

# THE AUSTRALIAN HELLENIC COUNCIL GOES TO CANBERRA

The Australian Hellenic Council is a peak advocacy group for issues that affect Hellenism and which impact on the wider Greek-Australian community. The Kytherian Association of Australia is a member of the council and on 25 November 2015 delegates from NSW, Canberra and Victoria went to Parliament House to lobby for and promote the Hellenic cause.

Buoyed by the successful launch in mid-October 2015 of the Parliamentary Friends of the Parthenon Group, the delegates started with a working breakfast with outgoing Greek Ambassador, Haris Dafaranos, during which the various concerns of the Greek-Australian community and the Greek State were discussed.

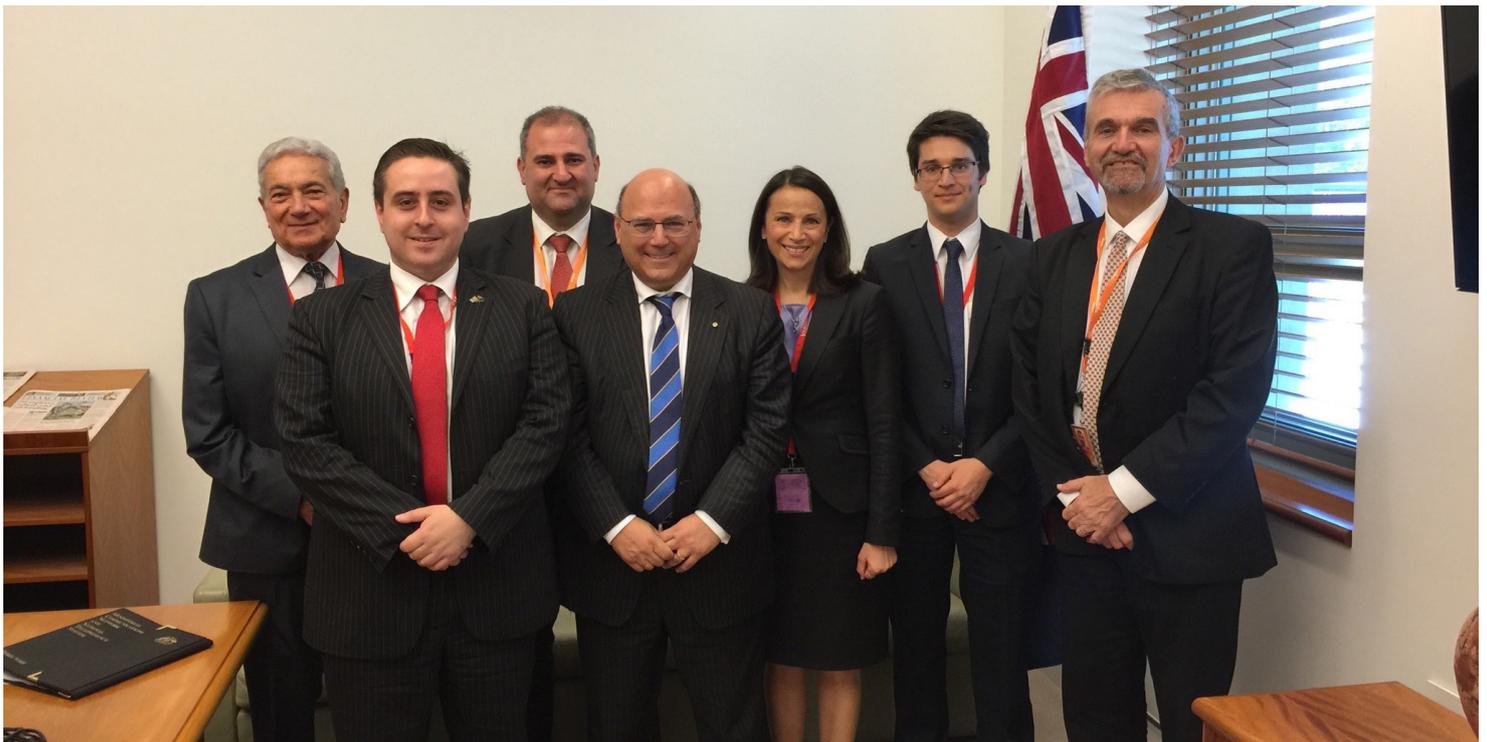
Inside Parliament, the delegation met with the Cabinet Secretary, Senator Arthur Sinodinos, Independent Senator Nick Xenophon, Labor shadow treasurer, Chris Bowen, MPs Maria Vamvakinou and Alannah McTiernan, and senior advisers from the Prime Minister's Office. Scheduled meetings with the Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, and her Labor counterpart, Tanya Plibersek, were understandably postponed because of diplomatic tensions following

the overnight downing of a Russian bomber by Turkish forces near the Turkish/Syrian border.

The main agenda item was to update MPs on the campaign for return of the Parthenon sculptures, not simply because they are inherently Greek in conception and execution, but because they are symbolic of the illegal removal of cultural property and artefacts that in many cases are intrinsically linked to the source country's own cultural identity. Australia as a middle power can practise niche diplomacy and given its historic ties through migration with both Great Britain and Greece, and shared wartime experiences, may be able to lend its voice to the growing international chorus supporting return of the sculptures.

Senator Sinodinos, himself a longtime supporter of the AHC and a stalwart in promoting Hellenism, reaffirmed his personal support for the campaign whilst Chris Bowen, in agreeing to join the friendship group, remarked that it was a "no brainer".

As Elly Symons, Vice President (Victoria) of the Australians for the Return of the Parthenon Sculptures commented:



*Left to right: Paul Levantis, Sophocles Kitharidis, George Vellis, Senator Arthur Sinodinos, Elly Symons, Raphael Symons, George Vardas*

*“It is very heartening to see such wide cross-party support within the Parliament for this cause. The Parthenon Sculptures are an issue that have galvanised opinion both here and overseas and in the finest of democratic traditions the Australian Parliament will hopefully voice its collective support for return.”*

The delegation also canvassed other issues, including the current Cyprus peace negotiations and the Macedonia naming dispute. It was also noted that 2016 will see the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the epic Battle of Crete where Australia and New Zealand soldiers forged an indelible bond with Greeks as they fought valiantly to try to stop the Nazi invaders. All MPs recognise the special links between Australia and Greece which will never fade.

Senator Sinodinos in particular stressed the government’s firm position on these matters and in turn the AHC acknowledged that Australian and Australians have been generally very supportive and understanding of Greece’s current economic problems.

It is also well-known that the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, is a self-confessed “unashamed Philhellene” and a classics scholar and it is therefore hoped that on a future overseas trip the Australian Prime Minister may well visit Greece to reaffirm the strong bonds that exist and which have also contributed to the success of the multicultural story in this country.

The meeting with two of the Prime Minister’s senior advisers assumed additional significance as they were



appraised of recent developments, including notably the delivery of a comprehensive legal opinion to the Greeks by the legal team led by Geoffrey Robertson QC. It is noteworthy that Australia has both fought for repatriation of indigenous human remains from British

institutions and museums and has itself returned cultural property (the most recent example being the Dancing Shiva statue to India), thereby confirming its credentials in cultural heritage.

*Independent Senator Nick Xenophon, a proud co-convenor of the Parliamentary Friends of the Parthenon, is always on the move but had time to confer at length and engage with AHC delegates.*

The meeting with Senator Xenophon, an enthusiastic supporter, focussed on some novel strategies that may



be adopted both here and overseas to ramp up the campaign for return of the Parthenon Sculptures, a theme that was also explored with Maria Vamvakinou, the principal convenor of the Friendship Group, and Alannah McTiernan.

It was also a pleasure to catch up with long-time Kytherian and Canberra stalwart, Paul Levantis, at the Hellenic Club and later in Parliament House.

It is great to see that Hellenism is alive and well within the portals of power in the Australian Parliament.

*George Vardas*

*Secretary, Australian Hellenic Council (NSW)*