

Cyprus conflict defies ready solution

Interview with "The Australian"

DEMETRIS Christofias, the president of Cyprus, is in every sense an original, if not an exotic, among international statesmen. He is the only national leader in the European Union who is a communist. He is a close friend and supporter of Israel, as indeed he is of Russia.

He is worried about the burden of asylum-seekers on his native land, and thinks it's unsustainable. He is hugely critical of American foreign policy, but his chief antagonist is Turkey.

He is also a very good friend of former Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer, the UN Secretary-General's special adviser on Cyprus, and full of praise for Australia generally. With about 100,000 Cypriot-Australians, we are host to the largest population, after Britain, of the vast Cypriot diaspora.

What seems to be this bewildering list of contradictions in the Christofias political personality is really just a reflection of the contradictory pressures and exigencies of Cyprus's own national situation.

A former British colony, Cyprus's population is divided between ethnic Greeks and ethnic Turks. Since 1974, about 37 per cent of its territory has

been controlled by a separatist state calling itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognised only by Turkey, which has some 40,000 troops stationed there.

This may seem an obscure ethnic conflict, but it has king-size strategic consequences. Turkey wants to join the European Union. That requires unanimous agreement from all the EU members. It is inconceivable that Greece or Cyprus, both EU members, would ever agree to Turkey's membership while it is in effect an occupying power in northern Cyprus.

I caught up with the charming Christofias for his only extended interview during a visit to Australia. After elected president in 2008, Christofias made reunification his highest priority; he re-engaged the UN and began meeting with the leaders of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. He remains ambitious that a reunification settlement can be reached before the end of 2012.

"The state of Cyprus will be a bizonal, bicameral, federal state with political equality of the two communities," he says.

"That does not mean numerical e-



quality, but effective participation of the two communities in the nation's institutions. It will have a single, indivisible sovereignty, a single citizenship and a single international personality."

In 2008, the two sides met under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General and Downer. Observers say that the broad outlines of an agreement are there, but the main sticking points are where to put the border, what happens to the properties of Greek Cypriots in northern Cyprus which were seized after 1974, and to what Christofias describes as "Turkish settlers", that is, mainland Turks who have settled in the north since 1974.

Christofias remains ambitious for a solution, but is soberly realistic: "It's sad to say we've come to a conclusion that Turkey is not ready yet to change her attitude to Cyprus."

He hopes the Turkish attitude might change after its elections next month, but like a lot of acute observers of international politics he is troubled by trends in Turkey: "There are several contradictions in Turkey in recent years. On the one hand they want to become Europeans. That means reforms, a less decisive role for the military, more democracy. I'm not sure (Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip) Erodgan has overcome the decisive role of the Turkish military in the Cyprus problem. The military follows an expansionist attitude towards Cyprus.

"At the same time Turkey is following a policy of intense economic development and her influence in the region is upgraded as a result. It has a theory that Turkey can become a model for other Muslim countries.

"But this creates a certain arrogance on the part of Turkish leaders. On the one hand they want to become part of the EU, but they also look to the Middle East and North Africa and want to become the leading country of that region. One contradicts the other. Sometimes they say we don't need the EU — Turkey is a superpower.

"Another contradiction is that they stick to Hamas in the Gaza Strip. As you know, Hamas follows an extreme policy towards Israel."

I ask Christofias whether he is concerned with a creeping Islamisation of Turkish politics and society. He says he is not sure. "People could suspect that behind their hands they have such a big idea. Everyone is anxious about which direction Turkey will go."

In Cyprus, Downer has sometimes been a subject of controversy. Neither side finds his approach wholly congenial, which is almost certainly an indication that he is doing his job, as both sides must make painful compromises to reach a solution.

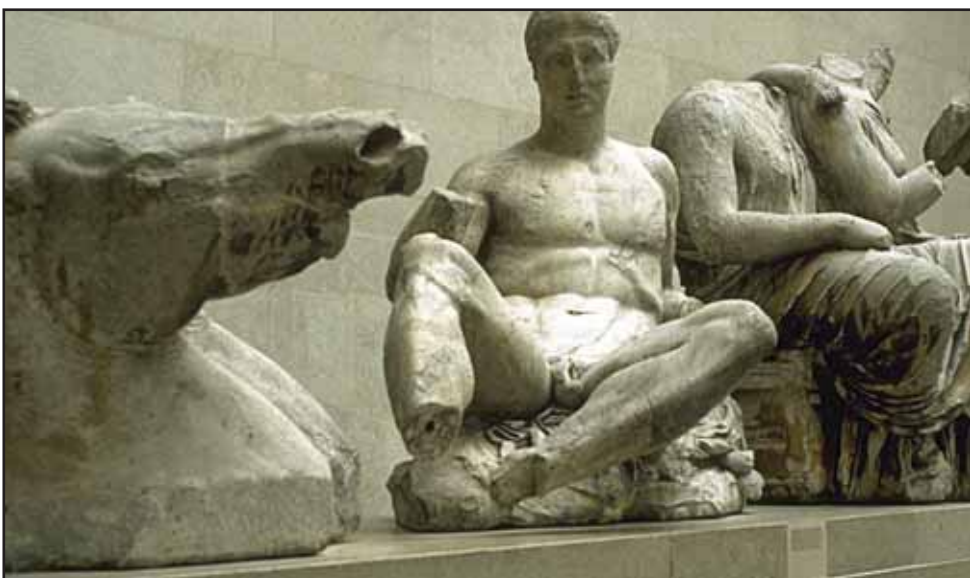
Christofias would not answer directly whether he thought Downer was doing a good job, instead saying: "I have to be very delicate. Downer is a facilitator, not a mediator. I have often very friendly discussions with him. There are forces which criticise Downer and I don't agree with those forces. Downer's job is to help us and our job is to help him help us."

Clear on that, then?

On Australia, Christofias has no such ambivalence: "We are very grateful to Australia. In all our difficult times, Australia always followed the principle of supporting our independence. For many years it has contributed to peace-keeping in Cyprus."

Christofias is certainly the most agreeable communist I have ever met. He explains his communism by saying that the ex-communist states of Eastern Europe didn't do a very good job. He approaches issues of economic justice by concentrating on the welfare of the lower and middle classes.

Above all, he says, his is a pragmatic approach, concentrating on reunification of Cyprus and the immediate practical problems his society faces, leaving larger theoretical questions of dogma for another day. If only all the world's communists were like him.



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