



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Re-inventing the opposition

This week, on the second anniversary of its election, we will be discussing at length the success and letdowns of the government. In my estimation there was a fair share of both.

I believe that a government's performance depends on an effective and well-oiled opposition, a crucial building block in any successful democracy.

For example, when the PL were in opposition and they were being led by Dr Alfred Sant, people on the ground, even staunch Labour Party supporters, felt that there was little hope of winning an election with him at the helm. One could attribute a number of reasons for this situation, but it is useless discussing this at this stage as it is water under the bridge. The learning point here is that it is never a good thing to have a hobbling opposition. To have democratic, well-structured and organised communities, we need a healthy opposition.

The government's 'whip' really and truly should be an effective opposition. Together with civil society they should be the ones monitoring the political direction being taken and the choices and decisions made.

A good Opposition is one that doesn't shoot from the hip, does not personalise the issues, recommends alternatives and works with government in key areas, namely health, education and national security, for obvious reasons. Contesting every single decision and polarising and taking confronting positions on each tidbit becomes annoying. Such a strategy eventually backfires and consequently breaks down any hope of a much needed cohesive and authentic dialogue between government and Opposition.

So a vigorous opposition is a requisite! Back to the PN. The Nationalist Party knows very well that these were two very tricky years.

Not only did the PN lose emphatically in the 2013 general elections, but the hope of gaining ground during the European Parliament ballot went down the drain with a result that confirmed the previous election outcome.

The only solace for the Nationalists was probably getting the third seat, maybe a small consolation prize, but it must have contributed to two matters. Firstly, Simon Busuttil remained at the helm - I believe he would have resigned if he hadn't got the third seat because that was his battle cry during the MEP campaign. Secondly, Dr Busuttil realised that from 'now on' it is 'my way or the highway'. Until that moment Busuttil, I feel, was being sculpted by his associates.

I have always believed in Dr Busuttil's potential.

When he was contesting the party leadership election, I was convinced that the right choice for the PN would be for him to lead the party in the post-Gonzi era. I think his unselfish decision to join the ranks right before the 2013 election did him no good. It is still taking people time to see in him the leadership qualities I believe he is endowed with. In the collective memory, he is still perceived as part of the team that failed the PN. To his credit, after the PN's second, catastrophic result in a year, he shifted up a gear. Simon Busuttil knew that he was sinking fast and that the only way was to set in motion the person he is; opinionated, conciliatory with a convinced European stance. He started clearing the financial mess, sacked the non-doers, started making use of *Dar Centrali*, got the issue groups in motion, revamped the media, organised a convention, chose a number of new faces to sit on the shadow cabinet and started having a go at the government's boobos. He knows well enough that this isn't a 'PN versus PL' brawl but a 'Muscat versus Busuttil' tussle.

If you had to ask me, this is still an uphill struggle for Simon Busuttil.

In terms of organisation, I think Busuttil is getting himself a decent structure. His constant digs towards the Prime Minister through Twitter and the media

have seen the government back peddling on a couple of issues. But Joseph Muscat keeps bringing out the best of himself when people think he is cornered. He is growing in stature, is managing to recuperate well from most blunders, getting good economic reviews, and addressing effectively specific areas that had been abandoned, like disability, social services and unemployment. His managerial style is reaping the fruits and he is on track to complete the manifesto proposals, albeit a couple, like the notorious power station, stained his standing.

Once again, back to the PN.

In a number of circumstances, I do see a bit of nitpicking in the PN's strategy especially from some of its spokespersons who are probably keen to impress their Leader. I believe that criticism at times is being thrown about scantily, not only affecting the politicians concerned but also having a negative impact on the sector in question. A word of caution if I may; people are not bored with politics, but with quack politicians.

Another challenge I feel that the Opposition needs to face is the fact that the economic indicators are positive with little to criticise; credit rating agencies are telling us we are doing well, trust ratings and other reports are indicating that Malta is on the right track, optimistic tourism figures, energy costs for consumers on the decline, unemployment is on the decrease and youth unemployment is stable. Not all is dandy, of course, but things are working out well on that façade and people at the end of the day are primarily interested that their 'take home pay' is respectable.

I feel that the opposition has another issue to brave. It still lacks the soul-searching that is so greatly needed. Addressing specific sectors in society is crucial, but the absence of an over-arching agenda necessitates that the PN gives credence to

itself by developing an ideology, principles, beliefs and ideas that can gel the party together. Politicians like Mario de Marco are greatly needed, but still too hushed. They are the public intellectuals that need to give sense to this party's existence, which is there not only to govern but to create the counter balances and to make sure that no one is left by the wayside.

Lamentably, I feel that the PN still doesn't sound like an alternative government. Most of its bolts are still too loose. A sense of dejection and unhappiness still oozes amongst the diehards. Too many party stalwarts have been pushed to the side. Mind you, it's good to have new faces, but politics is an art and it always takes time to mould people into a party and political mindset. Some huffs and a few puffs are being heard at the *Dar Centrali*. As always happens in any organisation once you make a decision, you get a group of people who are tetchy. Busuttil has to be careful that cleansing doesn't become bleaching out the good that there is as well.

It is important that people feel they belong in the party, whether one is a conservative or a liberal, a business person or an employee, left or right leaning, Catholic or atheist, middle class or working class. So far, in this sense, the Nationalist Party still looks disjointed.

As a final point, the Nationalist Party can't wait for a crisis to act in response. Whether it's the Mallia debacle, the Premier Café dud or the *Monti* stalls/Ordinance street muddle - these are not enough to convince the voters that the PN is an alternative government.

But in my opinion, the worse thing the PL can do is to underestimate Busuttil, the same way that the PN had misjudged Muscat. I predict that within three years, Busuttil will be in a position to give Joseph Muscat a run for his money.

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Mugabe to lead independent Zimbabwe

Nationalist leader Robert Mugabe has won a sweeping election victory to become Zimbabwe's first black prime minister.

Mr Mugabe's radical Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front) party or Zanu (PF) won 57 of the 80 black seats being contested in the country's first elec-

tion since the end of white minority rule.

It is enough to give Mr Mugabe a comfortable majority, even when the 20 seats reserved for whites are taken into account.

He told a news conference the new government would include his former chief guerrilla rival, Joshua Nkomo, and his Patriotic Front party, which won 20 seats.

He also made clear he would consider bringing Europeans into the administration "so as to bring about a government that will be reassuring to all people of Zimbabwe".

Bishop Abel Muzorewa's United African National Council, UANC, party won only three votes - a humiliating defeat for the party which only 10 months ago was riding high in the polls. News of Mr Mugabe's election victory was announced over radio and television sending thousands of enthusiastic black Zimbabweans



onto the streets shouting for joy.

Mr Mugabe's symbol, the cockerel or jongwe, inspired his supporters to constant crowing and arm-flapping. Many ran out onto the streets with live birds.

The celebrations were largely good-natured and there were no signs of racial tensions. But overhead and at key crossroads in the capital, Salisbury, and the black townships, the security forces maintained

a constant vigil.

Zimbabwe's business and farming communities have reacted to Mr Mugabe's election victory with caution. The Salisbury stock exchange fell sharply when the results were announced but recovered later in the afternoon.

Former prime minister Ian Smith told the BBC: "I think Rhodesians are pretty pragmatic and full of experience.

"I don't visualise them resorting to panic action, stampeding. I think they will act in a very mature, responsible way. After all it's our country, where will we run to?"

In a broadcast on television tonight, Mr Mugabe said: "I wish to assure you that there can never be any return to the state of armed conflict which existed before our commitment to peace and the democratic process of election under the Lancaster House agreement."