

FIFTH JUNE 2008: A TURNING- POINT IN ANGLO-CYPRIOIOT RELATIONS?

The visit of President Christofias to London and the meeting with the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has resulted in the signing of a 'Memorandum of Understanding' that has been greeted with satisfaction by some but at the same time has been criticised or looked at cautiously and apprehensively by others.

This agreement of 5th June 2008 has raised the important issue as to whether this visit and the Memorandum of Understanding have really opened the way for a new era in Anglo-Cypriot relations.

Historically there is a lot that connects Cyprus with Britain. Cypriots probably learn, while still at school, of the "visit" of Richard the Lionheart to Cyprus in 1191 and the capture of the island. Cypriots were not really participants in the events on this occasion and the distance in time has helped to disconnect this event from any negative connotations. Some centuries later, in 1878, they responded with relief at the news that their country was taken over by the British. Tired of three hundred and eight years of Ottoman domination they were relieved that they were taken over by a more "civilised, Christian" nation.

Expectations as to a better future were high. However, this period of euphoria did not last long since soon nationalism began to grow amongst the Greek Cypriots who would be asking for self-determination and union of the island with Greece. This was to inaugurate a long period of conflict between the Greek Cypriots and the British that would climax in the armed struggle of the Greek Cypriots against British colonial rule in the years 1955-59. The 'acts of terrorism', the arrest and execution of EOKA fighters created ill-feelings on both sides. Many Greek Cypriots have come to view the British as their permanent and consistent enemies who are always there to frustrate

their national aspirations and support the Turks (the Turkish Cypriots or Turkey depending on what circumstances dictate.)

This rather uncomfortable relationship has continued through the Zurich-London Agreements in 1960 and independence, to the events of 1963-4 and 1974 and the attempts to find a solution that climaxed in the Annan Plan. The Plan was rejected by the vast majority of the Greek Cypriots, something which could not have pleased its real creator Lord Hannay. The post-referendum period saw a steady deterioration in Anglo-Cypriot relations that manifested itself in the policy pursued by Britain in the European Union where they appeared to be supporting the Turkish-Cypriots and Turkey on every occasion. Diplomatic incidents like the planned visit of Foreign Secretary Jack Straw produced further strain in relations and confirmed in the minds of most Greek-Cypriots, British hostility towards them and bias in favour of the Turks.

British politicians and successive British governments view things differently. They state Britain's consistent support for a just and viable solution to the Cyprus problem and their commitment to peace and stability in the area that would promote the welfare of all the inhabitants of the island of Cyprus.

These are the perceptions that prevail. It is not easy for anyone to change them over a short period of time but there is sufficient groundwork on which to build a better relationship. The Cypriots have been affected by the legacy of British colonial rule. The majority speak English and many have friends or relatives in the Greek-Cypriot community that live in Britain. The largest percentage of tourists are British and traditionally they have been well received. A substantial number of young Cypriots graduate from British Universities every year. There are many other things that could be pointed out as positive elements in Anglo-Cypriot relations at grass-root level.

Now is the time to capitalise on the results of the meeting of Christofias and Brown and place Anglo-Cypriot relations on a new footing based on mutual understanding and respect.

Britain is a key player in any attempt at a solution of the Cyprus problem and a new perception that is acting as an 'honest broker' will certainly go a long way toward facilitating the peace-making process.