

Speech by Laurie Oakes SO GREEK: Confessions of a conservative leftie

(AKA *The Savva Memoirs*)

Someone once said that memoirs are the backstairs of history.

In *So Greek*, Niki Savva has taken us up the backstairs of recent Australian politics and snuck us inside to give us the kind of intimate look that we don't get very often.

Not even those of us who, as political journalists, like to think we know a whole lot about what goes on in the back rooms. AND on the backstairs. The truth is, we know only a bit.

Peter Costello won't thank Niki for producing this book. She's rather more candid about him and his flaws and weaknesses than he will be comfortable with.

Probably John Howard won't be all that delighted with Niki either. Apart from anything else, she's scooped him on some pretty good stories that he probably wanted to keep for HIS memoirs.

But I'll make this fearless prediction. The Howard memoirs—to be titled, I understand, *So Earlwood*—won't be nearly as racy, amusing, interesting and honest as Niki's.

Niki, of course, has one very big advantage over the former prime minister. She might not be in love with journalism any more. That comes out very strongly in these pages.

But it's her training and experience in the craft that makes *So Greek: Confessions of a Conservative Leftie* so hard to put down. She can write and she can tell a story brilliantly.

And you can see the whole range of her journalistic experience in the book. From the serious analysis that was so important in her time on *The Age* and *The Australian* to the tabloid and human interest skills she mastered so well on the *Sun News-Pictorial* (now the *Herald-Sun*), to the keyhole-peeping talent she displayed in a very brief period—just a few weeks, as I recall-- anonymously co-writing the Whip gossip column in the old *Truth* newspaper.

Unfortunately in the book she's outed her co-author on *The Whip*. All I can say in my defence that the best stuff—which is to say the most scurrilous--was hers. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Niki and I go back a long way. I remember her arriving in Canberra to work in the Oz bureau, when Gough Whitlam was prime minister.

She was just a kid really, but the kid turned out to be a pretty good reporter so in the mid-70s I hired her for the old *Sun News-Pictorial* (now the *Herald-Sun*) where I was Canberra bureau chief.

My other notable hirees besides Niki around that time were Tony O'Leary and Geoff Walsh. How's that for a gold-plated trio of political reporters and future minders?

Now I'm waiting for O'Leary and Walsh to produce their books.

O'Leary's would be called *So Meek*.

Niki was smart, and she was tough. She says in the book that she HAD to toughen up after being told she was too nice to ever become a bureau chief. And it's true that she SHOULD have got that promotion well before she did.

But those were pioneering days for women in the Press Gallery. Niki was the first female political journo hired by the *Sunpic*, the country's biggest circulation newspaper at the time.

On other papers Anne Summers over-awed polities, bureaucrats and colleagues alike because of her outspoken feminism; Michelle Grattan, then as now,

worked longer and harder than anyone else; Gay Davidson from the *Canberra Times* showed she was as good as the blokes by using the gents' dunny rather than the ladies'.

Niki was Ethniki, The Werris (as in Werris Creek), and The Moody Mediteranean. She had her cheeky smile and her "little ole me" persona and she just seemed to fit in.

And she broke stories. Even in those early days you didn't want to stand between Niki and a good yarn.

Niki writes: "I refined my techniques by observing Laurie Oakes."

That would be flattering, except for one thing. Her confessions later in the book about how badly she believes she behaved at times as a political journalist.

But this is one of the things that makes *So Greek* a brave book. Niki obviously took the view that, if she was going to tell the truth about others and make tough judgements about them, she had to be equally tough and candid about herself.

And she is.

For example: "As a journalist I lied often, usually about my sources, but about other things, too."

On the use of intimidation. "If I rang a Labor backbencher seeking information and they told me they never gave briefings about caucus discussions or decisions, I never rang them again. And I never mentioned their names in a story either. Unless they had done something wrong, of course."

On her concerns about becoming a press secretary: "Could I really bear to put up with people like me?"

And this admission: "I was to become the kind of press secretary I'd always hated—the type who puts up barriers." Was she ever!

Before Niki joined Peter Costello's staff, I used to have occasional very pleasant dinners with the then Treasurer. After she became his press secretary, the dinners for two became dinners for three.

And if Peter even got close to revealing anything interesting, he got the Evil Eye. If you want to know about Cypriots and the evil eye, that's explained in the book too.

The only saving grace was that Niki was a good dinner companion, too—even sober, which she always was when she was in her guard dog role.

Inevitably since Niki's book came out—since its publication was first mooted, in fact—there's been debate about whether political staffers *should* write about what they've seen and heard and done.

It's OK for politicians to write memoirs or publish diaries, apparently...but a lot of politicians, staffers, and others don't think it's ethical for the people who work for politicians to do the same.

I can see the argument. How do you have trust if someone's likely to spill the beans later?

But that happens all the time in politics. It goes with the territory. Any polliie knows there's a risk anything he or she says will be leaked.

I know this will shock you. But even things said in the sanctity of the party room are sometimes leaked.

Ministers in the last Labor Government had Neil Blewett keeping a diary on what happened in Cabinet so he could publish it later. In the Gorton-McMahon years, Peter Howson kept notes of conversations he had with other ministers, backbenchers, bureaucrats, journalists, party officials—and he published the lot. Great source material.

I don't see that there's any difference if a staffer does it.

In the US there's a long and fine tradition of political staffers writing books that shed light on the political process and the people involved in it.

It happens in Britain, too. Alastair Campbell's diaries, *The Blair Years*, provided a valuable insight into Tony Blair and his government (and into Alastair Campbell himself, of course).

But this sort of thing doesn't happen much in Australia, more's the pity.

John Edwards, a former Keating staffer, wrote *Keating: The Inside Story*, but that was a rather different situation from Niki's. Keating employed Edwards as an adviser expressly so that he could gather material for the biography. Keating knew what Edwards was doing and paved the way for it.

He was rather less happy when the book was published though.

Edwards revealed that, as Treasurer, Keating set up a trampoline in the backyard of his Canberra house because he quite seriously believed QUOTE that the few moments of perfect stillness at the apex of a jump, those few moments when you had risen as high as you would but had not yet begun to fall, when your blood, bones and organs were suspended momentarily in space, were the moments when any cancer cells in your body would be annihilated".

Keating thought that made him sound a bit weird. I don't know why.

Keating didn't authorize Don Watson's book on his period as prime ministerial speechwriter and was distinctly cranky about it. But *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart* is a great book, and an important one. It explains a lot about Keating's personality and his strengths and weaknesses and why the Keating Government went the way it did. Like Niki's, it's also a bloody good read.

Let's hope Savva and Watson have started something. Our understanding of what REALLY happens in politics and why—would be much the richer for it.

I'd love to read the recollections of Lachlan Harris and Alister Jordan about life inside the bunker that never sleeps. If Jasper and Abbey can do a book, I fail to see why Alister and Lachie shouldn't.

Niki DOES tell a lot of tales out of school. And not just about politicians but about journalists as well.

There's a lot of secret journalistic business disclosed here.

The remarkable thing, though, is that there's no malice in any of it. There's no settling of scores.

Some of her judgements are pretty tough, but that just means she's clear-eyed. She's not nasty.

I said Peter Costello wouldn't be happy, and I think that's pretty self-evident. Niki's frankness about his indecision, and the way he stuffed up his chances of getting the leadership, is not exactly flattering.

But as a result we learn a lot about why the best prime minister we never had didn't make it to The Lodge. And that's important as well as interesting.

I've always been a Costello admirer—a fan from the moment he took his seat in parliament. But one anecdote in the book really surprised me. I think it's particularly telling.

As Niki reports it: "Jeanne Pratt asked Peter, at a dinner one night, why he wanted to be prime minister... A few days later, Peter asked for a screed to help him answer the question, but I put the request to one side. This was definitely one for him to decide."

Niki doesn't spell it out, but what the story says to me is this. If Peter Costello didn't know WHY he wanted the job, it's not really surprising that he didn't drive harder—as hard as necessary—to get it.

But even though Niki pulls few punches and makes some unflattering judgements about her old boss, the affection she has for him shines through. It's not a knife job. It's NOT an anti-Costello book.

She's an admirer who thinks he would have made a good prime minister. And she's obviously sad that he didn't get the chance to show it. But in her view it was, to a large extent, his own fault.

So Greek is not just a book about politics, of course. It's also a story about a family. A Cypriot family who migrated to Australia in the early 1950s.

The chapter on the family's background in Cyprus is just extraordinary.

There's the story of Niki's grandfather, Saouris, conscripted by the British in World War I, who got into a brawl with another soldier on a troop train. It escalated to a knife fight when they reached their destination.

When they were hauled before the commanding officer he looked at their files and said: "Did you know you are brothers?" They didn't. Their father had packed them off to different villages when they were children, and they hadn't had any contact since.

The section on the different world the Savva family found in Australia and the way they adjusted to it reflects an important part of our country's social history. The immigrant experience.

I love the story about Niki's mum, Elpiniki-- who is, incidentally, a magnificent cook--discovering the delights of vegemite. True. She really liked it.

And these migrants claim they taught AUSTRALIANS about food!

As she got to her teens, young Niki really felt the cultural divide. She wasn't allowed to ride a bike, wear slacks, go out barefooted, or play with boys.

And this is interesting. One of her mother's male relatives offered to give Niki \$500 if she stayed a virgin until she got married."

As I read that a light bulb lit up in my head and I said to myself: I wonder if Tony Abbott has thought of that. \$500 for people who refuse to part with their greatest gift. A virginity bonus, like the baby bonus.

See. Niki's no longer in the game, but she's still coming up with great policy ideas for the Liberals.

Life was hard for the Savva family in the early years. They learned that whingeing doesn't do you any good... You just get on with it.

And that attitude explains some of the harsh judgements Niki was to make later of Peter Costello when he became, in her words, "sanctimonious and sooky".

At the heart of *So Greek* is the story of Christina, Niki's sister, to whom the book is dedicated. "For Christina—a shining example of the value of life and how it should be lived."

I was privileged to know Christina. She really was special. Vital, courageous, bubbling with good humour despite a dreadful hereditary illness.

Reading Niki's account of the last two weeks of Christina's life, it's hard to hold back tears. Very hard.

I'm pretty sure the main reason Niki started writing this book was to tell Christina's inspirational story. The politics and the rest of it, I think, were secondary.

It was the need to spend time with Christina in Melbourne as her health deteriorated that led to Niki making the switch from political reporter to political minder.

That switch that put her in a position to lift the veil that normally conceals much of what goes in politics—including the role of minders, and the inter-action between politicians and journalists which is fundamental to the whole process.

So what we get is something different from the normal run of books about politics in this country.

Here are some of the things I like about it.

I like the aphorisms. Such as Niki's warning to politicians. "A friendly journalist is not necessarily a friend."

Another one. “Politicians have to be different enough to attract attention, but not so different that they’re hunted down by the pack.”

I like the anecdotes. *So Greek* is chocker with great anecdotes.

I like the “how-to” aspects of the book...Advice on what to do and what not do to succeed in politics.

Sample: “Politicians who want to succeed have to suffer fools, most of them from their own side. They have to listen attentively to all the banal complaints or advice that their colleagues feel compelled to dispense, even when all they really want to do is talk about themselves. They have to eat humble pie and look as if they love it, and then ask for a second helping.”

Guess which longest-serving Treasurer didn't follow this advice?

I like the humour in the book. There's lots of it.

I like the way Niki humanises politicians. Shows them as real people. And sympathises with them to a large extent.

It's a change from the kind of portrayal of politicians we've got used to since Cicero wrote 50 or 60 years BC: “Politicians are not born; they are excreted.”

It's not the kind of attitude that does a lot for the health of our democracy. It's a great line, though, isn't it?

I like Niki's description of the role of a press secretary. “The press secretary's job of satisfying the media and his or her master at all times is like juggling a tiger and a python.” Doesn't that get it exactly?

I like the way she writes about the political process.

“It is not a contest for the faint-hearted. Because the stakes are so high, there is no place for weaklings in politics and political journalism. It's a toss-up who is tougher, more devious, and more scarred—the reporters or their subjects.”

I like the description of the relationship between politicians and political writers. “It is symbiotic, parasitic, narcissistic, and toxic.”

Obviously I like the inside stories, too.

Like the one about the secret meeting Peter Costello held with his closest supporters in Michael Ronaldson's Melbourne apartment after Glen Milne broke the Walletgate yarn and Howard denied there'd been any leadership deal.

The purpose of the meeting was to decide if Costello should challenge, resign or sit pat. Chris Pyne and Mitch Fifield said challenge. Ronaldson said that was madness. Tony Smith was for sitting pat. Niki has a lot of fascinating detail about the discussion.

I'm sorry, though, Niki. You missed Chris Pyne's best argument. I'm told Chris said that Costello should challenge because he was a Leo and that's what Leo's do. I'm a Leo too, said Chris, and Leos are bold and brave.

Well, Niki's NOT a Leo, but *So Greek* proves that she's bold and brave too.

I'll make one final point...

One of the recurring themes in the book is a concern that fear of the media is making our politicians dull.

She writes of politicians becoming robotic and scripted to avoid gotcha journalism. She says journalists complain bitterly about identikit politicians, yet the media tend to pick on politicians who are even a little bit different.

I've expressed similar concern myself at various times.

But it turns out, Niki, that the problem isn't exactly recent. The other day I came across this, written by G.K. Chesterton early last century:

“For fear of the newspapers politicians are dull, and at last they are too dull even for the newspapers.”

Still, as we used to say frequently in the old Sunpic bureau, it's old enough to be new.

I take great pleasure in declaring this terrific book launched.

