

Nike Award Speech

by Patricia Drivas

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

Tonight Australian Hellenic Council delegates and members of Melbourne's Hellenic community have assembled to honour an Australian politician who has an outstanding record of service to multiculturalism as well as to the Australian Hellenic community.

Tonight's guest of honour is The Honourable Michael Atkinson MP, Member for Croydon, Attorney-General and Minister for Multicultural Affairs of South Australia.

By way of introduction, Michael John Atkinson is like so many of us, the son of immigrants, in his case Irish Anglicans who arrived in Australia in 1949. A devoted family man, he is married to Joan and together they have four children.

Michael Atkinson believes in Christian values and has a keen interest in world history. Indeed, this personal passion for history led to this evening's presentation.

Raised in Adelaide, Mr Atkinson studied at the Australian National University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts with Honours (majoring in History) and a Bachelor of Laws. His professional life has seen him in the role of journalist with the *The Adelaide Advertiser* newspaper as well as serving as an Advisor to a Federal Minister. First elected to the South Australian Parliament in 1989, he was a Shadow Minister before Labor won the 2002 state elections.

He enjoys being the member for Croydon and is often seen by his constituents riding around the electorate on his bicycle. A religious man, he is actively involved with his local parish of St Aidan's. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he would be the only politician who knows almost every person's first name in his electorate.

In the state Government of South Australia, Michael Atkinson is serving as Attorney General, Minister for Justice, Minister for Veteran Affairs and Minister for Multicultural Affairs.

Michael Atkinson is a man with high ethical standards in law and order and is considered pedantic with ministerial matters. He has a high profile

in the South Australian government and is deeply trusted by the Premier, and fellow NIKE Award recipient, the Honourable Mike Rann. One colleague has said of Mr Atkinson that "He always does things for what he believes are the correct reasons". The Aus-

trality, regularly attending major religious and national day functions he is also a strong supporter of the annual *Odyssey Greek Film Festival*, and the *Adelaide Festival*.

In December 2003 he visited Greece and Cyprus. While in Thessalonike, the capital city



tralian Hellenic Council honours Michael Atkinson this evening not only for what he has done, but for the reasons he did.

During his political career he has been involved in passing controversial and important bills in parliament ranging from the crackdown on bike gangs to the banning of bongs.

A Cabinet colleague Tom Koutsantonis, who has known Michael Atkinson for over eighteen years, said: "The Attorney General, next to the Premier, has the best political mind in the state. He is not your normal Attorney General, and he does not tow the line with judges and lawyers".

Michael Atkinson is a deep thinker, an intellectual; his parliamentary colleagues often refer to him as the "mentor" as he shows a keen interest in his younger colleagues.

Michael Atkinson is also passionate about his Multicultural Affairs portfolio. Every year he attends numerous club and organisation functions, and often travels abroad striving for a better understanding of the various diverse cultural groups. One of his most recent visits was to Thessalonike, often referred to as "the Bride of the North" of Greece, where he spoke at an event commemorating the Genocide of the Pontian Greeks between 1916 and 1923.

As is evident here this evening, Mr Atkinson enjoys a strong relationship with his Australian Hellenic con-

of Greece's northern province of Macedonia, he attended the World Council of Hellenes Abroad conference. There he met with Hellenic Government Ministers and local government representatives.

Upon his return, in his report to the South Australian Parliament, Mr. Atkinson stated the following: "In 1974 Turkey invaded Cyprus and expelled the majority of the Greek population from the fertile and most economically productive northern third of the island. Turkish armed forces have continued to occupy this territory since it is now administered by an illegal regime without international recognition".

The report continues. "Cyprus first came to the political fore in South Australia when former Premier Hon. Don Dunstan MP went to Cyprus in 1957 when Cyprus was in turmoil fighting against the British administration. Don Dunstan upon his return helped negotiate the release of Archbishop Makarios".

The report says "This custom of interest in Cyprus has continued in the state and is a bipartisan policy to call an end to the Turkish occupation and withdrawal of the Turkish forces, the repatriation of Turkish settlers and the return of refugees to their ancestral lands".

As Attorney-General, Michael Atkinson oversaw the financial support provided to South Australian Cypriots in

order for them to pursue the return of their properties in the Turkish-occupied part of Cyprus through the European Court of Human Rights. While the sums of money concerned were not large, the support shown by the Government and by the man the Australian Hellenic Council honours this evening brought renewed hope for justice for Cyprus.

It is not surprising therefore that in March and April this year, the two chambers of the Parliament of South Australia adopted a resolution recognising the genocide committed against the indigenous Christian population in Anatolia by Turkish nationalists between 1915 and 1923.

In his capacity as Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Mr Atkinson personally moved the resolution in the Legislative Assembly. The motion reads:

That, whereas the genocide by the Ottoman state between 1915-1923 of Armenians, Hellenes, Syrian and other minorities in Asia Minor is one of the greatest crimes against humanity, the people of South Australia and this House –

(a) join the members of the Armenian-Australian, Pontian Greek-Australian and Syrian-Australian communities in honouring the memory of the innocent men, women and children who fell victim to the first modern genocide;

(b) condemns the genocide of the Armenians, Pontian

Greeks, Syrian Orthodox and other Christian minorities, and all other acts of genocide as the ultimate act of racial, religious and cultural intolerance;

(c) recognises the importance of remembering and learning from such dark chapters in human history to ensure that such crimes against humanity are not allowed to be repeated;

(d) condemns and prevents all attempts to use the passage of time to deny or distort the historical truth of the genocide of the Armenians and other acts of genocide committed during this century;

(e) acknowledges the significant humanitarian contribution made by the people of South Australia to the victims and survivors of the Armenian Genocide and the Pontian Genocide;

The motion concluded with a call for the Federal Parliament to also officially condemn genocide of the indigenous Hellenic, Armenian and Assyrian Christians of Anatolia.

As expected, the resolution triggered a fierce reaction from the Turkish Embassy in Canberra. The Attorney-General's position has not changed. According to a recent profile of Michael Atkinson in *The Australian*, anyone who disputes the historical fact that the Hellenic, Armenian and Assyrian Genocides occurred "was practising a form of 'Holocaust denial'". The same profile noted that Michael Atkinson "always does things for what he believes are the correct reasons".

This is the man the Australian Hellenic Council honours tonight with the presentation of the 2009 NIKE AWARD. A man of honour, a man of principle, a man of justice.

Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. Michael John Atkinson please stand and give him the welcome he deserves.