

Speech made by Senator Ferguson

Senator FERGUSON (South Australia) (7:33 PM) — Mr President, as you are well aware, I rarely speak on adjournment, but tonight I have been moved to speak because of a series of events that have taken place this week. In particular, I want to say to the Senate that this year is the 40th anniversary of the formal Agreement between the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia and the Government of the Republic of Turkey concerning the Residence and Employment of Turkish Citizens in Australia. The aim is to celebrate and commend the achievements of the Turkish community here in the Commonwealth of Australia that has been created as a result of this agreement in the 40 years since its implementation.

I was most concerned to receive a visit from the Turkish ambassador earlier this week in which he expressed his deep concern about a speech that was made by the Hon. Michael Atkinson, the Attorney-General, Minister for Justice and Minister for Multicultural Affairs in the Labor government in South Australia. I had not thought that I would be surprised by anything that the South Australian Attorney-General said in relation to the Turkish community, particularly as most state parliaments do not have a role in foreign affairs in the same way that the federal parliament does.

I have had the privilege of visiting Gallipoli and being a guest of the Turkish government. I will concede that at the outset, I have had the privilege of going to Gallipoli, where our two countries were once enemies. Since that time, the Commonwealth of Australia and the Republic of Turkey have established a unique relationship and a bond forged in the blood of young men from both our nations. This uniqueness, at the core of the deep-rooted relations between our two countries, gained even more momentum following the unforgettable reconciliatory remarks of the founder of the modern Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, to the mothers of the fallen Anzac soldiers. He said:

You, the mothers who sent their sons from far away countries, wipe away your tears. Your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land, they have become our sons as well.

There is no statue or plaque more moving than the one at Ari Burnu, on the beach at Gallipoli. The words of Ataturk are there for all Australians and others to read.

So you can imagine how surprised I was to be told this week by the Turkish ambassador that Michael Atkinson, the South Australian Attorney-General, in a speech to the Greek association in South Australia—and the Pontians in particular—made the following statement. I cannot believe that a minister would say this. He made reference to:

The nationalist Turks led by Mustafa Kemal's forces and their frenzied followers began to persecute them through beatings, murder, forced marches and labour, theft of their properties and livelihood, rape, torture and deportations.

The Turkish ambassador found that most offensive, and a wholly unjustified caricature of the truth. It can only cause deep ill-feeling, not the least since Mustafa Kemal was the leader of a nation that was, at that time, fighting for its survival against an invasion from Greece—a point that the Attorney-General in South Australia seemed to overlook.

We can all try to rewrite history. There were atrocities in the past. We are talking about events that took place almost 100 years ago. There are always debatable issues. We have the situation with the Armenians, with the Pontian Greeks and with a range of other people who currently are trying to put today's moral judgment on events that took place 100 years ago. These events cannot be accurately depicted. I have no doubt that there were atrocities on both sides. But those of us today find it very difficult to pass judgment—we should not be passing judgment when we do not know the full facts.

The Turkish nation is now a friendly power. Members of the Turkish community have integrated into Australian society and become wonderful Australians. To be reminded of events that took place in history that long ago, and a biased interpretation if I may say so, is certainly not warranted. I acknowledge along with a lot of others the unique relationship that exists between Australia and Turkey—a bond that has been highlighted by the commitment of both our nations to the rights and liberties of our citizens and to the pursuit of a just world, which was highlighted in a statement of Kamel Ataturk: 'Peace at home; peace in the world.' I commend the Republic of Turkey's commitment to democracy, to the rule of law, and—particularly in the region in which it lives—to secularism, which is something that is quite

On the 18th March, 2009, one Senator Alan Ferguson, a Liberal Senator from South Australia, uttered manure in the Federal Parliament, giving a ridiculous interpretation of history, and berating the Honourable Michael Atkinson, Minister for Justice in South Australia. Why? Because Minister Atkinson had the decency and fortitude to pay tribute to the 353,000 Pontic Hellenes, victims of the NeoTurk movement, lead by Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, that resulted in the Christian Genocide in the early part of the previous century. Senator Ferguson was obviously influenced by a junket that the Turkish (military junta) Government organised for him. The President of the Federation of Pontian Associations of Australia, Harry Tavlaridis, has written to this historically dyslexic Senator expressing the Federation's grave disappointment at his anathema.

unique in that part of the world.

On this, the 40th anniversary of the formal Agreement between the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia and the Government of the Republic of Turkey concerning the Residence and Employment of Turkish Citizens in Australia, we pledge our friendship with, our commitment to and our enduring support of the people of Turkey as we celebrate this important landmark together. In relation to the Attorney-General in South Australia—and I am not saying this personally; I am saying it because I think it was a very ill-judged statement to make. It was obviously made in the context of being at a Greek function where it was suitable for him to make these remarks. But such a speech coming from a minister in a state government is very damaging to the otherwise excellent relations between our two countries. I would contrast that with the conciliatory words to the mothers of fallen Anzacs at Gallipoli of the great statesman and founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. I commend the Senate to take note of the statement that was made by the minister but I also commend to the Senate that in fact we reaffirm our commitment to the wonderful friendship that exists between our two countries. I fully understand the concern expressed by the Turkish ambassador who, as well as being a wonderful representative of his country in Australia over the past three years, I count as a personal friend.

Reply letter to the Senator Ferguson by the President of the Federation of Pontion Associations of Australia

Dear Senator Ferguson

It is disappointing that you have chosen to take a political stand based on a personal relationship and a lack of historical understanding. You commit the very sin you are criticising. I think you will by now have understood the folly of your words, but it is too late.

I suggest you have a further discussion with your friend the Turkish Ambassador and ask him why is it that though you value this 'friendship' so highly and respectfully, he however is quite content to send you into the abyss with misinformation, half-truths and outright lies? You likely know now that the Attorney-General, Hon Michael Atkinson MP, was not making a simple "speech to the Greek association in South Australia" (?) but unveiling the first plaque in Australia, one of many around the world, to commemorate the victims and survivors of the events of 1914-1923. Why did you hesitate to mention this fact to the Senate? Did you know? Did you research? Just a little would have shown how wrong and one sided your reaction really was.

The plaque was installed by the Pontian Brotherhood of South Australia on its 50th anniversary. During that time I was its President and I proudly led my members to gather there on that day to mourn, cry for and honour our grandparents. Yes, our grandparents. That's how close to us, to our generation, these events are. You make them sound like a millennium ago, but it was only yesterday when we heard our grandparents singing a melancholy dirge, mourning lost

children who died on the marches, parents, siblings, strangers who became family. Just as Australia did not forget the Anzacs in a single generation, neither will we forget our families.

My speech on that day began "We are gathered here today. Think on that. We are gathered. That is more than our forefathers could have dreamed of all those years ago, facing nightmare after nightmare." You will say that you don't ask us to forget but that judgement in modern times with modern morals cannot be passed on old events. This country was built from people who stole as little as a loaf of bread and yes we don't apply the same standards today. But when one pays the ultimate price with his life, Mr Ferguson those standards haven't budged one inch. I defy you to name anyone that can state the Pontian, Armenian and Assyrian genocide was acceptable back then. Germany did not and does not feel that way regarding the Jews. What about Japan and their war crimes? England was condemned for losing sight of their human rights standards when dealing with the IRA in the 1970s. What does Turkey fear now? Perhaps an inward turning scrutiny is not something this country can sustain. It is clear Turkey is not ready to be the European it purports.

Senator, you go on to say that "we should not be passing judgement til we know the full facts." Perhaps you should have practised what you preached because you showed yourself to be very biased in your information gathering. There are eyewitness reports available from any number of Western sources of

the day condemning the events of those years. They applied judgement and morals of the day to their condemnation of Ottoman Turkish actions.

In light of the resolution passed by the International Association of Genocide Scholars, how is it possible you would risk political embarrassment to support a vague and biased notion of one person, friend or no? The Attorney General carried out his own research, as I'm sure did the department that supports him and is in no way garnering votes. He has certainly achieved a respected status for his boldness, courage and honour in supporting a cause that is beset on many sides from funded lobby groups from Turkey.

As you can imagine, the South Australian Migration Museum has its own regulations for the wording of the plaques they display on their wall and carries out rigorous research before approving a plaque. You feel that months of their planning was wasted? Wrong? You and your ambassador could have done better? That is insulting to the professionalism and independence of the staff of the Museum and they deserve your apology for the insinuation in your remarks.

You have also singlehandedly offended the over one million Greek-born and Greek-descent Australians with your biased siding with one personal friend and your guest trip to Turkey. Don't you care about Australia's relationship with Greece? Don't misunderstand; I have many Turkish friends and work colleagues, some of whom joined us on our

50th year anniversary dance. This doesn't have anything to do with current day relationships, but to remember those who died and suffered under the Ottoman Empire. Like many Pontians in the safety of countries like Australia I don't need to research what happened during those events. My grandparents told me the facts. I heard and felt their pain. Matter of fact I cried writing this letter to you, their stories came flooding back. In Turkey, there are any number of reports from human rights activists of the oppression of freedom of speech and incarceration of journalists who speak out about these very events. Others of minority groups are not allowed to practise their cultures and languages openly and hide in fear. You need to do your research.

So Mr Ferguson, you owe the Australian public an apology, especially those of Greek-descent, to Pontians all over the world, to my grandparents and most importantly those 353,000 Pontians who lost their lives during the genocide.

I write to you as the President of the Pontian Brotherhood of South Australia of the time, as the current President of the Federation of 12 Pontian Associations in Australia, as a Vice President of the Confederation of Greek Pontians, as a member who served this great country in the Australian Defence Force and as an Australian of Pontian descent.

It is time for you to show us that you have some real "ticker" and do what's right.

Regards
President: Harry Tavlaridis