A Case of Integration?

It is an election year in Greece, and on Symi both candidates for the office of Mayor are well aware that with a majority of just nine votes last time around, every vote is vital. They are also aware that with non-Greek EU nationals voting in numbers for the first time in municipal elections, the 120 or so new votes that are up for grabs are particularly important. In the first of the two articles that the Greek newspaper “Ta Nea” carried about Symi in the past month (both can be read in English or Greek on the SymiGreece website), the candidature of a British woman was the focus of interest. In fact, since the article was written, another British woman has joined the race, this time for the other candidate.

Some are encouraged by this participation of non-Greeks. Indeed, to quote the editorial of the September 2006 edition of the English language Symi Visitor Free Monthly, the non-Greek editor Nicholas Shum, sees this as “an encouraging sign of the extent to which the foreign contingent is becoming integrated into Symiot society.” While this perceived integration may indeed be the case, an alternative interpretation is also possible. Put simply, if the non-Greeks were becoming integrated into Symiot society why is there a need for non-Greek candidates to attract their votes? Could it be that both mayoral candidates know that the best way to secure the non-Greek vote on Symi is to have non-Greeks for the non-Greeks to vote for? Could it be that when one mayoral candidate secured a non-Greek on their ticket, the other had little choice but to do the same? If this were indeed the case, it would be viewed as a sign of a distinct lack of integration of the foreigners into Symiot society.

One thing that is certain is that the Symiots are rightly very proud of their island and its Greek identity. Symi has always been Greek, even during the centuries of foreign occupation, and we are sure it always will be. The non-Greeks may come and live on Symi but there exists a common perception that many of them have a colonial mentality which runs contrary to the aspirations of the Symiots who wish to preserve what is worth
preserving of their history and environment, but also to take steps forward to make their lives better. It is this mentality and not a particular nationality that may deter Symiots from voting for non-Greek candidates, both of whom have declared that at least part of their reason for running is to promote the interests of the non-Greeks.

We wish all the candidates, Greek or otherwise, well in the election and await the result with great interest. We agree with Mr Shum that the final tally of votes for each candidate could be most revealing.

A Follow–Up

In last month's editorial we took exception to what we perceived to be the interference of the Symi Visitor Free Monthly, and particularly its editor, in politics on Symi and also the upset caused by a particular anti-muslim paragraph in its front-page article.

On the issue of road-building, something that we called the editor's pet-peeve, we are glad to report that both mayoral candidates mention in their manifestos their commitment to building roads and opening up the island to improve tourism. We agree wholeheartedly with them and wish whoever finds themselves in office in mid-October, the best of luck in bringing their road-building plans to fruition. We hope that those opposed to their plans can accept that these roads are what the overwhelming number of Greek people on Symi want. Symi is beautiful and has much to offer everyone, but it is not a caricature or a Disneyland to be locked away in a glass case, and must be allowed to grow and develop if it is to give a living to the people who live here. SymiGreece trusts that any plans for the island that the Symi people find contentious will be vigorously debated. On the issue of road-building, the debate is long over and the decisions have been made.

Mr Shum, the editor of the Symi Visitor Free Monthly who so managed to upset locals and visitors alike with an anti-muslim paragraph last month concedes that he was guilty of “sloppy journalism” but does not offer any apology. He mentions the offence he caused only in a reply to a letter he received. He claims that the opinions he expressed were not his but those of the crew of the Dodekanisos Pride taking part in the evacuations from Lebanon in July. Why did he allow such a clearly anti-muslim statement to be printed last month without any acknowledgement that this was, as he says himself this month, “at variance with one’s own received impression of the situation”? Sloppy journalism indeed, and for those most deeply offended there is no sign that Mr Shum’s attempt at back–
pedalling is in any way an acceptable retreat from an unacceptable position. The flippancy of his statement “Interestingly, I have also been informed that the article was unnecessarily anti-Israeli. You can’t please everyone.” is very much misplaced. For Ali, a long-time Symi-resident who SymiGreece interviewed last month, Mr Shum has done nothing but aggravate the situation.