

Conference of Local Bar Associations

by Edward L. Weiner, Chair



The Rule of Law and Role of Attorneys: It's Not All Greek to Us

In a society founded on respect for the rule of law, the lawyer fulfills a special role. The lawyer's duties do not begin and end with the faithful performance of what he or she is instructed to do so far as the law permits. A lawyer must serve the interests of justice, as well as those whose rights and liberties he or she is trusted to assert and defend and it is the lawyer's duty not only to plead the client's cause, but to be the client's adviser. Respect for the lawyer's professional function is an essential condition for the rule of law and democracy in society.

— Code of Conduct for European Lawyers. The Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE). 2008

PARTICIPANTS IN THE VSB Midyear Legal Seminar observed first-hand the importance of our profession in maintaining the rule of law and democracy during our stay in Athens, Greece, November 2–9.

A highpoint of the seminar, which included excellent CLEs and wonderful tours of historic sites, was The Rule of Law Panel Discussion, organized by Judge George Varoutsos and VSB President George Shanks, in coordination with the Athens Bar Association. The panel discussion took place just hours before the Greek Parliament's confidence vote on Prime Minister George Papandreou, as well as the start of scheduled demonstrations in Constitution Square in front of the Parliament Building (and our hotel).

The panel of Greek attorneys included two members of Parliament (truly remarkable, given the timing of the meeting), the president of the Hellenic-American Chamber of Commerce, a noted law professor, a senior member of the Ministry of Justice, a judge, the vice president of the Athens Bar Association, several other leading commercial and criminal attorneys, the president of the Athens Law School Alumni Club, as well as the vice president of the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE).

The remarks of the panel members were surprisingly frank. While of varying opinions politically, the panel members were solid in their agreement

that “the image of lawyers is under siege” in Europe.

In addition to noting the challenges of maintaining the integrity of the judicial infrastructure in a distressed economy, panel members raised a number of other issues familiar to us as attorneys and as Virginians:

- Ensuring and improving “equal access” to the law;
- Using technology to reduce costs and streamline the legal process (online filings for “Federal” Court is currently being implemented in Greece);
- Restructuring and simplifying tax laws to build revenue, while allowing families to flourish and businesses to grow.

As a frame of reference, Greece and Virginia are somewhat similar in size and population; Greece's land area is 51,000 square miles, compared to Virginia's at 39,500 square miles. Their population is eleven million, compared to ours at eight million. However, per capita annual income in Greece is only \$30,000, compared with \$45,000 in Virginia.

The panel pointed out another difference between Greece and Virginia, particularly relevant to VSB members: there is a trend in Greece for *more* elected officials to be attorneys, as opposed to the *downward* trend in the commonwealth.

The lively and substantive nature of the forum carried over into the luncheon reception where panel members and VSB members were free to speak in small groups. In a conversation with Evangelos Tsouroulis, the vice president of the CCBE, we discussed the common challenges and approaches to sharing best practices among bar associations of varying sizes, from rural to urban, whether it be across twenty-seven European Union countries or ninety-three counties in Virginia. We agreed that the key was consistent, ongoing, inter-bar communication.

As you know, the mission of the CLBA includes building lines of communication among local bars, as well as between local bars and the VSB. To fulfill our mission, the CLBA presents the Bar Leaders Institute, a one-day program that trains and provides resources to current and prospective local and statewide bar leaders. The next BLI is scheduled for Monday, March 5, at the University of Richmond. Please visit the CLBA page on the VSB website for further information.

The VSB Midyear Legal Seminar was an opportunity to share with bar leaders from Greece our common goals, roles, and challenges. Many thanks to Judge Varoutsos and President Shanks for this opportunity. I commend the VSB for its efforts and hope that this type of forum will become a permanent part of our Midyear Legal Seminar.