

Maria_Vamvakinou_Interview

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Interview with

The Honourable Maria Vamvakinou MP

Federal Member for Calwell

Co Convenor of Parliamentary Friends of Multiculturalism and Palestine, Member of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade

Held in November 2014 at EEAMA's Star International

1C Bell Street Preston Melbourne Australia

Interview conducted by **Angela Plowman Constantinidis**

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: **Question:** *“As a Migrant and a child growing up in Australia, did you face any difficulties?”*

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: “Yes I did, but I don’t think they were any more or any less than a lot of the people and certainly the kids that I grew up with, especially in the 60’s. The 60’s was a period in Australia pre multiculturalism so we were new Australians and we were different. The local Australians were resentful of the fact that we had come to Australia. I think that they probably felt we had taken over their neighbourhood. I guess like any other migrants, when you are different you are treated as a foreigner, I mean the whole expression ‘go back where you came from’ or ‘don’t speak English here’ from our parents. That was common back then in Australia, and when I look back on it, it was hurtful, because effectively we were just trying to establish a life in Australia and we felt that we had to behave differently as children. I felt that I had to behave differently to what I was used to at home because if I didn’t behave differently during the day I wouldn’t fit in. The classic example that I talk about is: my mother used to send us to school with cut lunches, I used to throw my lunch away because it was different to the lunch that the Australian kids had. What did the Australian kids have? White sliced bread with hundreds and thousands on it and vegemite. What did I have? Thick pieces of bread with vegetables, often zucchinis, eggplant. That was wog food, and I do remember throwing it away on many occasions because I was embarrassed, of course look where we’ve come, you know, 50 years later. The food that I used to throw away is now Australia’s culture

food, that everyone eats. You find it in restaurants so and of course we are now more integrated but things don't change because the new lot of migrants that come here, and certainly a lot of the ones that I represent in Calwell. They are going through in many ways similar experiences to ours, the differences though are that we are much more a multicultural society now and its not ok to be a racist whereas in the 60s when I was growing up the broader community and the authorities and the politicians didn't protect the migrant communities as much from that racism as we do today"

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: Question: *"What prompted you to become a politician?"*

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: "Well, I was always interested in, and was always involved in my community I was the secretary of the 'Lefkadian' Brotherhood when I was 15. I used to get roped into these things. But I had an interest in politics and I studied for a test. Strangely enough yesterday was the funeral of Gough Whitlam, and as I have said in parliament last week, I think about his sacking in 1975, (I was in year 11, growing up in the 70s) It was very exciting time politically for Australia, that prompted me to become actively involved in politics and obviously the labour party. The labour party represented my background. It fought for things that my parents had to put up with and so it's natural for me and everyone else really in migrant communities to gravitate to the labour party at that time, and so, lots of kids ask me that, and the answer to it is that I don't mind my own business. If you are a politician you don't mind your own business. If you are an active community member you are active in the community, because you are interested in what is going on around you. So that is the best way to describe it."

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: Question: *"Would you like to see more women in parliament? And Why?"*

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: “Absolutely, absolutely, because women have a different attitude towards politics. Women are different in the way that they operate and I think that the political system is too adversarial. The culture that exists needs to be less adversarial and more consensus, of course in a democracy if you have consensus you would probably never have elections. But, one could argue politics is about the contest of ideas which it is, but I think women bring to politics a way of involvement in the community which is uniquely female and I think that if we had a good balance in politics, that would be better for everybody. The truth is, that more women in politics is a truer reflection of the society that you represent. So if you are representing an entire society from the majority of the people representing that society are from just one gender, ah, that’s an imbalance, and it’s an imbalance that needs to be corrected”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: **Question:** “*What is the benefit of maintaining your Greek – Australian culture?*”

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: “In the 60s I would have probably have found no benefit. I would have wanted to have ditched the Greek language and I would have wanted to be an Australian. Um, the truth is that maintaining Australian Greek culture for me is.... ‘I am bilingual’ so, what I thought was a disadvantage speaking Greek, I have come to realise, was a massive advantage, the opportunity to be able to speak another language, to think in another language. Um..... I’ve come from a cultural inheritance which is very rich. And I think that in all, it makes me and people like me all of this and more interesting and it gives us more depth, it gives us an ability to understand and to operate almost in 2 worlds and I think that is definitely a benefit”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: **Question:** “*If you were in a book club, what book would you recommend to a 16 year old girl?*”

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: “Well, it would probably have to be Jane Austen, and it would have to be, *Pride and Prejudice*. I’ve thought about it actually when I saw these questions, it’s not my favourite book of all time.... well, if I had a favourite book it would be John Fowles ‘*The Magus*’ My 19 year old daughter is actually a big fan of Jane Austen, and I think this Lizzie character epitomises everything that a young woman or a woman should be. An individual first and foremost before gender, before class, before society, before anything. And I think that if we can all strive to be individuals, and succeed as an individual without being defined by the social mores of our time or whatever it is that society expects of you because of your gender at the time, if you can go beyond that, I think that’s what a personal achievement is, that’s what that book represents to me”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: Question: “*How do you unwind after a busy schedule?*”

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: “I sit on the couch and I watch TV. It’s that simple”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: Question: “*Do you like music?*”

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: ☐☐ “I love music, yes”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis:☐ **Question:** “*So, Do you listen to Greek music?*”

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: ☐☐ “I listen less to music now because I am very busy and I miss that. I tend to only listen to it in the car. I’m inspired by a lot of music. I love Greek music, I love the Greek language, and for me the music is a profound part of who I am. It reminds me of my childhood. I grew up in a house with an extended family, in a neighbourhood where music, yiortes, dancing was really important, and I believe, that is the core of my soul. I miss that a lot now in my political life but it moves me in a way. Greek music moves me in a way nothing else does you know”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: Question: “*Do you have a favourite female Greek singer?*”

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: ☐☐ “I am going to say the obvious one, for me anyway, Haris Alexiou but I love Alkistis Protosaltis as well, and my real favourite is Dimitra Galani. And after that I like everybody else”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: **Question:** *“Do you like exploring the world and its culture”*

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: “I love it. I think I would love to be able to visit every bit of this planet, the world, and you know..... You sort of sit back sometimes and you think, is it possible to visit the entire world? And I suppose if you committed your entire life to it, it's possible. Um..... But I think we live in a fascinating place and technology, collaboration, the internet it's opened up our horizons in so many ways that the more you see the more you want to actually be a part of”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: **Question:** *“So, Does that make you understand your constituents better?”*

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: “Yes it does, very much so. I have um.... Constituents form a large part of the globe, the middle-east in particular; I have a great interest in the Middle East. I have visited Israel, and Jordan and Palestine and I hope to go to Egypt. But I think the reason I have a great interest in the Middle East is because I'm Greek and I see huge connections with the people in that region”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: **Question:** *“Have you ever been back to Greece and*

ultimately to the Greek island of Lefkada where you were born?"

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: "I go often and I was in 'Lefkada' in July. 'Lefkada' is a beautiful island. The 'Ionian Islands' are very different to the 'Aegean' and, having been a part of the 'Venetian Empire' the people on the 'Ionian Islands' are distinctly different. The 'Venetians Empire' was an educated Empire. So a lot of the Modern Greek poetry, contemporary poetry and art, came from the 'Ionian Islands' so, um..... It's as if I am doubly blessed, to come from that part of Greece, which was at the forefront of the revitalisation of Greek Culture and Greek Art"

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: **Question:** *"When you visit Greece do you see or notice any cultural differences as a Greek Australian woman?"*

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: "I would have to say yes. I think I noticed it when I went to Greece for the first time when I was 17 years old. It just took me a long time to accept that I actually was a bit different. I went to Greece at 17 believing I was nothing but Greek and it was there that I learnt and realised just how much of an Australian I was as well. I think that with all of those experiences, and everything, from the way we conduct ourselves to the way we behave in public, that's where we see our Australian identity. It becomes obvious to us when we are away from Australia"

Angela Plowman Constantinidis: **Question:** *"What is your favourite Greek dish?"*

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: ☐☐ “A really good ‘Spanakopita’ as clichéd as this sounds I love ‘Spanakopita’ Especially if it’s made well. I’d like to say that they make a really good ‘Spanakopita’ in Lefkada, and I can make a really good ‘Avgolemono’ as well”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis:☐ **Question:** “*Which Greek dance/dances have you learned to dance?*”

The Hon M Vamvakinou MP: ☐☐ “Well, I grew up in Greek schools, so I was lucky to learn to dance Greek. I love the ‘Tsamiko’ and I also love the ‘Ballos’ dance from the ‘Aegean Islands’ I also like the ‘Kerkyreiko’ that was taught to me by the late Abbott of our parish of St John in North Carlton of Melbourne”

Angela Plowman Constantinidis:

“I sincerely thank you and wish you well. ☐ Kai me to kalo na se doume as the Prime Minister of Australia”

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That concluded my interview with the Honourable Maria Vamvakinou PM