



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Managing by crisis or administering by focus?

Our latest controversy is on the new, now discarded, *Monti* stalls that were intended to host bargain purchases in the form of jeans ('*tlieta lira*'), *panties tat-tigra*, sexy push-up and strapless bras (that put 'Victoria's Secret' to shame) amongst others! Let's face it apart from these outmoded stalls design, messing up the St John's Cross was the cherry on the cake.

The irony of it all is that, as the renowned artist Kenneth Zammit Tabona pointed out during my radio show last Saturday, instead of having the Cross of the Knights of St John they pasted the San Stefano one! And how proverbial that was, 'cause these stalls only lasted '*mill-Milied sa San Stieffnu*'!

This is just one incident that will help me illustrate the core issue in this 'opinion'. Governance is an awfully complicated matter in this day and age. It is no longer a straightforward issue that is, having an election, fighting it out tooth and nail and nothing really happens in-between until the next ballot features again.

The natural progression of our political *modus operandi* has made a gigantic leap in these last two years, probably shifted up a gear by the Prime Minister's approach, that is, taking politics from a macro model, where the over-arching issue takes dominance, to a micro form of political engagement, where the interest groups and grassroots are directly affecting not only the debate but also the actions that need to be taken.

In many ways, the control room of what happens on a day-to-day basis is almost literally the office of the Prime Minister. It might get complicated when the interests groups collude, for example the 'yes' versus 'no' spring referendum coalitions or the *Monti* sellers and those who are objecting to the clogging up of Ordinance Street.

Then again, the fact that most decision making leads to *Castille* doesn't automatically entail that there is a systematic by-passing of authorities and departments, even though one cannot ignore the potential

danger of this happening.

What I believe Prime Minister Joseph Muscat is doing is that he is developing a form of organisation that is kicking in the right dose of bureaucracy without allowing the system to be controlling. Muscat wants to govern, he wants to lead, he wants to influence change - he just doesn't want things to be left to chance.

Some, rightly so, have questioned the fact that the PM has had to get ministers to back-peddle on transfers, rationalise political and government appointments, sack a minister or two and is now taking note of the appalling *monti* stalls design.

All this seems to validate why Joseph Muscat is so eager to keep tabs with what is happening on a day-to-day basis.

Firstly, Joseph Muscat is an impatient Prime Minister. He wants things done even if the amends come at a cost.

Secondly, the fact that the Prime Minister has such a large number of ministers and parliamentary secretaries, partly to appease the voters and partly because the work of the government has augmented, has made it increasingly difficult to put his mind at rest. There are too many people in the Cabinet that are still untested, making the occasional booboos, and this is piling on pressure.

Thirdly, this government is hell-bent on producing results. The Deputy Prime Minister has recently claimed that some 50% of the Manifesto proposals have been accomplished in less than 50% of the government's term. The fascination with goals, annual plans, KPIs and 'delivering the goods' is crucial for this Prime Minister. The dots are connecting fast and

with the commitments taken with a host of interest groups, prior to being elected in government, this is obviously heaping the strain.

In a way, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat is trying to converge macro with micro politics which requires a great deal of staying power. He is trying to look at the small picture when the bigger picture still governs the resources and the wider institutional transformations that are needed. Muscat risks being accused of being conceited, of reacting to public demands, of populism, of being a vote chaser, of being haunted by the promises made in his boardroom on the fourth floor at the mile-end.

But I don't share that analysis. I think Joseph Muscat, once again, is being underestimated by his political adversaries.

Now that he is Prime Minister, he has realised even more that there is no decision that isn't touched by politics and that the people are interested in the outcome more than the process. This is so very different from how the PN is projecting itself, whereby this party is focused on making sure that the processes are more important than the end result.

What I think Joseph Muscat is doing is that he has read the signs of the times. He is essentially reacting to a post-political society where people are becoming diffident of the traditional party structures, the political apathy that oozes out of the parties and the lack of commitment of several members of our political class.

Joseph Muscat has understood that political ideologies have been discredited and people are disenchanted by the political idealism, by the over-arching causes and the search for the utopia that exists no longer. It is

is alert to the fact that people are fretful in the immediate, what affects them most, the impact of what happens in the life they are living at the present moment.

If we had to zoom in on his speeches he has left little space to the 'grand ideas' and is looking at the country in a managerial sort of way. He has localised politics essentially focusing on what people want. Muscat has recognised that there is an ever-growing divide between politicians and the community and his way of connecting with the citizens is by being bold and taking the bull by the horns.

So whilst I get the impression that the PN is busy waiting on the side for the next blooper the government will make, Joseph Muscat is busy managing the hot spots.

To administer in this way necessitates a Prime Minister that is full of vigour, quick to react and able to handle multiple conflicts at a go. This is different from managing by crises, it is administering by focus.

Surveys, opinion polls, petitions do it all for him. The more he gets of these the more justified he is in taking the collateral action. The issue here is, will he run out of steam? Will people interpret this as a weak government because he shifts the goalsposts intermittently?

I think that the politics that are distant from the people appeals no more and Joseph Muscat knows it. People want politics that ensue in the context they are engaged in.

There is a fine line between 'populism' and 'being grounded'. In my opinion the PN is interpreting Muscat as being the 'former' rather than the 'latter'. Sorry but on this one I think the PN is off beam.

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4 February 1998

4,000 feared dead in Afghan earthquake

An earthquake in northern Afghanistan has left thousands dead, injured or homeless.

The earthquake is centred on the city of Rostaq in the remote province of Takhar, close to the border with Tajikistan.

A spokesman for the Northern Alliance - which controls the area - told Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press over 3,500 bodies had been recovered.

The Islamic Taleban government in Kabul puts the death toll at 3,230, but western experts believe these figures may be too high because the area is sparsely populated.

Emergency supplies

According to the anti-Taleban Afghan Embassy in the Tajik capital Dushanbe about 15,000 people have been made homeless as dozens of villages have been destroyed.

The United Nations and the International Red Cross is still trying to verify this infor-



mation.

There are no relief agencies in the area but the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has al-

ready sent a team from Dushanbe - at least 36-hours' drive away.

An airport to the west of Rostaq is still operating and can receive emergency supplies.

Swedish seismologists measured the earthquake at 6.1 on the Richter scale, which they described as "not extreme" but they said under certain conditions it could nevertheless cause considerable damage.

Most of the population in the affected area live in mud-built houses.

Afghan ambassador to the UN Ravan Farhadi said the region was covered in snow drifts and extremely cold at night.

Taleban leader Mulla Mohammed Omar has expressed his sympathies and ordered troops in the region - attempting to capture Takhar province from the Northern Alliance - to assist rescue efforts.

But ongoing civil war in Tajikistan may hamper relief operations from the other side of the border.