

'Almost everything that you thought you knew about current-day Greece is wrong.'

That thought went through my head as I stood among a mass of demonstrators in Syntagma Square during the recent general strike. There was a festive air: souvlaki sellers amid grandmothers, students singing and lots of street theatre performances. It was unlike any of the images that I had seen; there was no stone throwing, no tear-gas or water cannon attacks. I may have been lucky but there was a wide spectrum of ordinary people marching in the demonstration. The usual suspects were there, of course: the anarchists, the Communists and the general drop-a-hat-see-me-protest lot. But there was also a broad range of others: nurses, farmers, doctors, actors and teachers.

After the demonstration was over, I walked past the rows of gas-masked policemen (generally far nicer than the thuggish louts of Canadian law enforcement at the G8 and G20) and the parliament building up to the rich Kolonaki area of Athens. Kolonaki is all Armani and espressos, designer stores amid expensive cafés. I interviewed a corporate lawyer in his offices there about the demonstrators. I expected to hear a class-conscious diatribe about non-taxpaying freeloaders clogging up traffic. Rather, over coffee in bone-china cups, the lawyer said he liked the protests, had taken part in many himself and was sorry that he missed that day's demonstrations.

I heard a lot of similar views from a broad range of people. Nor are these sentiments an accident of selected interviews. Greek opinion polls show consistent rates of over 75 per cent of the population of all economic classes in support of the protests.

If you have read the international media for the last year, there have been lots of articles about the so-called "Greek psyche." Generally, they portray Greeks as a lazy, corrupt lot who are happy to sit around in the sun drinking ouzo and cheating German banks out of their hard-earned profits. To describe an entire population in these terms is dangerously close to racism, yet we hear this analysis constantly in the media.

The real problem is that the facts do not make mesh with this analysis. One fact: In an international survey of working hours in OECD countries, the Greeks are actually second in total hours worked only just behind the Koreans and far ahead of Canadians. Two, the Greek economy compared to the entire European Union is roughly the size of greater Miami to the rest of the United States. Even a wide bankruptcy would be embarrassing but it should not shake the fundamental European economy.

Three, part of the reason why so many Greeks have taken to the streets against their government is not to protest paying their taxes. (Approximately two-thirds of workers have little choice as their taxes are deducted from their salaries, as in Canada.) Rather, people are partly on the streets because they have lost faith in their political leaders after a series of corruption scandals that have rocked the Greek domestic political landscape, but have received little attention outside the country. The most notorious is the Siemens case. Siemens is a German multinational company. In an irony missed by no one, high-level Siemens executives were put on trial in German courts for paying hundreds of millions of dollars in bribes and kickbacks to Greek politicians in exchange for overpriced infrastructure contracts. While some of the Siemens executives who paid the bribes were convicted in Germany, no Greek politician who actually accepted the bribes has gone to jail.

It is not as if some of the politicians suspected of taking bribes have not been named. The Greek anti-corruption unit wrote a damning report of the Siemens case. However, before they were allowed to investigate any further, they had to submit (by law) their findings to the Greek parliament. Perhaps not surprisingly the Greek politicians decided not to allow many investigations of their own to continue.

It is many of these same politicians who are in charge of making the fiscal cuts that are supposed to satisfy German and other European banks. Imagine Karlheinz Schreiber (a convicted German bribe-payer) and Brian Mulroney (a former politician with a credibility problem) being placed in charge of slashing Canada's health-care programs and you have some understanding of the anger of the Greek population. This is why so many Greeks are protesting on the streets, not because they are lazy or do not want to pay their taxes but because they have no faith in any of their politicians.