

Hellenes abroad join forces for the inclusion of Greek language

The emerging risk of a possible exception of the Greek language from the new national schools' curriculum currently being developed by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) resulted in collective mobilisation of the Greek Diaspora.

Politicians, academics, notable community members of the Hellenic Diaspora, and all Hellenes abroad have joined forces for the inclusion of our language in the new national schools' curriculum, which is currently under development and also maintain the status of the Greek language as a "priority language"

A campaign has been launched by newspaper "Neos Kosmos" for the collection of signatures which will be sent to the Minister of Education and will be submitted to the Parliament by Politicians of Greek Origins.

The following article has been published on the online edition of "Neos Kosmos" on March 11th written by Federal Member for the Victorian electorate of Calwell and a former Modern Greek secondary teacher, Maria Vamvakinou.



Now is the time to lobby for modern Greek Modern Greek has a formidable infrastructure and policy-makers must recognise this.

Maria Vamvakinou, MP

The release of the Federal Government's National Curriculum proposal and the review of which priority languages to include in the National Curriculum presents a historic window of opportunity to lobby for the teaching of the Modern Greek Language in Australia.

It's incumbent on us all to make our voices heard. How many times have you heard the statement, 'you have to hand it

to the Greeks, they push hard to maintain their Greek language skills, more so than any other community'?

I often refer to the Greek Communities remarkable efforts in relation to preserving Greek language and culture when addressing parliament.

I feel fortunate to be one of those Australians who are bilingual. This has been an asset to me and I want to see other young Australians, no matter what their background, have the same opportunity.

I hope my children feel the same, if they don't just yet, they will in time, just like me.

My generation studied the Greek language in afternoon schools. I attended primary and middle school classes at St John's Greek Orthodox Church, and in my senior years I attended classes at University High and Princes Hill High Schools.

By the mid to late '70s, Greek language was being taught at a large number of venues run by the Orthodox Church, the Greek Community, Saturday School of Modern Languages and private providers. The first Greek bilingual day school was established in the late '70s.

The Greek language was not only spoken extensively at home, but it was taught at Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Levels with Post Graduate courses available.

Modern Greek language was also available as a Method in the Melbourne University's Post Graduate Diploma of Education Course.

Where we had once relied on people with some training in Greece to teach in our afternoon schools, we were now training our own Australian Greek Graduates to teach the next generations.

Over the years of course we have benefited, and continue to benefit, from teachers who are seconded to Australian Greek language Schools from the Greek Education Department.

My experiences of formal Greek language learning began in 1964 and ended in 1980. In 1982 I took up my teaching post at Thornbury High School, as a Modern Greek language teacher. Of course, the teaching of Modern Greek relied heavily on material and textbooks initially supplied by the Greek Government.

Eventually as we built our own local capacity, we began to produce Greek language books and teaching materials.

The Greek Australian community was very much in the business of maintaining its language capacity as well as its culture. Over the past 60 years, we have adjusted our teaching approach in order to suit the learning capacity and the realities of each generation. My experience, as a first generation Greek Australian in learning the Greek language is different to that of my children.

The overall aim for teaching Modern Greek remains the same however, and is twofold. One, retention of the Greek language for the purpose of maintaining an active Greek cultural and linguistic inheritance for those Aus-

tralian of Greek descent and two, teaching Greek language and culture to Australians who are of non-Greek descent.

I want my children to learn Greek because it will help retain active links to their Greek inheritance. I also believe in the immense educational advantage of speaking a second, or third or fourth language.

The effects of multiple language learning on the brain's learning capacity are well documented, but so too is the importance of multilingual education on a generation of people who will work and live in a global community.

Our education system needs to be better prepared for the challenges ahead. Modern Greek has a formidable infrastructure and policy makers must recognise this.

There are over a hundred languages spoken in Australia and Modern Greek is one of the top five. In over 60 years we have established thousands of afternoon schools, many bilingual day schools and tertiary courses.

We have a Greek speaking capacity of hundreds of thousands of people in this country alone.

The significance of the Greek Language to science, medicine, classics and philosophy cannot be underestimated. Nor can the historical support of the Orthodox Church, the Greek Communities, generations of Greek Australians and the Greek Government.

This infrastructure makes for a compelling case about the relevance and viability of Modern Greek in the National Languages Curriculum.

We have a unique opportunity, in framing the National Languages Policy, to build on and to strengthen this country's approach to language learning.

We must establish a viable and comprehensive national languages policy that will give Australia the best chance yet to grow and develop a serious and competent multilingual capability.

We need to harness the language capability we already have by striking the right balance between the so called economic languages and the community languages.

Success will be measured on the ability of our education system to produce genuinely multilingual Australians, fluent and conversant in languages other than English.

(Sources: ana, Neos Kosmos)

Maria Vamvakinou Profile

Maria Vamvakinou, the Federal Member for Calwell, is the first Greek-born woman to be elected to the Parliament of Australia. Born on the small Greek island of Lefkada in 1959, Maria migrated by boat to Australia with her parents in 1963 who, like many post-war European families, were looking for a better life and greater opportunities. Maria grew up and was educated in Melbourne's Northern suburbs and, as the child of working class migrant parents, Maria shares a lot with many local residents and families.

The Federal seat of Calwell, which is situated in Melbourne's North-West, is a culturally diverse community, with the largest Muslim community in Victoria, and the third largest in Australia.

Maria was educated at Brunswick South Primary School and Princes Hill High School. Maria went on to attend the University of Melbourne where she obtained a Bachelor of Arts, with a major in Modern Greek and Political Science. Maria also holds a Diploma of Education from the University of Melbourne.

Maria is a trained secondary school teacher and spent most of her time as a teacher at Thornbury High School. Prior to entering Parliament, Maria worked for a number of Parliamentarians and Senators.

Maria is married to Dr. Michalis Michael and has two children, Stavros and Stella.

Maria has had extensive involvement in her local community and prior to entering Parliament, Maria was, amongst many other things, a Councillor on the Northcote City Council, as well as a volunteer radio journalist for 3ZZZ radio.

Maria is Chair of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation, and is also a member of the following parliamentary Committees:

- Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
- Standing Committee on Petitions