

DIASPORA: ELECTIVE LEADERSHIP & WORLDWIDE STRUCTURE

Posted on December 4, 2010 by Keghart



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By Sahag Toutjian, Los Angeles, 4 December 2010



International Symposium

The Armenian Diaspora: Elective Leadership & Worldwide Structure

Initiated and organized by the Institute of Armenian Studies at the University of Southern California (USC), an international symposium was held on Saturday, November 20, 2010, from 9:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Attended by an estimated 500 to 600 participants covering a wide spectrum of age groups from all over the world, the event took place in the Town & Gown hall at the USC Campus in downtown Los Angeles, California.

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As pointed out by the master of ceremonies, Dr Richard Hrair Dekmejian in his *Introductory Remarks*, the aim of the symposium was not the actual setting up of the worldwide Diaspora structure itself. It was, rather, the investigation and discussion, on an academic level, of past attempts, present opportunities and future possibilities toward that end.

The talks were intermittently followed by breaks for questions and answers, including one at the closure in the evening, as well as coffee breaks, breakfast and lunch.

The panel of mainly twelve speakers, consisting of academics and practicing professionals well versed in their respective fields, presented specific aspects of the main theme: Elective Diaspora Leadership. Each presented studies, reports, relevant thoughts and/or analyses of viable models for attaining fair and adequate elective representation – in the following order.

1. Dr Z.S. Andrew Demirdjian, Cal State University, Long Beach: *The Persuasive Power of Numbers: A Call for Political Clout*

Dr Demirdjian made a rigorous analysis of the commonality of the critical mass concept in sciences (chemistry, physics, nuclear physics), adapting it to the social and behavioral aspects of political realities. Starting from the buildup or aggregation of various natural resources in sciences, or from

man-made resources in human endeavors (individuals, activities, materials), he stressed that the tipping point of such growth occurs at the stage of critical mass. At this critical stage we accomplish, in the realm of sciences, spontaneous combustion or chemical/nuclear reaction yielding the required power – or leverage in the realm of politics and allied fields. To illustrate this point, he gave the heartening example of the Canadian Native Inuit nation, who peacefully joined forces with their neighboring nations in a vast area of over 1.9 million square kilometers. They thus formed the Nunavut (meaning Our Land) that became the largest – and an influential – federal territory of Canada despite its sparse population.

This was a call for sanity and unity, putting our provincial differences aside, keeping under check the petty interests of islets of small Armenian entities and communities, the bickering, jealousies and ignorance draining our potential; and opting for organization, unity and intelligence so that justice is served to us worldwide as a nation. The speaker passionately assured the audience that we have the talent, knowledge and potential, and that together we can use our aggregated, cohesive clout to attain our goals.

2. Dr Archalus Tcheknavorian-Asenbauer, Senior UN Advisor, Vienna, Austria: *Armenian Unity and International Politics*

The speaker asserted that, to date, we as a nation have underestimated the role of the United Nations and other international organizations and agencies for advancing our cause. Here she opened a legitimate bracket to urge that we give our support to others, non-Armenians, on worthy causes and issues, so that others will support us when we need them. She upheld the view that the divisions among our organizations and splinter groups resulted in disrupting our potential such that those components of the Armenian world do not work in unison relative to the pursuit of our common interests, which calls for international cooperation. This lack of cooperation, she stated, equally applies to the Armenian government which failed to consult the 7-million strong Armenian Diaspora on key issues and, foremost among them, the recent diplomatic contacts and moves between Armenia and Turkey. Finally, she proposed that Armenian institutions worldwide should coordinate their work on the basis of a broad strategy which all of us can share.

3. Mr Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier: *Proposal for a Popularly Elected Structure to Represent Diaspora Armenians*

Against a background of divisions, assimilations, empty churches and closed schools, the speaker stated that the Armenian Diaspora can immensely benefit by pooling their limited resources in a scheme of creating a democratically elected worldwide structure that would represent all Armenians in the Diaspora. A collective effort would thereby be organized to ensure their survival as parts of a dispersed ethnicity detached from its homeland. In practical terms, he suggested that elections be held by Armenian communities to choose one representative for every group of 20,000 voters. This would add up to a collective world total of 350 representatives from all electoral districts

throughout the Diaspora, an elected body that can legitimately claim to speak on behalf of 7 millions of Armenians outside the borders of Armenia and Artsakh.

Starting with this initial conceptual scheme, Mr Sassounian envisions many more necessary steps before launching the ambitious initiative of creating a worldwide representative structure. It was proposed that a team of researchers conduct the necessary explorations to contact the leaders of existing organizations and groups in the Armenian Diaspora, to determine the optimum mechanisms for conducting such elections, estimate the demography of each community, establish qualifications for both voters and candidates, and recommend measures to prevent voter fraud.

4. Dr Gaidz Minassian, Foundation for Strategic Research, Paris: *Toward a World Council of Armenians: Why, How, Who?*

Dr Minassian outlined a detailed plan unanimously approved by French Armenian organizations to hold popular elections for a representative leadership early next year. The entities involved in the French Armenian project are: the main groupings of Armenian socio-political life, and the French Armenian Council both in its mission's generic terms and as a model of structural balance. The French experience could subsequently serve as a most valuable prototype for elections in other Diaspora communities. The recent experience already gained by the French Armenian Council was held forth as a paradigm change that could be very useful in avoiding the pitfalls on the way to a World Council. To be rational and constructive, contemporary international relations should be taken into account by recognizing the interdependence among states and societies, and making due allowances as required. This places a heavy responsibility on each entity for appropriate responses to social, economic, political, geopolitical and strategic challenges. It was made clear that a single electoral model or plan cannot be applied indiscriminately to all Armenian communities. Since each community lives in a unique legal and political environment, it would be necessary to devise an appropriate plan for selecting representatives in each country, in consultation with local leaders. For this purpose, priorities need to be set as to which model would be the most beneficial to adopt under the circumstances.

5. Governor George Deukmejian, Retired: *Personal Reflections of California's First Armenian Governor*

Introduced by Hon. Paul Ignatius, former Secretary of the Navy, and honored with standing ovation, the Governor, son of Armenian immigrants fleeing Ottoman atrocities, outlined the dynamics of factors that helped the attainment of his bid to the highest elected position in the State of California. He pointed out that pledges and promises were useful in his election for the first term in 1982, but that he had to rely on his accomplishments for his second, 1986 term in office. He concluded his free, "non-focused" reflections by emphasizing how we can be successful when we help each other.

6. Hon. Grigor Hovhannissian, Consul General of Armenia in Los Angeles: *Welcoming Remarks*

The Armenian Consul General asserted that the Armenian world has undergone an upheaval – a major shift in the Diaspora's approach and that of Armenia – while a poor mutual understanding has

persisted between the two. During the former, romantic period, the view from Armenia was that of a Diaspora whose overriding duty consisted in taking care of hyrenik, the motherland. Simultaneously, the diverse nature of the Diaspora engendered differences in attitude vis-à-vis Armenia. There have also been dramatic changes in the demographic structure and distribution of Armenians around the globe. Out of a ballpark figure of 10 million Armenians worldwide, the Diaspora accounts for about 7 million, of which 4.5 (?) million in Russia and the rest scattered elsewhere. Close ties characterized by two-way consultation, partnership and sponsorship between Armenia and the Diaspora are the only rational approach mutually, since the existence and survival of each side depends on the other. The cannon of our common ship cannot be left loose, concluded the Consul General; it must be handled firmly.

7. U.S. Ambassador to Armenia John Marshall Evans, Retired: *Maximizing Influence in a World of Nation-States: A Challenge for the Armenian Diaspora*

Introduced by Mr Charles Ghailian, Chairman of USC Institute of Armenian Studies Leadership Council, the former Ambassador to Armenia Mr Evans was acknowledged as a man of highest moral integrity and valor for his courageous diplomatic stand on the Armenian Genocide, and given a hero's long and standing ovation by the audience. Mr Evans had publicly dissented from the stated policy of the U.S. government on the issue of the Armenian Genocide. He had become convinced that a gross injustice was being perpetrated through the denialist policies of the Turkish government and tacitly accepted by the U.S. government. His measured public stand cost him his job; he was dismissed from his post and forced into early retirement.

Ambassador Evans stated that, in the international political jungle where all are theoretically equal but where, actually, influence through size and power predominates, there is no real cover for the small and the unprotected. In his view, strategically, elective leadership for a diaspora has never been tried – but then, he went on, it cannot succeed if not tried, and he said he was encouraged by what he has heard here today, which is a useful and timely discussion. He recommended focusing on the task of paramount importance, which is to help the strengthening and survival of the first long-lasting Armenian state of modern times. After all, the only tangible basis for Armenian unity is the existence of the Republic of Armenia. He urged not to underestimate the basic fact that the opinions and actions of international bodies, agencies and governments are rigged in favor of states, while groups or NGOs count less – even though really well organized groups can influence states and thereby make a difference. On a positive note in this respect, he mentioned that, with the advent and proliferation of the internet, the world is becoming more democratized, giving legitimacy to groups in their fight for justice and human rights.

8. Mr Mark Arax, Journalist/Author, Fresno: *The Power of Speaking to the Media with One Collective Voice*

Dubbing himself a reluctant participant who is not yet sure of where he stands on the notion of

Diaspora unity, Mr Arax gave an off-the-cuff account of some of his experiences in the San Joaquin Valley which he christened the first capital of the Armenian Diaspora. He evoked the memory of his father Aram Arax who, he said, was a communist, while he himself is a Dashnak -- drawing the humorous conclusion that we Armenians could not achieve unity if it were based solely on our DNA. He made a similar, yet rather less convincing, parallel between the ANC and the Armenian Assembly.

9. Dr Levon Marashlian, Glendale Community College: *The Necessity and Difficulty of Establishing a Diaspora Congress*

Citing similar attempts and resolutions made in 1979, 1980, 1983 and 1985 which bore no fruit due to the disagreements and infighting among the participating Diaspora organizations, Dr Marashlian affirmed that the Armenian Diaspora badly needs a democratic, legitimate and organized body that would be beneficial to Armenia and would strive to safeguard the Armenian language and geopolitical standing. The traditional political parties and organizations are hesitant to advance such ideas, because their motto announces: We already strive to that end, and you can join us if you want. He also pointed out that the creation of an Armenian World Congress would secure the unity of the Diaspora under one umbrella, whose existence constitutes an important factor for the future strengthening and survival of Armenia.

10. Dr Stephan Astourian, University of California, Berkeley: *The Traditional Armenian Parties and the Problem of Pan-Armenian Coordination*

Dr Astourian presented an interesting report on the cultural and benevolent activities of the traditional Diaspora political parties and other organizations inside the Diaspora Armenian life, subjecting them all without exception to a critical assessment. He gave an account of their national activities aimed at safeguarding the nation, the Armenian language and schools; however, he concluded with a negative appraisal of their position and number, as also the significance of the role they actually play within the Diaspora Armenians. He outlined the stance of the three traditional political parties of the Diaspora toward the state of Soviet Armenia in the past and that of the present independent Armenia. As always in similar past presentations, the stated purpose of Dr Astourian's conclusions was meant to reflect national political, economic, social and geopolitical realities based on available statistical sources, and not personal judgments.

11. Dr Nyree Derderian, Stanford University: *Models and Modalities of Creating a Trans-Diaspora Framework*

Dr Derderian started by depicting the overall image of the Diaspora Armenian as discordant and inharmonious in common collaborative ventures. In contrast, she brought forth the example of a Jewish organization that succeeded in founding an international united body of 500 members as constituted by delegates from the U.S., Israel, and worldwide, with the aim of helping and safeguarding Israel. She noted that such organizations can be found among various nations like the

Greeks, for example, who can be taken as paradigms to learn from.

12. Dr Richard Hrair Dekmejian, USC: *Concluding Thoughts*

Dr Dekmejian summed up the seminar's discussions in the quest for setting up an elective leadership and a viable worldwide structure to help the Armenian Diaspora face the present and coming challenges to their well-being and survival. The contents of the deliberations in the seminars will be published in due course and will be available to the public.

The author would like to express his appreciation for the high academic quality of the International Symposium on The Armenian Diaspora: Elective Leadership & Worldwide Structure organized by the USC Institute of Armenian Studies, and personally to Dr Dekmejian. At this time, we will refrain from comments and the expression of personal opinions on the overall initiative, the subjects presented, the issues raised and the stands taken. We will do so after a thorough review, once all the printed materials are made available in a usable format.

Important Note: -- I had to leave the symposium early, missing the valuable talks by Drs Marashlian, Astourian, Dekmejian and Derderian at the end of the day. I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my longtime friend and the chief editor of Nor Or Weekly Dr Minas Kojayan for the notes graciously and promptly provided by him so that I could make this report as comprehensive as possible.

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