

Debate & Analysis

Another report, another deferral



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A public consultation meeting on media reform took place on 15 February 2023 by a Prime Minister appointed committee to advise him on media reform.

Unable to attend, I still want to express publicly my discontent on how the government is doing its utmost to procrastinate implementing first the recommendations of the government-appointed Daphne Caruana Galizia Assassination Board of Inquiry July 2021 report, and second the recommendations of the government-appointed media experts committee of April 2022 (its first report concluded so far).

From the government's inaction, one gets the impression that it first appoints a board or committee, tasks it with specific terms of reference, but when the Board or Committee reports back, government ignores in large part, if not all, its sagacious proposals. So why appoint these entities when their labour will end up in the Cabinet's rubbish bin? We all know that when governments do not want to take the bull by the horns, they appoint a board or committee to gain time hoping that the issue in question would have by the time the report is presented, died a natural death and is erased from the public's memory.

So far as I am aware, the first report that the media experts committee had submitted to the Prime Minister has never been rendered public by the Office of the Prime Minister. One would have expected that, once the Prime Minister had declared that the report would be made public, he would have, at the least, kept his word. But in today's world, promises are there to be broken. So far we do not have any inkling of what has been written in this report. What we do know is that government has tabled three bills on media freedom in the House of Representatives. Whether these bills have adopted in part or in full, rejected or perhaps considered but discarded the media experts committee's first report remains a state secret, surely not in the



public interest to divulge. And the irony is that media freedom is nothing but about dissemination of government-held information.

The fact that the report has not been published and that government proceeded with its three bills leads to the logical conclusion that it has ignored the media experts committee's reports; otherwise, the Prime Minister would have surely been the first to boost how democratic his government is when implementing all the positive recommendations of its own appointed committee. But we had none of this jubilant euphoria in the media except for a deafening silence on the report's content.

It is also known that these three bills are, according to government, intended to implement (in part of course and in a very minimalist and superficial manner for that matter) the government appointed Board of Inquiry's report into the Assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia. It is very well known that government never had the intention of appointing such board. So it first procrastinated to appoint this Board of Inquiry, but then, when it reached the stage that it could not do otherwise primarily because of international pressure, and received the Board of Inquiry's report more than one and a half year ago, decided initially to bury it. Once again, when this flawed strategy failed dismally, the gov-

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ernment chose to address the inquiry report's least harmful part, that concerning the freedom of the press, to detract the public's attention from the more controversial aspects of the report.

Appointing an advisory board was a perfect excuse from government's perspective to gain more time to defer implementation of the Daphne Board of Inquiry report. The media,

government thought, would be veered from highlighting the most embarrassing parts of the report. Government's strategy was to corner the media into a dark alley whereby the media's time would be taken up in discussing media freedom rather than government's inaction at implementing the most embarrassing parts of the Daphne Board of Inquiry's report, a ploy that worked out marvelously to government's contentment. The Daphne Board of Inquiry report, the more time passes, will end up forgotten. By the time the next general election is announced, it would have been dead and buried. This is the same strategy government adopted with its own appointed Bonello Commission for the Holistic Reform of the Justice Sector report of November 2013 when it decided to scuttle it.

Following the harsh adverse reaction to government's three bills moved in the House to address media freedom, government had another perfect excuse to delay further the implementation of the Caruana Galizia report. It agreed that its own media freedom committee should carry out a public consultation meeting, discuss the three government bills in question, and report back ... of course, after the lapse of several more months. Another excellent delaying tactic for government not to implement, albeit it marginally, the recommendations of the Board of Inquiry's re-

port. But at least the delay could be politically justified through a democratic public consultation exercise, even if this exercise will end up having no influence of government's decision as the April 2022 report had none.

After the media reform committee submits its second report to the Prime Minister, the inevitable questions that arise are: first, will government publish both the first and second reports?; second, will government adopt the wise recommendations that its own committee has offered in both reports?; third, will government react publicly to these reports stating which parts of the reports it is in agreement with and which not and, more importantly, why? After all this delaying saga on the media reform (had we not gone through one in 2018 with the enactment of the Media and Defamation Act a few years ago?), the government should publish its roadmap on how and by when, if it so intends, will it be implementing in full or in part the recommendations of the Board of Inquiry. Clearly government does not have the political will, nor the urgency, to see those recommendations arriving safe at port and is playing for time. Malta's image abroad, in the meantime, continues to suffer because of government's overdue inaction.

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