

## **49<sup>th</sup> European Lions Forum**

### **Quality of life through acting collectively and caring effectively**

**By Dr. George Vassiliou  
President of the Republic of Cyprus  
(1988-1993)**

**13<sup>th</sup> November 2003**

Dear President  
Dear President of Lions International  
Dear Lions guests and participants  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear friends,

We are all extremely pleased that Cyprus has been chosen to host the 49<sup>th</sup> European Lions Forum and I am greatly honoured for having been asked to be the keynote speaker at the opening ceremony.

Over 1000 of distinguished Cypriot citizens are members of the 25 Cyprus Lions Clubs. Cyprus may be a small island but we are proud that we have one of the highest percentages of members not only in Europe but in the whole world. In the last few decades the Cyprus Lions, with their dedication and hard work, have considerably contributed to improving the quality of life in the island by alleviating pain and suffering between many groups of people and particularly the blind. I have not the slightest doubt that if your founder, Melvyn Jones, was alive today, he would have been extremely proud for the achievements of Lionism in Cyprus but also in the whole world.

In preparing for this brief presentation I came across a very interesting statement in one of your web pages. It says that “all individuals are citizens of their community and their nation. A Lion is something more. A citizen of the world.”

The first object of Lions Club International is to create and foster a spirit of understanding among the peoples of the world. This is indeed the fundamental reality of our age that community or national interest can no longer be attained in isolation from world interest.

Today, more than ever before, we all realise that we cannot possibly go on living in our small little world in isolation of the others. We recognise that actions, in places thousands of miles away from us, are having a direct effect on our lives. Either by affecting the environment or the world economic situation or, what is even more important, the world political situation and the sense of security for all of us. The need for collective action has never been greater and it is no coincidence therefore that this is the main theme of your 49<sup>th</sup> Conference. Quality of life through acting collectively and caring collectively.

Dear friends,

The challenges we have to face wherever we live are many and great; poverty, underdevelopment, injustice, disease epidemics, trafficking in human beings, destruction of the environment. One could speak for hours for any one of these challenges and many others that I haven't mentioned. So I will only briefly outline some of the aspects of underdevelopment and illegal immigration.

I start with the problem that we face in many countries but particularly in countries, like Cyprus, situated in main crossroads to Europe; the problem of illegal immigration. We read in the papers every few days the tragedy of old boats sinking taking with them tens or hundreds of illegal immigrants and we do know that there are thousands and thousands of such destitute persons living either illegally or in various camps around Europe. There is no doubt that illegal immigration has increased considerably in the last few years. Why is that? Is it because conditions are so really wonderful in the countries where those poor people wish to find a new home? Up to a point, yes. There is no comparison between living conditions in Europe compared to Africa, for example. Television is projecting everyday scenes of this life-style to the hundreds of thousands of poor people in Africa, Asia or Latin America, making thus even more obvious the contrast to their own lives and increasing the appeal of the developed nations. Much more important, however, is the fact that conditions in developing countries and particularly in Africa have been getting from bad to worse. Millions of people live under the poverty line, thousands of children die because of malnutrition and other thousands suffer from diseases, like aids, without much hope for treatment. We have to admit, whether we like it or not, that we have failed our main duty as

human beings, as Christians or Moslems, as good Lions, to Africa. Colonialism has left behind it corrupt administrations, a heritage of tribalism, civil wars, lack of infrastructure, all kinds of diseases. Can really any one of us blame these poor and hopeless people for wishing to escape from the hell in which they live? They have nothing to lose, so they are ready to 'make a gamble' to take their chances. They are ready to suffer anything as long as they can have a better future.

The European Union has a noble and ambitious objective to reduce by 2015 by half the number of people living in extreme poverty around the world and particularly in Africa. However, let us not celebrate because even if this noble objective is achieved, it would still imply that the other half will continue to live in extreme poverty after 2015. Furthermore, judging by the amount of money spent on development assistance around the world, it is not at all certain that this objective will be achieved. With poverty and suffering at such a level it is not difficult to understand that people in their desperation try by all means to escape. Prostitution, the illegal trafficking of human-beings or the export of death through the cultivation of all kinds of drugs is for many the only way to escape.

Dear Lions,

Looking at the very interesting program of the work of your Conference I have realised that you will be dealing with some of the many challenges that our societies are facing currently. Issues like protecting the youth from drugs and alcohol, ensuring recycling and protecting the environment, helping people with special needs, promoting the transfusion of blood and donation of body organs for transplantation, helping the blind. To all these activities which are all extremely worthwhile one could add others like for example helping the Roma people, alleviating poverty, contributing to the need to reduce unemployment, etc.

You are very well aware that in order to be successful in addressing all these challenges one has to act collectively. To mobilise, not only the other Lion members, but also as many people as possible in our communities or in our work place, the appropriate Government bodies, political parties, professional organisations, etc.

We are all fully aware that our economic system, the system of enlightened capitalism is based on individualism. It is the effort and work of the millions and millions of individuals that leads at the end to the desired result of progress in every sphere of life. There is no doubt, however, that individualism, although important, cannot under any circumstances help address and cure the many problems our societies face. We need to work together; we need collective action if we want to achieve any results. Let us not forget that by helping others, by alleviating misery, illnesses, poverty, etc. we are also helping ourselves. A decent human-being's life cannot be satisfying unless he contributes and helps his neighbours and those around him, to have a better life themselves. The egoistic approach to life is a recipe for disaster in our today's strongly inter-dependent societies. One or two centuries ago people relied mainly on themselves and their families, but today to have even the slightest chance of being successful, we have to work and communicate with hundreds and thousands of persons around us. We need to care about what is happening in places far away from us.

You the Lions are the good Samaritans. Through your actions you are giving a wonderful example, an example which I hope you will not mind if other people, non-Lions, will try to emulate.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

I hope, or rather I am certain, that your Conference, judging from its program alone, will be a great success. But please try to find some time to get to know a little bit about Cyprus as well and understand our problem, the tragedy of living in a small island that has been cut in two by a brutal coup d'etat and the invasion that followed. The people of this island, Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots have clearly demonstrated in the past months that they want and can live together. We are certain that jointly we can create and build a better future for ourselves. We sincerely hope and do our utmost so that with the support of the U.N. and the help of people like you and your governments, it will be possible to restart negotiations, early in the new year. We strongly desire to achieve an agreement and join the European Union reunited.

I wish every success to your 49<sup>th</sup> Conference and a really pleasant and enjoyable stay in Cyprus.