

"SPEAKING TO BE HEARD"

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By Viken L. Attarian MSc, P. Eng, MBA, Montréal, 22 November 2009

✘ The Vartan Oskanian event that launched his book, *Speaking to be Heard*, (Ձևաւարտ Տասնամեակ) , was remarkable in several aspects.

Firstly, it was organized by two youth organizations standing traditionally on opposite sides of the multitude of Armenian Diasporan divides, the AGBU Montreal Young Professionals (YP) and the ARF Armen Karo Student Association. This in itself was a positive development.

Secondly, it brought together several bright minds to frame the book presentation by the author. The evening was emceed by Chahe Tanachian of the AGBU YPs (Director of the AGBU M. Keusseyan Armenian Studies Program), and by Lalai Manjikian of the Armen Karo Association (a PhD student at McGill). The book itself was diligently presented in both Armenian and English by Dr. H. Hacikyan, himself an accomplished scholar, writer and teacher. As for the author, he was introduced by none other than George Shirinian, the tireless Executive Director of the Zoryan Institute.

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And finally, there was the author himself. Armenia's former Foreign Minister for 10 years who brought Armenia's foreign policy to the international scene and was the architect and enactor of much of the diplomatic efforts that made Armenia a valued player on the stage of nations. He had brought a qualitative leap as well as an intellectual rigor and long term strategic focus to the various policy initiatives of the ROA. The book was about his speeches that he made over his decade long tenure. And the audience of about 400 came to hear the current chairman of the Civilitas Foundation speak.

✘ And they were not disappointed. Oskanian demonstrated his mastery of the topics under issue. He talked about the policy of complementarity that was introduced into the lexicon of Armenia's foreign policy (i.e. creating complementary policies that selectively created alliances with Russia, the US and the EU), he talked about making the

Genocide Recognition issue a cornerstone of the ROA foreign policy, he talked about the lessons of tolerance that could be taught by Armenia to the world, because even when we are a small nation, we are an ancient people with a vast historical experience. He talked about the importance of recreating a country through the organizing of a truly civil society in Armenia, about making it a country where the primary focus would be on democracy, human rights and the freedom of expression. He talked about the urgency of that position and how we need to act now, because history is made in the present, because he believed that the Armenian youth who are citizens of the world want to identify with such a country and would see their Armenian identities reflected in it.

Oskanian of course also talked about the "Protocols"; he expressed his disappointment with and astonishment at the language of the text, even while admitting that he was one of the first initiators of dialogue with Turkey. He rightfully pointed out that the major achievement for Turkey was that

- The ensuing global unease after the "Protocols" were signed showed Turkey our weaknesses and serious vulnerabilities.
- It created deep divides within Armenia, within the Diaspora and between the Diaspora and Armenia.
- It essentially created the opportunity for Turkey to remove the issue of Genocide Recognition from various international agendas.
- It gave the upper hand to those who have suggested back in 1998 that a land-locked country like Armenia essentially had no options left to it and must cave in to Turkey's demands, whereas for at least a decade, the opposite was already proven by Armenia. This effectively nullified the strategic advantages created for Armenia after the Russo-Georgian war.

The Q&A session was as lively and passionate as Oskanian's speech. When asked about the sources of funding of Civiltas he was very straight forward: individuals, international foundations and state aid programs from the UN, North America, and the EU. When challenged about his role in initiating the dialogue with Turkey he was clear that his disappointment is not related to the existence of such an agreement but to the language in it and how it weakens Armenia's position. When asked about the current government, he clearly said that he believes them to be as patriotic as anyone if not more, but what was at issue was not whether they should be labeled as traitors but rather the content of the "Protocols" and how they benefit Turkey and hardly benefit Armenia. He stressed that all views should be considered.

Oskanian ended his talk asking all not to take Armenia for granted and not to be indifferent towards Armenia, regardless of what position we have over the "Protocols". He said that he will continue to speak to be heard.

Given his track record, erudition and passion for what he does, it would be very hard not to listen to what he has to say.

