

Greek Everyman: Andreas Papandreou at 100

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Andreas Papandreou at 100

2019 marks 100 years since the birth of Andreas Papandreou, Greece's first socialist prime minister and an extraordinary figure of 20th century European politics. Whether in or out of office, Papandreou dominated Greek political life for a generation. In his 11 years as prime minister (1981-89 and 1993-96), he provoked more blind adulation and more enraged vilification at home and abroad than any other post-war Greek or, for that matter, European political leader.

Papandreou's shadow, more than two decades after his death, still looms over Greek political life. Even those Greeks, with little or no memory of him, live in a world that he created. The best proof that Papandreou's style and set of values still dominate Greek political culture, is the current prime minister and leader of radical-left Syriza party, Alexis Tsipras, who won power largely by emulating Papandreou's political persona and political tactics.

When Papandreou swept to power as Greece's first socialist prime minister in October 1981, he was seen as the answer to the prayers of many Greeks trapped after the 1944-1949 Civil War in a repressive and claustrophobic society divided into first-class and third-class citizens. His victory was seen as representing a new political synthesis – national, consensual and participatory. Papandreou's supporters, that October, did not talk about a change of government, but a change of regime.

Papandreou's career, in many ways, mirrored that of Francois Mitterrand, who preceded him into power by a few months. Like the French President, Papandreou's main accomplishment was to get elected and thus introduce the notion of alternation between right-wing and left-wing governments as a normal characteristic of public life. Like Mitterrand, too, the sweeping social and political transformation he promised proved to be less striking than the enjoyment he derived from the exercise of power. Papandreou's was an extraordinary life story: inspiring, amusing, and often disturbing. In fact, his history, almost like that of his own country, offers such a sweeping panorama that it must baffle as well as amaze.

The Importance of Being a Papandreou

Andreas Papandreou was born to be a politician. His lineage and formation allowed of few other possibilities. Politics infused the atmosphere in which he was raised. The Greek political world with its smoke-filled rooms, rituals, backroom dealings and behind-the-scenes machinations, was the only life set before the son of George Papandreou, a prominent centrist

politician who himself was twice to become prime minister. In this respect, Andreas Papandreou's origins accorded closely with those of the majority of Greek political families.

For it is an unwritten law of Greek public life that a political family hands down the tradition of political commitment from one generation to the next, and George Papandreou laid out the path of duty just as clearly as any other grandee who placed his sons on the road to parliament. In the nepotistic and dynastic world of Greek politics, it was and remains the natural order of things. One of Andreas Papandreou's very own sons, George, was also to hold cabinet posts in his father's administrations and eventually become prime minister just as his father and grandfather before him.

To understand a man, Napoleon once said, one has to know what was happening in the world when he was 20. For Papandreou's generation, which came to adulthood during Hitler's and Mussolini's Europe and the quasi-fascist Metaxas dictatorship in Greece, this precept was particularly apt. Metaxas, like Franco in Spain, was ruthless in the use of state terror, the effects of which reverberated for decades. The police force became the regime's agency for state control and its main instrument of reforming political values and public morality. In June 1939, as a third-year law student at Athens University, Andreas Papandreou experienced first-hand the brutality of Metaxas's special security police when arrested and taken for interrogation because of his involvement in a dissident communist group that supported disruptive but non-violent forms of collective action, primarily disseminating anti-regime posters and conducting leafleting campaigns. It was only the fact that he was the son of a prominent politician - and therefore by Greek political standards 'untouchable' - that enabled him to be allowed to leave Greece for the US where he studied at Harvard.

In his 1971 *Democracy at Gunpoint* political memoir, Papandreou himself gives a rather exuberant and self-indulgent version of the events and his conjecture as to how he and his 'university resistance group' (as he called it) were arrested. 'I was cocky and unafraid. Youth and a conviction that my tracks were covered, gave me a sense of security and strength. And a sense of relief. I had played hide-and-seek with the men of special security for three years. I knew that the moment of confrontation would be upon me sooner or later. It was just as well, then, that it had now come about'.

What makes Papandreou's lively description of his arrest remarkable is not the over-dramatic portrayal of himself as the idealistic young hero ready to fight, in spite of his privileged background, against forces of darkness and destitution but the fact that he understood early

on that taking a position on contemporary politics was a fundamental part of his self-description and self-definition.

When Papandreou's father, George, became prime minister in 1963, ending a right-wing dominance of Greek politics that had lasted since the end of the Civil War in 1949, Andreas Papandreou decided to take his American wife and four children to Athens to enter Greek politics, leaving behind a comfortably-settled life in California and a formidable academic reputation. Papandreou's meteoric rise to high office was interrupted in April 1967 when a group of middle-ranking army officers – who subsequently came to be known as 'the Colonels' – launched a coup, which ushered in a seven-year period of military dictatorship. Papandreou was imprisoned but freed and allowed to leave the country a few months later primarily due to effective lobbying by his American wife.

The military junta maintained power through its use of open political repression and with the help of the ripples of an unprecedented international boom. At the same time, the apathy and resignation on the part of a large segment of the Greek population, deeply disillusioned with parliamentary politics, fed a belief that the dictators, though archaic and authoritarian, were better than any other available alternatives. The regime eventually collapsed, not because it was overthrown by popular violent resistance but because it failed to overcome the problem that afflicts the majority of authoritarian models of government - namely the establishment of a political system with a facade of a legitimacy that could succeed the dictatorship.

In exile, first in Sweden and then in Canada, Papandreou aspired to be the orator-in-chief of the anti-junta struggle, frenetically campaigning around the world against the dictators. Papandreou founded an anti-Colonels resistance group, PAK (Panhellenic Liberation Movement), whose activities had very little impact but became the nucleus of his own political party, PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement), after the junta collapsed in the debacle of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in July 1974. Both PAK and PASOK were tightly wrapped around Papandreou's personality and leadership equated, at both party and governmental levels, more often than not with the satisfaction of his will.

Man of the People

Following the downfall of the Colonels' regime, Papandreou announced the formation of PASOK with an eye-catching green rising sun as a party logo. PASOK's founding charter, grandly entitled the Proclamation of 3 September 1974 (written unsurprisingly by

Papandreou himself), called for the establishment of socialism and a fundamental re-orientation of the country's foreign policy: the removal of the US bases from national soil, withdrawal from NATO and rejection of the option of membership of the EEC, which was dismissed at the time as a capitalist club.

Combining populist demagogy, fiery socialist rhetoric and heady nationalism directed principally against the US and Turkey, Papandreou hit on a winning formula. A 14 per cent share of the vote in 1974 doubled to 25 per cent in 1977 and then almost doubled again to 48 percent in 1981. PASOK's 'short march to power' was a remarkable testimony to Papandreou's political charisma and ability to articulate the aspirations and, perhaps more significantly, the fears, resentments, and frustrations of a significant portion of the Greek electorate.

Papandreou understood the complexities of Greek political history and was quick to evoke emotions of national pride. He told the Greek people what they believed to be true, namely that in every crucial phase of the country's modern history a coalition of vested interests -the Bavarians, the notables, the Palace, the Pentagon, NATO, the CIA, the multinationals – had, at every opportunity, turned the country against itself. Papandreou's balcony speeches in Syntagma Square opposite Greek parliament before frenzied supporters with his arms held straight out, Christ-like, and his eyes glaring upward towards the sky as he damned the US as 'the metropolis of imperialism' and pledging the immediate removal of the 'American bases of death' from Greek soil have entered national political folklore.

PASOK's landslide victory in 1981 gave Greece its first-ever socialist government ending half a century of right-wing political monopoly. It was a historic victory since the transfer of power from right to left legitimized *metapolitefsi* (as the Greeks call the transition from dictatorship to multi-party democracy), demonstrating that the country's political system could withstand democratic alteration in power. In fact, the smooth alteration of power between right and left increased public confidence over the functioning of institutions and drew political protest off the street. Even terrorism subsided, as Greece's most deadly terrorist group at the time, the 17 November group, chose not to carry out an attack for two years respecting - as it put it in a communiqué - the popular mandate and wishing not to create additional obstacle to the implementation of PASOK's political programme.

Once in power, Papandreou took anti-Westernism to xenophobic extremes. Declaring that 'Greece belongs to the Greeks', he turned anti-Westernism into a national mantra, threatening

several times to pull Greece out of every single organization to which she belonged. Papandreou's threats never materialized (and in practice were often reversed) but his rhetorical ferocity and anti-American, anti-EC, anti-NATO and anti-Turkish polemics fulfilled a psychological need for both Papandreou and the country itself for international recognition.

Reflecting a mixture of fondness for the man and disdain for right-wing politicians, the electorate trusted Papandreou in 1985 with a comfortable 46 per cent of the vote and a second term. But his second administration was mired by economic stagnation, urban deterioration, and corruption at every level. Papandreou's troubled second term culminated in near-fatal health problems, a highly public liaison with a mistress half his age, a messy divorce, electoral defeat, and indictment by parliament on charges of bribery and embezzlement in the \$200m Bank of Crete scandal.

Papandreou entered the history books again as the first head of government in Greece to face criminal charges. After a nine-month-long trial, dubbed by the Greek media as the 'Trial of the Century', which had a bitterly divisive effect on Greek society, Papandreou was acquitted on all charges by a single vote but the whole episode marked the lowest point of his political career.

Papandreou's return to office in 1993 for a third and final term established PASOK as the natural party of government in Greek politics. By winning in the 1993 general election a 47 per cent of the vote (only marginally less than at the time of his great triumph of October 1981) Papandreou had achieved one of the most spectacular comebacks in postwar European politics. But already weakened by major heart surgery in 1988, he clearly was not the man he had been. As his health deteriorated, Papandreou's entourage, led by his new wife Dimitra continued to camouflage the reality that the socialist leader was little more than an observer in the running of day-to-day policy.

Ill health finally got the better of Papandreou in November 1995, when he was rushed to hospital suffering from pneumonia and kidney problems. Although desperately ill, Papandreou continued to cling to power through seven agonizing weeks in intensive care at the Onassis Cardiac Surgery Centre before finally resigning as prime minister on 15 January 1996, signaling a dispiriting and undignified end to a remarkable political career. Six months later Papandreou was dead.

Legacies

The perpetual cycle of political controversy, scandal and physical illness should not, however, discredit Papandreou's lasting legacy. He was not the mythical socialist revolutionary hero his admirers would have liked but neither was he the 'nine-headed Greek monster' as the right-wing British newspaper *Daily Mail* once described him. Together with the first post-junta premier, the veteran conservative Konstantinos Karamanlis, he helped to wipe away the legacy of the country's seven-year dictatorship and prove that post-junta Greece was a truly stable democracy. PASOK's October 1981 victory with its promises for a dramatic break with the recent past and its radical proposals for changing Greek society may have been anathema to the traditionalist right, but the smooth alternation of power increased public confidence in the functioning of institutions and drew political protest off the street. Under Papandreou's guidance, some important, long-overdue social reforms were implemented but his greatest achievement in power has to be the healing of the wounds of Greece's 1946-49 civil war through the official recognition of vanquished communist refugees who in their thousands were permitted to return home. With Papandreou the left learned how to govern.

Whatever else Papandreou was, he was the ideal Greek everyman: he stood up to the Americans and the Turks, he twirled to the macho *zebekiko* Greek dance in public, he loved fine dining and beautiful women, and his compatriots (whether in favour or against) admired him for all that. Papandreou, the consummate populist that he was, reached the hearts and minds of the voters like no other Greek political leader. Whether on family law or pension reform or foreign policy or education, or the introduction of civil marriage and the recognition of the national resistance, Papandreou invariably touched the majority nerve, knowing how far to push and when to pull back.

The Greeks also admired Papandreou for his determination to redefine Greece's sense of identity. Above all, Papandreou wanted Greece to be autonomous and capable of asserting its independence in matters of national interest. He was, of course, not the first Greek politician who deliberately aggravated the Greeks' lingering sense that they are one of history's victims, stirring nationalist emotions in order to advance their own political ambitions. But he was the first to have the capacity not simply to appeal to some already constituted sense of Greekness but to organise elements of national life and history, often contradictory in themselves, into a coherent narrative that made persuasive sense in his story.

Under Papandreou the nationalism of resentment that had characterized the first years of *metapolitesfi* was replaced by the nationalism of pride. From the day he came to power, Papandreou aggressively sought, through veto diplomacy in the EU and vendetta politics in the Balkan and the Aegean, to redefine Greece's sense of national identity and raise the country's status in the world. In the end, the search for national grandeur brought instead economic stagnation, low growth, double-digit inflation, and colossal public deficits that combined with a bloated and corrupt bureaucracy (which still pervades much of daily and working life) to erode the country's financial stability and international credibility.

If Andreas Papandreou still matters today, despite his tendency to run his party and Greece more like a private fiefdom than a country, it is because he is remembered for demonstrating robust leadership at times of national crisis. National crises – particularly in crisis-prone countries, like Greece - demand from leaders courage, character, imagination and most critically compassion. Papandreou had all these qualities in spades. By contrast, his present-day counterpart Alexis Tsipras may have taken several pages from the Papandreou political playbook but he is no Papandreou in this respect.

Papandreou for example would have never displayed the insensitive behaviour that Tsipras showed in the summer of 2018– one of the most traumatic crises since the second world war, when devastating wildfires decimated an entire seaside community outside Athens. Papandreou's response would have been the complete opposite to Tsipras's slow, detached, uncaring and unapologetic reaction to a grave national emergency. A politician to his marrow, Papandreou would have delivered plain, human sentences that people could understand and identify with, and most certainly would not have failed to show the empathy desperately required by the circumstances or waited an entire week to go by before visiting the devastated areas.

Papandreou remains a fascinating figure in European politics, part populist and part visionary. A one-man election machine took the Greek Socialists to unprecedented political heights transforming them into an extraordinary vote-winning machine, something that, in turn, gave him a unique opportunity to rewrite the rules of Greek politics. In fact, Papandreou enjoyed circumstances more favourable than any other Greek premier in the country's modern history.

But, like Mitterand, he was an egotist who lived for the adrenalin of office. More interested in himself and his place in history than in Greece's future, Papandreou's patronage and

clientelism at home and vendetta diplomacy abroad damaged Greece, turning the country into a kind of pariah state. For years, domestically, it was less important to get the deficit under control, fill the holes in the budget, tackle high unemployment, resist tax evasion, defeat corruption, and increase the status and credibility of the country than it was to postpone the moment when each of these might be confronted. And, abroad, the Greece-against-the-rest-of-the-world attitude led to the country being treated more often as a leper than as a friend. Like Margaret Thatcher, a political contemporary of his, Papandreou tended to see foreign policy not as a continuum but as zero-sum games that Greece had to win. The smoothness of conventional diplomacy, the spirit of give-and-take, were values he could never bring himself to observe. At the same time, however, without confusing intentions and consequences, Papandreou was a creature of his time and a pragmatic leader for whom immediate needs and available expedients mattered more than apparent consistency. His unpredictability and byzantine governing methods together with the subtle ease with which he evaded definition have become the stuff of Greek political legend.

Opinions on a prime minister's legacy are always provisional but no one can dispute that Andreas Papandreou was a historic figure. Papandreou's years in power were touched with national pride and grandeur but, in the end, they constitute a melancholy saga of an instinctive politician and a master tactician who could not rise above the habits and conditioning of a lifetime to be the great, reforming prime minister that Greece needed him to be. Greek democracy, more than two decades after Papandreou's death, still suffers from the same structural deformations. Its political culture and institutions continue to be clientelistic and corrupt and its political parties –theoretically the key agents of change – remain populist, parochial and inward-looking. In many ways, Papandreou's premierships were a mirror of the country itself: chronic psychological complexities leading to squandered opportunities and unrealistically high expectations undermined by self-indulgence and lack of discipline.

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