TERRITORIANS

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS

It is a privilege as a long term Territorian, and as Administrator to deliver the 15th Eric Johnston Lecture on a topic that is very dear to my heart—the influence of Greek immigrants on Darwin and the Northern Territory.

Some might suggest I would have a biased position on such a topic, but I can assure you that history already shows that the story of Greek immigration and the Territory is anything but a Greek Tragedy.

This evening it will be my pleasure to talk to you about the experiences and contributions of a number of quite famous Territorians who were proud of their Greek background and equally proud to be Australians who lived in the Northern Territory.

It is also quite fitting that the forum for such a presentation is the Eric Johnston Lecture. Eric Johnston was Administrator of the Northern Territory from 1981 until 1989 and with his wife Joan, travelled widely to meet people in many locations and from all walks of life.

Already respected and recognised for his outstanding work after Cyclone Tracy, Eric Johnston took the Office of the Administrator to the people in a way that it had not been done before.

Eric was a supporter of many groups in the Territory and I have many fond memories of the discussions we had as we shared a drink in clubs and community halls all over Darwin.

I have no doubt Eric made a large contribution to the unity and pride we now enjoy in this community—a community which somewhat paradoxically has found strength in the diversity of its many cultures and backgrounds.

In delivering a presentation on a topic that deals with one group of people in the community, there is always a risk that someone might be left out, or the achievements of an individual might be understated.

This evening I will not be presenting a detailed history of the Greek Community, that would take at least 200 years and you would all go to sleep, but I will talk about a few families and the achievements of a few individuals to give you an insight of a story that is common to so many.
I have grown up with the families I will talk about and I have seen their contributions first hand. I hope my reflections of their arrival, their achievements, their disappointments and their legacy gives fair recognition to their genuine contribution.

From the outset, I would like to thank the State Library for their assistance in staging the lecture and also acknowledge the contribution of Historian, Peter Forrest, and the people who have placed their stories on record in the NT Archives.

"A HOME AWAY FROM HOME – the Aegean to Australia"

In Darwin today it is estimated that there are around 8-10,000 Australians with ancestral or current links to Greece and its many cultures.

The Greeks, like people from all the great civilisations of the world, have moved to many parts of the world over the centuries, but is interesting to examine the reason why many have decided to make Darwin their home.

With Australia being such a young country, we only need to examine the history of the last 200 years to identify the political, social and economic factors that have encouraged massive movement of people from Europe and Asia to the four-corners of the Earth.

When we talk about the Northern Territory, that time scale can be refined even further and we need only consider the events of the last century.

It is fair to say that most immigrants from Greece arrived in waves that coincided with the two world wars, and the majority came from coastal and island regions.

Greece has always been a nation characterised by the different cultures in the various regions of its mainland and on its different islands. It should therefore be no surprise that immigrants from different places brought with them different skills, attitudes and outlooks.

I would like to look at some of those regions and talk about the people who came from them.

Some of the most successful immigrants came from a cluster of islands in the eastern Mediterranean, called the Dodecanese.

Nearer to Turkey than anywhere else, these semi-arid islands were settled by Greek people in ancient times however their strategic setting often saw them as the site of conflict or occupied by other nations. Nevertheless they possessed a proud intellectual tradition and capitalised on the islands’ location to venture into trade.

Political events in the period 1912-1920 however, prompted many to leave the islands in search of a more secure life and many chose Australia.

Given their background, the new arrivals in Australia were not daunted by the prospect of hard living in the Outback and their timing was excellent; Australia needed people who were prepared to work hard and who were prepared to stay.

The Dodecanese immigrants also had character traits that were invaluable in their new environment: They understood the importance of industry and the application of thrift.

They enjoyed the supportive culture of a close family and the wider clan, and were prepared to endure hardship if there was a chance of a better life, even if the reward was a generation or two away.

In any case, what was hardship in Australia compared to what they had left behind?
The Dodecanese excelled in building, maritime industries, the food and beverage industries, agriculture, and also in general commerce.

From 1913 onward Darwin was host to an influx of people from these islands.

This included members of the Harmanis, the Kailis, Haritos, Paspalis and Liveris families and I will now spend a little time talking about some of them.

**The Harmanis Family**

Alexandros Harmanis came to Western Australia from the Dodecanese island of Kastellorizo in 1910.

He worked in the Whim copper mine near Port Hedland before coming to Darwin, and gaining work with a local builder, Jack Buscall.

Alex brought brothers Manuel and George out to Australia, and in 1915 sent some money for his two brothers, two sisters and their Mother to join them.

Helene Harmanis, who died in Perth recently, was one of the first children to be born in Darwin to Greek parents. She will be fondly remembered for her grace and charm, as well as for many achievements, not least of which was her introduction of high fashion to Darwin.

Helene was born in Darwin in 1918, delivered by a midwife Mrs Tye, under a mango tree near the family's house which stood near the present site of the Metro Inn.

Her father, Kyriakos Kailis, migrated from Kastellorizo to Fremantle in 1910. He soon moved northwards and arrived in Darwin via Wyndham and Port Hedland.

Darwin was then a booming place, with abundant work at the Vesteys meatworks construction project, and on the railway extension between Pine Creek and Katherine.

In June 1940, Helene married a builder named Louis Harmanis. The Harmanis family, also from Kastellorizo, had arrived in Darwin in 1917, when Louis was eight years old.

The couple settled into a house in McMinn Street, where one of Louis' first tasks was to dig a sixty-foot well through solid coffee rock and ironstone.

The war separated the couple in 1941 and they reunited in Adelaide before moving to Perth where Louis worked as a builder.

Lured back to Darwin by Michael Paspalis in 1952, Louis worked for Michael for about a year before starting his own business.

One of his first projects was to build a family house in Packard Street - this house still stands and it is a splendid monument to good tropical design ideas.

Louis prospered as a builder, being called in to complete the Fannie Bay Hotel, and diversifying into several mining ventures, including the Frances Creek iron ore mine.

Helene and her sister Anne saw a business opportunity in fashion, and opened Helene’s Fashions in the Herbert Street frontage of the Hotel Darwin.

The business later moved to Smith Street where a hairdressing salon was also opened on the mezzanine floor.
In the 1950s and 1960s Darwin was booming as the public service, military, and private sector expanded. There was a strong demand for fashionable clothes and Helene’s Fashions brought the latest and best labels from the south to Darwin.

Generally Helene and Anne acted as buyers, but sometimes they were assisted in this role by Chrissie Paspalis. The women popularised their fashions by holding parades in the salon, or at Darwin’s Town Hall.

The availability of ready to wear high fashion meant that Darwin women could rank with the smartest in Australia and the business soon won fame with Station people well beyond Darwin.

In about 1959 Louis and Helene moved house, this time to a landmark house which Louis built in East Point Road, opposite the present site of the Darwin Sailing Club. The house later became the Seaview Motel.

Helene and Louis moved to Perth in 1967. Helene died suddenly as a result of a heart attack in 1994. Louis died within the next twelve months.

They are survived by their two children Jasmine and Kerry, as well as several grandchildren.

WRAP UP THE HARMANIS

The Haritos Family

Eustratios (shortened to Stratos) Haritos, came to Darwin by ship in November 1915 to work on the Pine Creek railway line.

His arrival in Darwin coincided with that of several other Greek families seeking work and refuge from the ravages of World War I. Sadly, his family was wiped out later when the Turks pushed the Greeks from Asia Minor. His sister was the only surviving family member.

Stratos married Eleni Harmanis in 1917. The ceremony was conducted in the old Town Hall opposite Brown’s Mart. Interestingly her granddaughter, Helen Bell, the daughter of George Haritos, now works at Brown’s mart.

Their children included Dorothy, who is the widow of Platon Anthony, Jack, who was born in Darwin Hospital on 9 March 1928, Marie, who was the spouse of the late Les Liveris, George and Ningle, both of whom I shall mention shortly.

Stratos and Eleni battled to become established and lived in a corrugated iron hut in Greek Town - in the general area of the present Travelodge.

Early in 1919 they set up a home at Race Course (now Ludmilla) Creek, out behind today’s Lake Alexander.

Here Stratos, in a partnership, developed salt pans to supply salt to the newly-constructed Vesteys meatworks on Bullocky Point.

Vesteys closed down after 3 years but the partners were fortunate to secure new markets at butcher shops, cattle stations and with buffalo shooters who needed salt for the hides.

At Race Course Creek, the growing family had a herd of several hundred goats and enjoyed fresh milk every day. The family also kept fowls and grew their own melons and vegetables.
In 1925, the family moved to McMinn Street, which meant the children were able to attend St Joseph’s Catholic School.

Prior to the bombing of Darwin, the family worked hard and increased their assets, which included the purchase of a lot in Daly Street where Stratos erected a 2-storey fibro building with a residence above a shop.

The Haritos family grocery store opened for business on 15 October 1940.

The business prospered until December 1941 when the evacuation of Darwin was ordered and Jack, along with some members of the family, embarked on a journey to Brisbane along with Ern and Edna Tambling and several hundred of their friends and associates.

George Haritos stayed behind with the army, and Ningle stayed to work with Marshall Perron’s father, who had a plumbing business.

Stratos was evacuated later and took his family to Mullumbimby, NSW, where he grew bananas to support his family. During the war, the army utilised the Daly Street property as a post office.

Jack return to Darwin in January 1946 and the family reopened E G Haritos & Sons in Daly Street, supplying buffalo shooters, fettlers’ camps, crocodile shooters and grubstaking peanut farmers on the Daly River.

They then became ships’ provedores, and were suppliers for mining and oil exploration teams, surveying groups and the Fujita Salvage Co.

The Haritos family was employing around 50 people at this time, including Thursday Islanders, Kalymnians and a group of indigenous Japanese from Okinawa Island.

In 1952, Jack married Helen Kassambos from Innisfail, Queensland.

Jack had met Helen at Ipswich some time before and decided to drive his Morris Minor south down the Stuart Highway and across the Barkly.

He broke down at Winton and had to continue by train before he could ‘pop the question’. Helen came to Darwin in January 1953 and she and Jack first lived at the Pee Wee Camp at East Point.

In the early 1950s, the brothers acquired 3 pearling luggers and developed an interest in the barramundi fishing and crocodile shooting businesses.

Around 60 000 pounds of barramundi were air-freighted to Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane in one season, but the market collapsed.

In 1956, the Haritos brothers were asked to take the Duke of Edinburgh out shooting crocodiles. The Duke was en route to Melbourne to attend the Olympic Games. A good shot, he picked up a 2 m crocodile from a fair distance.

Jack Haritos had an enduring relationship with Australian Rules football initially as a player for Wanderers, then for Waratahs and eventually as League Treasurer and President.

When Cyclone Tracy devastated Darwin in 1974, Jack was the volunteer who, 10 days after the cyclone, organised an exhibition match between Darwin and a team of naval personnel.

The Haritos family have made a major contribution to the Top End and have been synonymous with the progress of Darwin for many years.
Liveris Family

Andreas Liveris arrived in Darwin by ship on 30 November 1915.

He worked for two years before he returned to the island for his bride Maria, and then in 1919 came back with their infant son Nicholas.

George was born in 1922, and Les in 1923.

The family also lived in Greek Town where their house was a dirt floored shack.

Times were very hard following the closure of Vesteys and the end of work on the railway line. This hardship was compounded by personal tragedy when Andreas Liveris died, just two months after Les was born.

Many of the Greek people in Darwin were leaving for the south in search of better opportunities, but Maria Liveris was trapped in Darwin by grinding poverty.

As soon as he was old enough, Les became the delivery boy for his mother’s washing and ironing service. At the same time he went to Darwin Public School, where he was teased because of his Greek origin and his threadbare and patched clothing.

Despite this, he excelled at school, and won the annual scholarship which entitled him to secondary education at a school of choice in Queensland.

However, there was never any chance that his mother could afford the cost of uniforms, travel and other incidentals, so Les had to leave school.

In 1937, aged thirteen, Les applied for his first job in the Commonwealth Public Service.

At the time there was a strong prejudice against anyone of ethnic background, but his school results meant that they could hardly keep him out altogether.

Les was told "You can join the public service, but a Greek will never be more than a messenger boy."

He duly started as a messenger, but very quickly came under the notice of Reg Leydin, one of the senior public servants in Darwin. Under Reg’s guidance, Les became a filing and records clerk, then payroll clerk.

After the air raids on 19 February 1942, Les went to Alice Springs and joined the Royal Australian Air Force becoming part of a special intelligence unit which worked on Japanese signals and codes.

He served in New Guinea, and later, at the special request of General Macarthur, in the Philippines.

Les had a distinguished war record, but it was not something he ever boasted about.

He was discharged in 1946, and hitched a ride back to Darwin on an Air Force Dakota where he rejoined the public service, and began studying for his matriculation at night by candlelight.

In 1949 and just 25 years old, he was appointed to head the local branch of the Immigration Department. His office was a Sydney Williams hut, and he had one office assistant.
Minister Arthur Calwell devised a radical program to double Australia’s population growth through immigration with a particular objective of increasing the permanent population in the north.

Soon after Les took up his new job, Darwin started to boom.

New mining activities in the hinterland created a demand for labour, as did rebuilding activity in Darwin.

Les encouraged Europeans to come here to take the chances which were on offer.

He pioneered the practical application of the notion that migration was about settlement and adjustment, as well as the physical process of bringing people to Australia.

Above all, he provided a personal example which quietly proved that it was possible for a migrant child to achieve high office and respect in Australia.

In 1956 he married Marie Haritos, a member of another remarkable Darwin family with Kastellorizon origins.

In 1965 he was appointed Australian Consul to Spain and was in Madrid for three years. He then served as Immigration Counsellor in the Australian Embassy in Athens as the first Australian of Greek origin to hold this post.

Les was a supporter of the Buffaloes football club; he coached netball, and was a life member of the NT Basketball Association. He was active within the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Handicapped Persons Association, and the Australian Bicentennial Authority.

He also helped Timorese refugees and often worked 24 hours a day when the Vietnamese boat people were arriving. This time was even more stressful because his family was away in Brisbane following Cyclone Tracy.

Les took on many tasks behind the scenes - just one of these was his effective lobbying to achieve recognition for Greek pioneers in the naming of streets.

His public service and his contributions to the community were recognised in 1980 when he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

Les died after suffering a heart attack in 1995.

**Nicholas Paspaley**

Nicholas Paspaley was born in Greece in 1914 and migrated to Australia with his family in 1919, settling at the first port of embarkation, Port Hedland.

Nicholas began his working life at 14 and bought his first pearling lugger at 19. In those days the pearling industry consisted of diving for mother-of-pearl shells which were shipped to New York for use in the production of buttons.

His first boat had no engines so when the wind failed to bring them home, the crew was forced to row the vessel.

With the decline of the mother-of-pearl industry a new opportunity emerged – growing pearls through the Japanese culturing process.
The company quickly established pearl farming techniques and became the best processors of cultured pearls along the way.

Nicholas Paspaley, the son, along with his sisters Ros and Marilynne, have taken the family company’s activities on to bigger and better things since taking over operations in 1984.

Their company, the largest producer of South Sea Pearls in the world, is a multi-million dollar export business. The company has also expanded its operations into air, tourism and maritime servicing, a large piggery and a string of sheep, wheat and cattle properties.

Few other Territory-based enterprises can sit comfortably in offices on New York’s Wall Street, or Sydney’s Martin Place, or have major wholesalers beating a path to the their exhibitions in Hong Kong.

The company is proudly headquartered in Darwin and employs some 1200 Territorians.

Michael Paspalis/Chrissie Paspalis

Michael Paspalis was born in Greece in 1912, the fourth but first surviving child of his parents.

Michael’s father was a tobacco merchant, who sailed his own boat in the Aegean Sea. Michael, who was known as Mick, worked with his father and became a fine sailor.

Another son, Nicholas (Paspaley), was born in 1914, and in 1918, they both immigrated to Australia, disembarking at Port Headland.

Mick was then seven years of age and his father bought shares in a pearling lugger. It didn’t make a fortune, but Mick learned something about pearling.

Five years later Mick’s father died and, at the age of twelve, he had to leave school and go to work. His first job was milking cows.

Later Mick became a butcher and moved to Darwin where he added to his business by carting buffalo hides from Adelaide River to Darwin at week-ends.

In 1935 he went to Perth where he met Chrissy Kailis. The two were engaged in a week, married in another and returned to Darwin.

One hot day, Chrissy complained that there was nowhere to get a cool drink in Darwin. Shortly after, they opened the "Rendezvous Café”.

They had modern ideas - installing a refrigerated fountain and being the first to import ice cream. Next they imported chilled fruit by sea beginning the Paspalis fortune based on refrigeration.

Mick understood that the secret of success was to take opportunities and he began to buy real estate – houses and commercial property – just before Darwin became a war-time boom town.

In 1946, Mick and a partner applied for a lease on the Hotel Darwin. A year later, Mick bought his partner out, and then bought the hotel outright from the government.

Mick and his family ran the hotel themselves taking in the post war boom period for Darwin, and later leased it to a Perth brewery.

In becoming Darwin’s largest private employer, as well as a wealthy property owner in Sydney, Mick was quoted in saying:
"I belong to Darwin. This is where I got my chance. In my opinion, it is the best place in Australia. The secret of our success has been catering to what people need, and in doing the right thing at the right time."

Despite their personal success, Nick and Mick were always prepared to give advice and encouragement to the other businessmen, or assist those who were down on their luck.

Chrissy, although very much part of the business team, made time for other pursuits such as painting the beauty of Fannie Bay sunsets, or Katherine Gorge, as you can see over here! (indicates)

Although Mick passed away in 1972, that was not the end of the family’s achievements.

Chrissy took the family empire on to new heights, building the Centrepoint and Galleria complexes and acquiring other commercial properties.

The company’s business continues with daughters Phynea and Helene managing the company’s affairs.

Let me now go on to talk about the Kalyminians who came to Darwin.

Kalymnos might be regarded as “outback Greece”. It is an island about 300 km east south east of Athens, and it is part of the Dodecanese group.

In the early to mid 1950’s the Haritos and the Paspalis families had pearling luggers and along with others, arranged to bring sponge divers from Kalymnos.

Many well-known Darwin names were represented in the first group of divers - Alexiou, Halkitis, Pastrikos, Kotis among them.

The Kalymnians did not stay on the luggers for long. There was discontent about using half diving suits and there was dismay about the turbid water and extreme tidal range.

Once ashore however, they thrived in the building and construction industries. The first dozen or so Kalymnians encouraged relatives to come here, with the result that there are now probably about 6,000 or even more people of Kalymnian descent in Darwin, making them by far the largest single cultural group here.

**The Halkitis Family**

Theo Halkitis had arrived with the first divers, and he sponsored his brother Michael, who arrived in August 1954. Michael quickly got a job as a carpenter, and made his first move into civil engineering when he got a job as a grader driver.

He worked in isolated places, but before long was able to start his own business, Halkitis Brothers.

Some of his first work was building the beef roads west of Katherine and today there are few civil works projects which do not feature a Halkitis Brothers machine.

**THE GREEK-CYPRIOTS OF DARWIN**

What is not so well known is that Darwin was home to about 1000 people who called themselves Greek-Cypriots.
The story of the Greek-Cypriots coming to Darwin is a vital part of Australia’s multi-cultural tapestry. It is also a proud part of Darwin’s history.

The settlers of Cyprus were traditionally a rural people who farmed on the plains beneath the island’s two mountain chains. In the past century there was a drift to urban areas, but even as late as 1973 the total population of about 650,000 was still spread through more than 600 rural villages, with only six towns having a population greater than 5,000.

Following the turmoil of 1974, which saw some 200,000 people with Greeks affiliation displaced by the Turkish invasion of the Northern part of the island, about 12,000 Greek-Cypriots came to Australia.

A number came to Darwin, most because they had relatives or close friends already settled here.

Some Greek-Cypriots also came to Darwin not long after World War Two, in somewhat bizarre circumstances.

Peter Syrimi and Savvas Christodolou were among about a dozen people who left Cyprus by plane, bound (they thought) for southern Australia. The plane landed in Darwin and the Greek Cypriots disembarked in the belief that it was merely a transit stop.

When the plane re-loaded to fly on to Adelaide the Greek Cypriots moved to re-board the plane, but they were stopped. They protested that they were bound for Australia, not Darwin.

Airport officials reportedly said "this is Australia, mate, and this is as far as you go. If you want to go to Adelaide it will cost you another thirty quid."

Of course, none of them had thirty pounds, so Darwin became their home.

Another notable person was Kosi Kosmos who owned the first ice-works and the first ice cream service. During WWII, the Army confiscated his truck and the business, for its own use, and sent him away.

Greek-Cypriots like the Christou brothers, the Pantazis family and Patsalou family have contributed much to Darwin especially in areas where Greek Cypriots have always done well - trade and commerce.

The Church Connection

An aspect of Greek community life that cannot be overlooked is the role of the Church.

Historian Michael Christie, rightfully points out that for Greeks the family is not simply a group made up of parents, children and selected in-laws residing under one roof. It functions as an economic and property owning unit, as a tiny religious community with its own name-days and rituals, and is a quasi-political association in as much as it acts as one in relation to the wider community.

It was on the instigation of Nicholas Paspalis and Leo Fotiades that the first funds were raised for the construction of a church in Darwin.

Michael Paspalis and Les Liveris were major go-betweens in getting the land, and construction began in 1951.
By 1959, the Greek Orthodox Church of St Nicholas had been built and paid for by the community. It provided not only a place of spirituality, but a place for family, the community and common support.

The Greek School in Fox Crescent, Nightcliff, through its resources, offers teaching of Greek language and culture for about 200 children on Saturday mornings.

The church, and the Greek School, will continue to be cornerstones of the community.

In the past 35 minutes or so, I hope I have given you a reasonable snapshot of the contribution the Greek community has made in Darwin.

A common thread in all the stories is the existence of a strong family and community bond. I think it is fair to say that amongst Greeks there is a feeling that at every stage of one’s life, there is a father or a brother, a sister or a kinsman who cares.

The strong family ties and the traditions of thrift and industry undoubtedly nurture a sense of support and loyalty that helps create certainty when things are not so certain.

I believe it gives people the confidence to do something that all Australians value – the willingness and the ability to have a go.

Whilst the pioneers of the Greek community have left their mark in many areas, they are not the only ones who can claim a role in establishing the foundations of this thriving city.

Darwin’s foundations are laced with the languages and cultures of people from all over the world, but they were all people who shared the ability to look past hardship, to see through hope, and to seize the genuine opportunities as they arose.

Darwin today has a large and proud Greek community—proud of their heritage, proud because they are Australian and proud of their achievements.

Certainly many Greeks have been successful in their business endeavours, but success should not only be measured in share-holdings, company profit or property ownership.

Like many members of the Greek community, I am proud of their achievements, but more proud to have been part of a process that has encouraged mutual respect between men and women from different nationalities—a process that means young Australians growing up in Darwin today will value rather than fear the cultural and religious differences that make this City so special.

Ladies and Gentleman, I thank you for your attention.

Thank you.

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