

Ethnic Communications Pty Ltd (ACN 001 445 889)  
104 Norton Street, Leichhardt NSW 2040  
EMBARGOED: 12 noon on Thursday 21 July 1999

Individual,Community,Nation:50 years of Australian Citizenship

21-23 July, 1999, The University of Melbourne

“Key Issues For Australian Citizenship”

“Why I chose to become an Australian citizen”

Joseph Assaf

### 1.0 Forward

Although my Paper falls on the theme of the Present the past is inter-twined. The subject by nature is introspective. I shall address specifically from my background and perspective:

Why I chose to become an Australian Citizen.

### 2.0 My Desire to Migrate was only natural

It is important to an understanding of why I chose to become an Australian citizen, to firstly understand the background to factors influencing my decision to migrate.

I have to take you back to the 1960's in Lebanon, the country of my birth and origin of my native family tribe. I was 22 years of age and Lebanon was experiencing its golden era. Work and opportunity was plentiful in my birthplace. It was a vibrant and good place in which to live. Why then, you may well ask, should I even consider leaving?

To understand this you have to appreciate that:

travelling overseas was our tribal family's way of life since the days of our ancestors the great seagoing travellers the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians were famous for their love of expeditions, for discovering what was beyond the seas. The love for settling in new land grew stronger over the past 150 years especially after Lebanese migrants discovered the Americas; Lebanon was a tiny country with very limited natural resources, placed in the midst of many religious, regional, political and social conflicts. As a result Lebanon became the source of millions of migrants who looked for settlement in almost every corner of the globe; it became natural for Lebanese to leave home, to migrate and to seek out opportunities and alternative places in which to settle; cities and countries of the world were not foreign to most Lebanese and indeed were common in everyday conversations particularly since Lebanon was the centre for education and trade in the Middle East; there is hardly a country that does not have a Lebanese community; there is hardly a Lebanese family that does not have members outside the country; and even the local postman was known to bring mail only from overseas, because most people only received mail from their families and friends from abroad.

### 3.0. The World Outside my Village was Part of the Village Life

My immediate family comprised 6 children and I was the second eldest. My parents derived their income from the land and struggled to pay for our education in private and boarding schools. The going was tough for my parents and between the age of 14 and 22 I concurrently worked and studied. At one time I left school for 2 years to work and save and to help my parents. Soon after my 21st

birthday I began my first year at University. Then tragedy struck when my eldest brother who was in his final year at University died suddenly from a heart problem. We were devastated. I had confided to my brother my dream of migrating to an English-speaking country despite the fact that my education had been in Arabic and French.

I had many relatives in the US and several thousand people from my village had migrated to the US mostly before the First World War. Many were returning and visiting their families. Stories of the first and second world wars became common place, as was the story of the Titanic. Twenty-four people from my village were on the Titanic when it sank. People were continually talking of the world outside my village so life within the village became so much a part of the outside world. My tribal family was so much a part of the family of the world.

#### 4.0 My Passage to Sydney

My dream was to go to an English-speaking country, which meant I lodged applications for the US, Canada and Australia. Since Australia's acceptance came first I took it. I believed this to be in part destiny and in part an overwhelming feeling that something was pushing me towards the "Big Country".

I told no one in Lebanon or in Australia (although I had relatives and many people from my village in Australia), and using borrowed money I set out for Australia by air (the Suez Canal was closed to ship traffic at the time). How well I remember being told when I booked my BOAC (BA) flight to Sydney that I should keep a clean pair of shoes, a brand new pair and not to put them on until I got to the airport. I waited 2 hours for the flight and was eventually told that because of a strike the UK flight had been cancelled. During this time I had kept my new shoes on until I returned home. When I came back for the next flight it was noticed that my shoes had been used outside the airport so I was told to put on a new pair. As I had none they went through other passenger bags until they located a new pair for me. I was told not to complain about the size or colour. 24 hours later I landed in Sydney wearing someone else's shoes.

My worldly goods on arrival consisted of a tiny suitcase, a very limited range of clothes a couple of dictionaries (Arabic/English and French/English) someone else's shoes and single digit notes. My dreams, my willpower and my faith in God were blessedly immeasurable! On this foundation my new life began in my new country on 26th October, 1967.

#### 5.0 Lack of English Language Skills created havoc

"Give me the right word ..and I will move the world"(Joseph Conrad)

I remember how pleased I was to get a job in a factory. After all my English vocabulary of about 2 dozen hardly exceeded my financial assets. I did not have the right words to move myself! One of the words I knew, however, was "up". This word took on special significance when I took my first train trip to the City. As I stood in the queue to buy my rail ticket I listened to what people were saying. I frequently heard the word "City". Because of my knowledge of French I knew what "City" meant. When my turn to purchase my ticket came up the word came out reasonably well because I was understood. Then the rail ticket seller said "return or one way" This I did not understand but my "amazing silence" must have won him over because I received a return ticket. Having thought I achieved the hard part, I looked to see the direction of the platform. I heard a woman say to her daughter "hurry up" and then to my amazement they headed "down" the stairs. I froze and did not know in which direction to travel. I submitted to the direction of the crowd. I convinced myself that "up" in this case meant to "increase the speed of". Through similar analyses I formed my own grammar and taught myself. By listening, talking and reading and good practise and sometimes exchanging word explanations for cigarettes, I learnt the language.

While working at the factory I used to buy and read the newspaper each day. I bought it because my school teacher encouraged us to buy and read the newspaper at school. Purchasing the paper meant that we would make the effort to read it. There were so many words I could not understand and I used to have difficulty finding people who knew what the words meant. One Australian who smoked a lot

seemed to know a lot of words so I would purchase cigarettes and exchange one cigarette for one word. I thought I was doing well.

## 6.0 My Culturally Diverse Factory

The factory gave me my first multicultural life experience in Australia. I was fascinated by the extent of the cultural diversity at the factory. There were Greeks, Italians, Maltese, Yugoslavs, English, Dutch, Scots, and Australians of course. Each brought newspapers in a whole diversity of languages. I vividly remember *La Fiamma*, *The Greek Herald*, *The Maltese Herald*. I vividly remember the diversity of sandwiches at lunchtime. Different bread stuffed with different ingredients. I remember exchanging foods and tasting and sharing our culturally diverse foods.

My first real impression of Australia was that everyone was like me. We were all migrants. There were Italian Australians, Greek Australians, Scottish Australians, English Australians.

After 2 years of factory work I had saved enough to study full time at Sydney University. One of my majors was Sociology because I wanted to better understand the Society in which I lived. At University I again experienced the cultural diversity of the society. Asian faces that were not found at the factory because of the White Australia Policy were found at the University, thanks to the Government sponsored Colombo Plan. I experienced the Vietnamese, Chinese, Indonesian, Malay, Singaporean, Thai, Burmese and Filipino cultures. I felt privileged as I was in a unique situation experiencing this cultural diversity. I felt there was much truth in the statement that:

“what man prizes most is a privilege” (Lowell 1819-91).

I was probably the only non-skilled non-English speaking immigrant full-time student at the University. First year at University was very hard as I worked during the night in the factory and studied full-time during the day. I appreciated the study because like the newspaper, it was costing me.

The second year at University was much easier because I won a scholarship. The need to work full-time was removed as I received a living allowance. I could enjoy my University life. The Vietnam War, student movements, Federal Elections all began to occupy my attention. I already had been in Australia for four years and was one year away from finishing my degree.

## 7.0 My Unbelievable Opportunities

I started to think about a career and contemplated a public service type of job. The Department of Overseas Trade appealed to me, as I wanted to use my linguistic skills. I could see myself carrying out negotiations, particularly with Arabic or French speaking countries. I wanted to use my awareness of the various cultures. Middle Eastern, European and Asian. I wanted to work with these different cultures as I felt I could communicate with them.

I believed I could offer something unique – an ability to not only communicate with my native family tribe all over the world but with families of the world (other tribal families). I felt that my native family tribe all over the world could provide me with an added advantage as it was a good “cross cultural bridge” to enable me to market effectively from Australia.

Because of my learning experiences, I felt that the many other native family tribal communities were in a similar position. I saw how through these communities it was possible to have a “global outreach”. I saw how these cultural links can transcend geographic boundaries. I wanted to work with the various communities here by communicating with them, by marketing to them, by reaching them through their own languages and cultures. I wanted to begin my outreach to the globe by working through them right here in Australia. I wanted to explain to them how to vote, when and why to vote, what rights and obligations they have in their new land such as obligations to their environment, to others. I wanted to explain to them the benefits of integrating into the new society.

Along with Learning, Rights and Opportunities came Obligations

My experiences with both the factory and the University made me very aware of the great benefits of being a full member of the social environment. I had never voted before in my life as by the time I reached 21 in Lebanon there had not been elections in Lebanon.

Here I was in Australia with the 1972 Federal Elections approaching and feeling a compelling need to express my belonging by exercising the right to vote. I wanted to also fulfil my obligations to the country that had given me a scholarship, provided me with living allowances and provided me with so many opportunities.

Along with my right to have my voice heard I wanted to ask and to give. I wanted to be equal to other people who give and take. I believed that 4 years was long enough without feeling I was part of the community and an equal and full member of the society. I felt it unusual, abnormal and unnatural to live in a country where I expect to be given so many things and yet to remain in a state of limbo.

In 1971 I discovered my opportunity to use Australia's cultural diversity to spear - head the world's first marketing arm focused on the cultural diversity. Through this venture I could achieve an effective global outreach by marketing to the native tribes within Australia that together form a rich culturally diverse Australian Family.

I found myself working with most communities to market more effectively products and services from "how to vote", "Telstra", "Financial Services", "Medibank" to "Lifesavers" and the "GST". I have achieved my wishes to learn and work with the culturally diverse communities.

I saw my dream to be coming true. I found myself working on all important social issues from the environment to housing, to health, immunisation, governance, voting and constitutional reform. I saw the successful overseas adoption of many of our Australian practices. The outreach has indeed been global. Our tribes within Australia have transmitted the local messages, which have been conveyed linguistically and culturally correctly to the tribes of the world.

I saw my dreams take on an even greater dimension when my company, the worlds first Ethnic Communications Company, joined forces with the world's largest communications company WPP Group plc through it's Australian operation Singleton, Ogilvy and Mather. WPP is in 97 different countries and could see the benefits, the growth and significance of marketing appropriately to culturally diverse communities. My tribe of ethnic communicators has consequently grown dramatically.

I have learnt so many things from so many which really was only possible to achieve right here in Australia. I have learnt from the diversity of religions to love and forgive. I have learnt to respect, to be tolerant and at peace. I learnt from the factory and the University and the native tribes within our rich cultural mix in so many ways as the following illustrates:

From the Greeks to debate and argue effectively;  
From the Chinese to work hard;  
From the Dutch to bargain;  
From the Japanese to negotiate;  
From the Vietnamese to be tenacious;  
From the English to respect the law;  
From the French to respect the language;  
From the Germans to be precise;  
From the Aborigines to respect the land;  
From the Italians to be passionate (I married one);  
From the Australians to be fair and fair dinkum and  
From the Lebanese to learn from everybody.

Everybody has taught me that in order to promote, to sell, to negotiate, to communicate effectively you need to understand the language and culture of the people of your outreach. In Australia we have 160 different cultures of the world and that makes us a mirror of the global cultural diversity. It enables us to reach every one of those communities without going out of Australia and then to successfully after market testing at home to extend our outreach to the globe.

Equipped with Australia's rich global cultural diversity, I felt I can truly be a "citizen not of Athens or Greece but of the World" as Socrates wrote some 400 years B.C. Ladies and Gentlemen for this reason and for what I have shared with you, I chose to become an Australian Citizen.