Your Excellency the President of the Hellenic Republic,
The Honourable Mayor of Rhodes,
The Chief Justice of Australia,
Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It’s my great pleasure to be here with you today in Rhodes, to speak about what I think is a unique relationship between Greece and Australia.

The breadth of that relationship is evident here today as we mark the opening of this inaugural International Legal Conference of the Hellenic Australian Lawyers Association.

May I congratulate you on this excellent initiative which will explore the thought-provoking theme of ‘Contemporary legal issues and the influence of Hellenism’. What a great opportunity to exchange ideas and perspectives and to build closer links between the legal communities of Greece and Australia.

But in terms of the broader bilateral relationship, let me start from the very beginning:

The first known connections between Australia and Greece appear to be entwined with the fates of seven young sailors from Hydra.

These seven were the crew of a Greek vessel who were accused of robbing a Maltese ship in 1827.

They were tried by a British naval court (Britain being the ruling power of Malta at the time), found guilty of piracy and sentenced to death. After the intervention of some senior judicial philhellenes in London, this sentence was later commuted to life in the penal colonies of NSW.
The seven arrived at Port Jackson on 27 August 1829 and were put to work as servants in various trades: carpentry, boat-building and establishing early vineyards at Camden.

They worked hard, got on well with the locals and by 1837, the seven were pardoned. Not only that, the British authorities were somehow convinced to pay the costs of their repatriation to Greece.

Perhaps even more extraordinary, two of the seven chose to stay. Mr Antonis Manolis and Mr Ghikas Boulgaris were the first Greeks to be naturalised and Australia’s first Greek settlers. They spent the rest of their lives in the Picton and Queanbeyan areas, cultivating grapes, helping landowners and having rather large families.

So I think we can detect some enduring themes already:

First, the extent to which Australians appreciate excellent Greek wine-making expertise – and I’m pleased to see many of you carrying on this tradition here in Rhodes.

And second, the role played by the law – and by judges and lawyers in particular – in forging those first links between our two countries – and I pay my respects to all of you and to your antecedents for their foresight in this regard.

But there is another significant theme in here – one that has reverberated throughout the subsequent 190 years of our shared history – and that is that through adversity and hard times, a powerful and substantial friendship can develop. And that has certainly been the case for Australia and Greece.

Let me explain a bit more what I mean.

There is no better example of the friendship between our two countries than the bonds forged during the two world wars.

In WWI, Australians and Greeks fought side-by-side and worked together in the closest possible way. Many of you know that in 1915, 50,000 Australian soldiers and nurses spent time on the
island of Lemnos. It was the departure point for Gallipoli and the site of several Australian field hospitals. The story of the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign is well-known. What is less known is that the Australian nurses treating those wounded during the campaign achieved one of the highest survival rates of the war.

26 years later, Australian troops were again deployed to Greece, this time in WWII, and fought rearguard actions alongside their Greek comrades during the Allied retreat all the way south through mainland Greece. And then together on Crete, they fought against the famous German airborne landing and the Anzacs were bravely sheltered by Cretan villagers facing threats of horrific reprisals.

Afterwards, in the 1950s and 1960s, Australia created the world’s largest Greek diaspora in less than a generation. In 1971, Greeks represented 1.2 per cent of the population. In the United States, Greeks were only 0.1 per cent. That gives you some idea of the significance of what some have called the ‘olive wave’.

And now, up to 500,000 people who identify in some way as Greek call Australia home. You all know better than I do what a rich and precious part Greek-Australians play in our communities. The essence of Greece is woven into the fabric of what makes Australians who we are.

And I know, Your Excellency, that when you visit Australia, you’ll hear so many other stories that illustrate these connections and overlapping identities. Part of the phenomenon is attributable to our policy of multiculturalism. But a big part of it is due to the natural affinities that seem to exist between Greeks and Australians. It’s not for nothing that Antonis Manolis and Ghikas Boulgaris chose to remain in Australia in 1837.
Today, in the work that I do, I see these affinities played out every day.

I see it in the way Greece and Australia share perceptions of the world, and of the geostrategic shifts taking place around us.

I see it in how our assessments converge about the importance of a rules-based international order for international stability and peace.

I see it in our recognition of the need for free trade and open markets at a time when protectionism is rising in other parts of the world.

And I see it in the constructive way our countries and armed forces cooperate in the face of international challenges in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean and in our part of the world, the Indo Pacific.

I was particularly delighted that last month, Australia and the countries of the European Union officially launched negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement. As Greece emerges from nearly a decade of economic hardship, it’s exactly this kind of opportunity that offers prospects for growth, employment and prosperity.

And I’ll finish by telling you about one of my favourite bilateral initiatives, the Working Holiday Maker Scheme, which we’re on the cusp of concluding with Greece. This arrangement will allow up to 500 young people from each country to travel and work for up to two years in the other country, building connections and forging friendships that will last well into the future.

So I hope you’ll agree, our bilateral relationship is not just warm and enduring.

It’s the kind of relationship that reaches out every day across the water to embrace you. And it’s in this respect that I think it’s truly unique.

I wish you every success with the conference, which I know will be another important step forward in our bilateral partnership.

Thank you.