

RECOGNITION OF THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Ministerial Statement by Senator the Hon Gareth Evans QC, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Leader of the Government in the Senate, 14 March 1994

Since my announcement on 15 February last that Australia would recognise the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), there has been a significant increase in community tension between Australian citizens and residents of, respectively, Greek and FYROM origins. Demonstrations have been held; many provocative and inflammatory things have been said (including by some politicians); several physical clashes have occurred; and a number of vicious attacks have been made - by persons so far unidentified - on churches, parliamentary offices and other property seen to be associated with one side or the other.

This is a serious and deeply unhappy development for a country which, rightly, prides itself as one of the world's great multicultural success stories. It is against the whole character and tradition of this country, 20 percent of whose people were born elsewhere, with half of these coming from non English-speaking nations. It is time for calmer and cooler heads to prevail. It is time for the words to be heeded of those community leaders on both sides who have been trying so hard in recent days to defuse the tensions. It is time for everyone, politicians included, to stop making inflammatory and provocative statements. It is time for extremists to stop distributing the kind of written propaganda that they know will outrage those with opposing views. And it is time, above all, for the acts of violence to stop. Attacks on churches and other property - whether they are perpetrated by members of either community, or by others seeking for ugly reasons of their own to ignite ethnic tensions - are contemptible, cowardly and utterly un-Australian.

It is not unreasonable to ask, and expect, that all those who make their permanent homes in this country have an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia first and foremost. The right to express one's own beliefs, and to practise one's culture and religion, involves a reciprocal

responsibility to accept the rights and values of others, and to accept the basic structures and principles of Australian society: the Constitution, the rule of law, tolerance and equality, parliamentary democracy, and freedom of speech and religion. Almost universal acceptance of these principles has for many years encouraged good sense to prevail, even during some very harrowing periods for Australians with links to particular countries overseas, and it is crucial that that commitment be maintained.

I am not asking anyone, from either community, to abandon long or deeply held views and convictions. But what I, and the Prime Minister, and Senator Bolkus, have been asking each side to do, before advancing those views in ways likely to further inflame tensions, is to look at the issue from the other side's point of view.

Thus we have been asking those whose origins lie in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to acknowledge frankly that their country occupies only part of the territory embraced by ancient Macedonia; and that, accordingly, the use of symbols like the Star of Vergina or (more provocatively still) the White Tower of Thessaloniki, or the use of names or the circulation of maps which in effect lay claim to the whole territory and cultural heritage of ancient Macedonia, are bound to be deeply offensive to any person of Greek origin who cares for the territorial and cultural heritage of his or her original homeland.

Equally, we have been asking those of Greek origin to recognise and acknowledge that Slav-Macedonians - those originating in the FYROM - do have legitimate claims to part of the territory and cultural heritage of ancient Macedonia, and are distressed by demands that they renounce use of the name "Macedonia" entirely. We have asked also that Greek Australians, and Greece itself, accept that the outstanding issues are ones that can only be resolved by peaceful negotiations, and not by confrontation and conflict. We have asked that they recognise the unfairness of FYROM being denied a recognised place in the community of nations when it does satisfy normal criteria for recognition. And we have asked that they acknowledge the unfairness of Slav-Macedonians living in Australia being denied normal consular services necessary to maintain human links with their original homeland.

It is not always easy to look at a problem through the eyes of your traditional opponent, but it is always right to try to do so. There is invariably a measure of right and justice on both sides, and the present dispute is no exception. Responsible community leaders from both sides have been prepared to acknowledge that - even if, regrettably, sometimes only privately. I hope very much for the sake of the future of community relations, and multiculturalism in this country, that that approach prevails in the days and weeks ahead.

The Australian Government's position has been from the outset, and remains, one of acknowledging that there are two sides to this argument, and trying to balance our policy accordingly. When passions run high, of course, as they have on this issue, the only reward for attempting balance is very often to be assaulted by both sides. But we have not been, and will not be, deterred from continuing to call the balance as we think it should be called. Our responsibility, as the Government of Australia, is to conduct our foreign policy in Australia's national interests, not those of any other country; just as it is our responsibility to govern for the benefit of all Australians, whatever their sex, race, or ethnic origin.

Let me explain the basic elements in the balance we have struck.

The Act of Recognition. Australia moved to recognise the FYROM only after 58 other countries had done so, including every other member of the European Union and the United States. Moreover, we acted only after the state had been admitted to the UN, with Greece itself one of the 63 co-sponsors, and Greece itself prepared to accept the name "FYROM" as appropriate for this purpose.

In strict Australian foreign policy terms, that recognition had already been too long delayed. Certainly the price of further delay would have been a significant loss of foreign policy consistency and credibility. Since 1988, Australia has recognised states, not governments, and has done so on the basis not of approval or disapproval, but of four essentially objective criteria: clearly defined territorial boundaries, a permanent population, an established government, and a capacity to conduct international relations. In the case of

the FYROM, these objective conditions had been satisfied more or less from the outset. Now we have formally announced recognition, delayed though that decision may have been, that recognition is irreversible as long as the state exists in its current form.

Australia, like many other countries, delayed recognition primarily because it was thought this would encourage early resolution of the outstanding matters in dispute between the FYROM and Greece. But by 15 February this year, so many countries had recognised the state - including effectively all those with any influence on the situation - that it was impossible to pretend that Australia's withholding of recognition could amount to any form of effective leverage.

Prime Minister Keating said on 3 March 1992 that Australia would not move to recognition until three further conditions - going to the issues of name, territorial aspirations and human rights - were satisfied. For all the reasons set out in detail in my statement of 15 February 1994 (which I do not repeat here, but the text of which I seek leave to incorporate at the conclusion of this statement) and repeated by me in the Senate on 28 February, and for all the same reasons stated by the Prime Minister in the House of Representatives on 21 February and 3 March 1994, we believe those conditions have been amply fulfilled.

On the question of territorial aspirations, we believe that argument based on the language of the FYROM Constitution should reasonably have been put fully to rest by the amendment formally adopted in 1992, which proclaimed that the country "has no territorial pretensions towards any neighbouring states". But to the extent that there are some continuing Greek concerns based on references in the Preamble to forebears of the present state, and references in Article 49 to dealings with people of FYROM-origin living outside the state, the Australian Government does believe it would be helpful for the FYROM Government to address these concerns. Here as elsewhere, suspicions which might otherwise have been muted have been fuelled by the continued proliferation of offensive irredentist propaganda, especially maps of "Greater Macedonia", and the most helpful step of all would be for the spreading of that propaganda to be curbed.

The Name Issue. Most of the criticism of the Australian Government has focused on our moving to recognition in circumstances where the name issue has manifestly not been resolved to Greece's current satisfaction. But it needs to be remembered what the precise terms of the commitment made by the Prime Minister were: that Australia would not proceed to recognition without "the use of the word 'Macedonia' being settled in a way that does not cause further tension with Greece". When Greece itself has been prepared to accept the name 'FYROM', at least for the purposes of admission to the United Nations, and when some 46 other countries had recognised the state using this name and without incurring more than purely formal expressions of displeasure from Athens, it was difficult to believe, in our judgment, that our act of recognition would "cause further tension" with Greece. I came away from my own Ministerial consultations in Athens in January reinforced in that belief, and nothing that has happened since has given me grounds to change it.

It is a logical consequence of recognising the state under the temporary name of the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" or "FYROM" that Australian Government departments and agencies should - until present circumstances change - use that name for the state, and we will so direct them. A slightly more difficult and sensitive problem arises when it comes to identifying an appropriate name for people who live in, or originate from, the FYROM. When the Australian Government does not accept the name "Republic of Macedonia" as an appropriate one for the country itself, it is simply not appropriate to refer to its people as "Macedonians", even though many of them would certainly much prefer this terminology. We propose, accordingly, that Australian Government departments and agencies use the description "Slav-Macedonians" when referring to people who live in, or originate from, the FYROM. "Slav-Macedonians" is in quite common descriptive usage, and should not have any offensive connotations - other than for those to whom any qualification of "Macedonian" is unacceptable. It is the case that some FYROM people - including the Albanian minority - are of non-Slavic ethnic origin, but "Slav" in the present context should be taken as not so much an ethnic reference, but as shorthand for the country's name, the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

It is not proposed that any legislation be enacted to compel any particular usage, by government departments and agencies or anyone else. How ordinary members of the respective communities choose to describe themselves, and in particular how they choose to describe their ethnicity, in the Census or anywhere else, will remain up to those individuals and communities themselves. We recognise, for example, that there are Australian citizens of Greek geographic origin, but not of Greek ethnic background, who may choose to identify themselves as Macedonians. But in relation to those departments and agencies which the Government has a capacity to direct, directions will be given to refer, for the time being, to the country as "the FYROM", and to people living in or originating from it as "Slav-Macedonians". In relation to the ABC and SBS, and other statutory authorities which the Government has little or no capacity to direct, we can only express the hope that, in the interests of balanced community relations, they will choose to apply the same guidelines. I emphasise that all these questions of nomenclature will, of course, have to be revisited when the name issue is finally resolved, as we all hope it soon will be, in negotiations between the FYROM and Greece.

Opening of Consulate. As I have indicated, one of the considerations troubling the Government about our non-recognition of FYROM was that this made impossible the opening of a FYROM Consulate in Australia, and this denial of access to consular services was causing real inconvenience, and occasionally real hardship, to those 75,000 Australians of FYROM origin who wanted to maintain direct human links with their original homeland. Recognition was necessary to clear the way for consular relations to be established.

We have, however, made it clear - both in my 15 February statement and in subsequent communications to Skopje - that the opening of a FYROM Consulate in Australia can only be contemplated if certain conditions are satisfied, viz. that it describe itself appropriately (as the Consulate of the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", not as the "Republic of Macedonia") and that no contentious flag or other symbol be displayed pending the final resolution of outstanding issues. The imposition of

conditions of this kind - which would enable the Consulate to operate without any practical difficulty, but not in a way which generated new flashpoints for reaction - is not inconsistent with international law governing consular practice. For the moment, however, the FYROM side has indicated that it has real difficulties in meeting the conditions we have set. Until it overcomes those difficulties, and meets the stated conditions, the matter can be taken no further.

Diplomatic Relations. Entering into diplomatic relations is a distinct further step that remains to be taken between Australia and the FYROM. Just as one country can recognise another without establishing any consular relations, so too can recognition and consular relations occur, but without formal diplomatic relations. Australia has no present intention to enter into diplomatic relations with FYROM: although (as made clear in my statement on 15 February) we have indicated our willingness to enter into discussions about such relations, it would be premature to address this issue until the consular question is resolved.

International Activity. It is in everyone's interests that the matters which continue to be disputed between Greece and the FYROM be resolved as soon as possible, and by peaceful negotiation. Australia's capacity to influence that process is necessarily limited, but we remain ready to assist in any way we can. Some two years ago we actively promoted, between the parties and in the United Nations, the idea that recognition of the FYROM proceed on the basis of a temporary formula for the name, leaving final resolution of the substantive issue for consideration at a later date: some elements of that proposal are evident in the acceptance by the international community of "FYROM" as a temporary name. We remain in regular contact with the UN mediator, Cyrus Vance, and have made clear to him, and to Athens and Skopje, Australia's willingness to make any diplomatic contribution that would help their negotiation efforts. The fact that we (to my knowledge alone among the international community) have set such stringent conditions on the establishment of a Consulate, is certainly seen in a number of quarters as

applying a useful diplomatic discipline.

We have made it very clear in our public statements that we believe there is more the FYROM Government can do to advance the rapid peaceful settlement of this issue. The claim to the Star of Vergina as a national symbol is untenable and should be dropped. Some compromise should be accepted on the name issue: there are many potential formulae which would retain some reference to "Macedonia" without appropriating that name in its entirety. Action should be taken to halt the distribution, to the extent this is within the FYROM Government's power, of offensive irredentist propaganda. Those provisions of the FYROM Constitution which continue to cause concern in Greece should be addressed again. While recognising all President Gligorov's parliamentary difficulties, at the very least it would be extremely helpful if the Government in Skopje were to announce, now, its intention to take steps to change the flag - and to make agreed Constitutional amendments on the name and related issues - as soon as the necessary two-thirds parliamentary majority was obtainable.

The Greek side has its own important contribution to make to the peaceful settlement of this dispute. The blockade it is presently applying on the movement of goods into the FYROM is untenable and unsustainable, and should be lifted immediately. The Government of Greece should expressly indicate its willingness to negotiate a compromise outcome on the name issue - one which includes some reference, albeit qualified by one or more other words, to "Macedonia". And it should indicate its willingness to enter into serious and constructive negotiations on these and other outstanding issues immediately and without preconditions.

We in the Australian Government will continue to take every opportunity we can to urge both sides immediately down this path of reasoned, moderate discussion.

Community Relations Activity. We have, as a Government, exactly the same commitment when it comes to the domestic discussion of this issue. My colleague Senator Bolkus, Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, has

been giving some close consideration to how the community relations resources of this country might be further mobilised, in a systematic and focused way, to try and reduce some of the tensions which are currently evident. He is in the process of developing some community relations initiatives aimed generally at getting a better understanding on all sides of the issues and principles involved, and in particular at getting the media and the relevant communities together to discuss the portrayal of the respective cultures and the scope for better appreciation of them. The Government will be discussing with community representatives - at both official and ministerial level - how these and other possible initiatives might be best progressed, and Senator Bolkus will make a further statement on these matters in due course.

At the end of the day, however, governments can only do so much on these issues. Citizens and residents of this country have a right to expect that governments will act in a balanced, thoughtful, and constructive way on matters which affect their interests, and touch their emotions. But governments, equally, have a right to expect that members of the wider community will themselves act in a way which looks to the larger interests of Australia, maintains its cohesion, and does not undermine its values of tolerance, decency, mutual respect and, above all else, non-violence.

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