

## Launch of ***So Greek : Confessions of a Conservative Leftie***

**By Andrew Robb** – Sunday 21 February 2010

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I like to say I've worked in the public sector, the private sector and the very private sector – the political backroom.

In ***So Greek*** Niki Savva takes us into that backroom with candour, humour and great interest, and a compellingly simple writing style which I believe is Niki's hallmark.

It's a one sitting book. The anecdotal and honest style of writing makes it easy to read, and difficult to put down. Niki is a master of her craft.

I thought the essence of the book was captured by one of our sons, Joe. I saw him looking at my copy of ***So Greek*** and asked his impressions. Joe said *"well, I've only read the first page so far, but my initial impressions are that she doesn't muck around, and poor Peter!"*

It's a brave book. Brave in the unfiltered story of her family's background, brave in the account of her sister Christina's courageous story, brave in her judgements about both herself as a political journalist, and other journalists, and brave in her insights about politicians, particularly Peter Costello and John Howard.

No-one is spared her brutally honest assessment, least of all Niki.

As a political journalist Niki said of herself, *"I would usually begin with a charm offensive to get what I wanted; if that didn't work I dropped the charm bit. I learned to slice and dice anyone who deliberately fed out misleading information, or spoke to others and not me. I lied often, usually about my sources, but about other things too".*

Niki went on, *“Journalists can and do get away with lying; politicians and staff can’t. Nor should they”*.

Niki, I understand, after reading your book, Kevin Rudd has determined, that by 2020 no politician will live a lie.

As a journalist, I found Niki to be well-informed, tough and, at times, lethal. She was feisty, persistent and conniving, but with a smile that made you forgive all – or almost all.

When John Howard was preparing to take over from Alexander Downer to again be Leader of the Liberal Party in early 1995, I asked my staff at the Secretariat to compile a collection of images presented of John Howard in his last two years as Party leader in the late 80s. I needed to assess the repositioning that was necessary.

My team came back with a 3 inch thick collection of commentary, press stories and devastating cartoons, almost all of it depicting John Howard as ‘little Johnny’, an ineffective and out-of-touch leader.

I can report that 50 percent of the most potent pieces were penned by one Niki Savva.

On crossing the rubicon to become a staffer and press secretary to the Treasurer, Peter Costello, Niki pondered, *“could I really bear to put up with people like me?”*

I first met Niki in the ‘80s through her husband Vincent, when I moved from the National Farmers’ Federation to be Tony Eggleton’s Deputy at the Liberal Party Secretariat.

Vince is a wonderful and likeable fellow who until recently had given over 35 years of invaluable service to the Liberal Party. Based principally in the Federal Secretariat, Vince has worked closely with every Liberal leader since the early 70's, and no doubt will be recalled to duty in the months ahead.

One half-told story in Niki's book related to her first meeting with Vince. It was the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, 1975. Niki was working with the Sun News-Pictorial, under Canberra bureau chief, Laurie Oakes.

At that stage Niki's leftie instincts had not been tainted with any conservatism.

Vince was working in Malcolm Fraser's office. They knew who one another was, but had never had a conversation.

Vince was standing at the press boxes in the Old Parliament House very shortly after Gough Whitlam had announced his sacking by the Governor General.

Niki marched up to Vince, grabbed him by the lapels, and bellowed "*you won't get away with this*". What is not in the book is Vince's telling retort, "*we just did*".

At that time, marriage to Vince eight years later could not have been further from Niki's mind.

It was in my early years at the Federal Secretariat, in the late 80s and early 90s, that I gained a real appreciation of tabloid journalism. As the Herald Sun's chief political journalist, Niki was a big part of that.

For my sins I needed to read 10 newspapers a day. I soon learned that if I wanted to know what the punters - later known as the Howard battlers - were reading and responding to, I must focus on the tabloids.

The majority of swinging voters read the tabloids, and newspapers invariably know the interests and concerns of their readers better than the political parties.

I could, and still can, tell what the newspapers market research is showing by the placement of stories, the photographs and the angles taken. They spend much more on internal research than the political parties do.

I also quickly observed that what would take 30 or 40 paragraphs in the broadsheets, would invariably be covered as well or better in 10 to 12 paragraphs in the tabloids. And writing so concisely is a tall order.

Niki was a great exponent of this simple, yet powerful and informative, jargon free reporting and commentary.

It is no surprise then that this book is rich with that simplicity and clarity of writing, a style that paints wonderful word pictures.

For example, when discussing the frequency with which politicians suffer brain snaps when things go wrong, Niki writes *“instead of getting out of the old billy cart and getting on with it, they flap around till the wheels drop off”*.

In discussing Rudd’s 2007 election ploy of presenting himself as Howard Lite, Niki writes *“It was creepy. It was the invasion of the body snatcher. Howard went to sleep one night, Rudd slipped in, smoothed out of a few wrinkles, and stole his skin”*.

Or, when asserting the impossibility of any credible reconciliation between Howard and Costello, Niki observed *“In that final year, whenever voters looked up to check what was happening, more often than not all they could see were middle-aged men busily inspecting their navels to see if any new fluff had arrived”*. A disturbing thought.

I found this Howard/Costello contest to be the backbone of the book.

And, you won't find a more insightful and informed assessment of this political relationship.

Niki views the interaction of the two men from a unique perspective - as a long term senior political journalist, and then as a political insider, working successively for Costello and Howard, during the term of the Howard government.

Some within my ranks may complain about Niki spilling the beans, or making tough assessments, yet I get a real sense of an attempt by Niki to be fair and balanced, without gratuitous or nasty gossip. It is not a “tell all” book.

Though Niki does reveal the existence of a ‘losers’ file’ she kept to store news clips of various journalists and Parliamentary colleagues of Peter Costello when Peter felt he had been slighted.

For me, Niki exposes the pressures, the endless scrutiny, the good and bad character traits of key players, including herself, and the complex interplay between politics and policy.

You are introduced to the human side of politics.

This is a book which takes a constructive look inside the political backroom. Despite Niki's blunt assessment that Peter Costello was, as she says, *"never hungry enough to kill for the leadership"*, and that he *"stuffed up badly as he sought ... more than once ... to supplant the Prime Minister"*, Niki's obvious enduring regard and affection for Peter fills many pages.

According to Niki, *"my six years with Peter Costello were stimulating, rewarding, productive and hilarious but, ultimately, exhausting and frustrating"*. Niki goes on, *"It was Peter Costello's great misfortune to be around at the same time as John Howard, the master politician of his decade"*.

She suggests that Peter is now *"resigned, if not content, to live with himself as possibly the finest Liberal never to become Prime Minister"*.

Niki's time working with John Howard also forged a lasting respect as she writes *"in his second incarnation as Leader his discipline and his focus were extraordinary, and until his final year his judgement was generally very sound"*.

With the benefit of having worked both sides of the fence, Niki gives an unflattering insight into the inter-play between journalists and politicians, a much neglected area of public understanding.

This relationship between journalists and politicians, described variously by Niki as *"symbiotic, parasitic, narcissistic and toxic"*, is one sacred cow that Niki thinks must not be let graze in peace.

Niki says, *“Just as journalists use politicians to get what they want, politicians have to work out which journalists to use, how and when – and whom they can afford to offend in the process. They have to walk a minefield and be prepared to cop the explosions. Or the revenge”*.

Niki agrees that modern political journalism is a protection racket where politicians are either sources or targets. Niki says there are *“charmners and bullies, bribers and blackmailers, blabbers and users. First a journalist will ask nicely; then if that doesn’t work, intimidation might”*.

Of herself, Niki admits, *“If a backbencher told me they never gave briefings about Party meetings I never rang them again, and I never mentioned their name in a story either – unless they had done something wrong of course”*.

By the time Niki was finished, it was hard not to agree with Otto von Bismarck who said *“laws are like sausages. It’s better not to see them being made”*.

Niki’s book is much more than a political story. It powerfully tells the great story of Victorian migration through the eyes of one Cypriot family – the Savva’s.

The first photo in the book, of Elpiniki, Andreas, Steven and Niki really said it all for me.

The father and man of the house sitting with the children, the wife and mother standing behind, all in their best clothes, the children apprehensive, the parents with almost a half smile.

But then your eye is drawn to Andreas’ boots – scuffed, dusty, working boots.

The photo is rich with expectation, but anchored by a great sense of family, hard work, faith and persistence.

It is perhaps a lovely reminder of a quote fittingly from the movie, Big Fat Greek Wedding – *“don’t let your past dictate who you are, but let it be part of who you will become”*.

Niki describes her father as *“a good man...but even good men have their flaws.”* But he was also a brave man, brave to have left his country, wife and family and forge a new life in another land.

Shades of his daughter leaving home to go to Canberra in the early 70s.

As Niki recalls *“Andreas and Elpiniki were beside themselves. Absolutely not, under any circumstances, ever, was I going to leave home unmarried”*. Niki went anyway.

You felt for Elpiniki looking at the group photo from kindergarten, and, as Niki recalled, *“all the little kids down one end, except me, sitting on my own down the other”*.

*Then*, ostracised again for having to buy her precious olive oil from the chemist – back then, it was only used for ‘medicinal purposes’.

The language barrier then for new migrants was a constant source of frustration, and must still be so for new migrants.

We read that to get by, Greeks in Australia developed their own language, adding an ‘o’ or an ‘a’ to English words, then pronouncing them with a Greek accent. As Niki recounts *“the trouble was they bore absolutely no resemblance to the Greek words for the same items”*.

I can report that this particular attempt to communicate caught on in the wider community.

From my teenage years on, in the early 60s, I was brought up in Reservoir, one hub for Greek and Italian migration in Melbourne.

My father was foreman in a local plastics factory during those years and would often come home and tell us how he had to tell Mario or Nick, or whoever – at the very top of his voice of course - *“to watcha their stepa or they’d be deada”*, or something similar. Heaven knows what Mario or Nick made of it!

The book reveals that Niki’s feistiness came from both sides. Niki recounts, *“my father chased me around the kitchen table once in an absolute rage after I told him to “leave me alone, willya!”*. *“Who is this ‘Willya’?”* he yelled. *“He thought it was a disparaging nickname I had invented for him”*.

Then we read about Elpiniki watching Niki’s brother Steve playing Aussie rules football, *“we would stay as far away from my mother as possible; she screamed in both Greek and broken English at anybody who dared touch her son”*, Niki says.

Niki captures some of the unique character of Melbourne, and its obsession with Aussie Rules, with a lovely story about the then Richmond Football Club CEO, Graham Richmond, and football legend Jack ‘Captain Blood’ Dyer, turning up at their Doveton house to sign up her brother Steve for the Tigers U.19 team. Niki says...*“over the years my bragging that I had served Captain Blood a beer in our lounge impressed more people than the fact that I knew the Prime Minister”*.

I might add, one thing not mentioned in the book is Niki’s renowned prowess at marking and kicking a Sherrin.

Another event given very scant reference was the matter of advising the family of Niki's intention to marry someone not of Cypriot background.

In typical Cypriot fashion, Andreas and Elpiniki had been trying to line up eligible Cypriot Australian men. Every time Niki visited Melbourne there would be organized afternoon teas.

One Greek Easter Niki announced – *“I have something to tell you. I'm getting married to this English Australian man, but I should tell you he works for Malcolm Fraser, he is divorced, he's 10 years older than me”*. Niki paused as she observed the growing look of resistance, then went on *“and he's also the son of a priest”*.

With this last pronouncement Andreas looked relieved and said,, *“well that's OK then”*.

We also learn of the genesis of Niki's love of politics; and her contrariness which no doubt contributed to her effectiveness as a journalist.

Niki recalls dinner table debates where whatever position her father took *“we would take the opposite. It was not Greek to agree; that was boring”*. This observation also gave me a better insight into Petro Georgiou.

If the essence of the book is Niki's journey and her interaction with politics and its players, the soul of the book is the story of her sister, Christina.

Niki's love and respect for her sister comes through as absolute. In the final months of Christina's life, Niki talks of her own world slowly disintegrating.

In facing many challenges in her life, I suspect Niki has drawn much strength and inspiration from the example of her sister.

*As Niki observed “not once in her 43 years did I hear Christina express self-pity or complaints. There were no “why me’s” or “what ifs” ... A setback was something to be factored in, not succumbed to. Two terminal illnesses, two death sentences wrecked her body, but left no mark or taint on her spirit or her love for those around her”.*

Christina’s death led unambiguously – with the intervention of Niki and one of Christina’s doctors, Jonathan Cebon – to two decisions to increase public funding of medical research by a remarkable total of \$625million. This is an extraordinary legacy.

So in finishing up, I’ll have to be honest Niki, the book has been disruptive:

- Firstly, the Shadow Cabinet book club has been forced to change this week’s reading to “So Greek”, bumping “Battle Lines” back yet another week.
- Secondly, Tony Abbott has just sent thought the Agenda for the next Party Room Meeting. The first discussion point is titled “Ensuring this year is no Greek Tragedy”. The second item on the Agenda – “The banning of loser files”, and
- Finally, every time I speak to my journalist – the rest are in the loser file – there is this added awkwardness to the conversation as we each try to work out who is manipulating whom

**So Greek : Confessions of a Conservative Leftie** confirms that Niki Savva is gutsy, sharp, a great story teller and always a journalist. And a lovely person to boot.

It also confirms the saying *“fate is what you are given, destiny is what you do with it”* – or in the vernacular of our son, Joe, *“she doesn’t muck around, does she”*.

It’s an honour to declare this wonderful book launched.