Greece—is in due course welcomed into the “European Club,” the West

will owe George Papandreou a very big word of thanks for his tireless and enlightened efforts during the past five years. ●

Postscript—

As this magazine goes to press, the Cyprus reunification talks, which had been taking place in Bürgenstock (a small Swiss Alpine resort, near Lucerne), have reached a dead end: there is no formal agreement, by the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, to accept the revised Annan Plan. Instead, the U.N. secretary general has been forced to fall back on his last remaining option (short of simply allowing the Greek sector alone to accede to the EU on May 1): organizing simultaneous referenda in both Cypriot sectors on April 24 (four days later than originally contemplated) in the hope that the larger publics will approve that which their leaders have refused to do. Unfortunately, as explained above, even this now appears to be a long shot: but not because Rauf Denktaş did not even bother to show up at Bürgenstock, since the Turkish Cypriot side—very much under the guidance and influence of the Turkish prime minister—did, when push came to shove, accept the revised Annan Plan.

The real trouble, in the end, came from the Greek Cypriot side whose objections to the plan grew, if anything, ever louder during the course of the negotiations, and whose own leader, Tassos Papadopoulos, was not under undue pressure to accept a compromise solution from Costas Karamanlis, the new Greek prime minister. Moreover, it is by no means certain that the Greek Cypriot voters will go over Papadopoulos’ head on April 24: to the contrary, normally reliable pollsters predict that most Greek Cypriots are apt to vote “no.” (Erdogan is confident that a majority of Turkish Cypriots will vote “yes.”)

In brief, the principal concerns of the Greek side (Greek Cypriots outnumber Turkish Cypriots and Anatolian immigrants by a ratio of over three to one) have to do

with: (a) the amount of additional territory to be allocated to the Greek sector (according to the latest U.N. plan, the Turkish sector would still occupy 29 percent of the island); (b) the number of Greek Cypriot refugees from 1974 who would be permitted to return immediately to the reconfigured northern sector—far too small a percentage (19 percent) according to the Greek side; and (c) the number of Turkish troops (as many as 6,000 according to the Annan Plan) who would be allowed to remain in the Turkish sector, following reunification, for another seven years—again, too large a number and for far too long, according to the Greeks.

To be sure, the additional concessions Erdogan extracted from Annan on behalf of the Turkish Cypriots do run contrary to some of the basic EU laws by allowing for restrictions—over free movement and resettlement, as well as property claims, in the northern sector—to be imposed on the Greek side for a fairly lengthy “transition period.” But this was the only way of reas-

suring the Turkish Cypriots (while taking the wind out of Denktash’s sails) that they would not be suddenly “overrun” by their more populous and far wealthier southern neighbors.

In any event, as a recent editorial in the *Financial Times* argued most cogently, Cyprus “entering the EU on May 1 as a divided state... would be bad for both communities, and bad for the EU. The Turks will remain isolated, a disputed frontier will become the Union’s external border, and the Greek Cypriots will be unable to exploit the full advantages of membership.” Furthermore, “if Cyprus remains divided, attempts to reconcile the two mother countries will remain hostage to a separate dispute neither want nor need.” It remains to be seen whether, at the last minute, the Greek side might, after all, see the light and do what George Papandreu would have certainly opted for had he emerged as Greece’s prime minister on March 7.

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