

A psychologist and academic in politics

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Abstract

Over the years, the contribution and overall interest of resident academics to serve in parliament has been scarce in Malta. This paper aims to explore the possible reasons for this, and highlights overlooked contributions that academia can give to parliamentary work. The role of the backbencher is highlighted and discussed in the midst of the work carried out at the University of Malta. This paper also aims to instigate a discussion on the way forward with regard to our direct contribution to what happens in parliament which is where decisions affecting our own lives are taken.

Introduction

“Why did you have to do politics?” That is a question asked to me by many for which I have no real answer. Did I have a choice? And, most importantly, how did I take such a decision which would have a significant impact on my life? Gulzar (2021) mentions that who decides to become a politician influences the performance of democracies in important ways and the current literature consists mainly of studies carried out in advanced democracies. Research often focuses on work on political entry or leadership that is formal but more work is needed on the antecedents of such political entry which I also aim to highlight in this paper. What family background, activities and jobs increase the likelihood of future participation in politics as a politician? Tracing the antecedents of formal political entry could provide insights into how the political class may be broadened.

My story

In my case, the path into politics was a natural one. I was born in politics because of two important and significant members of my family. The first person is my late cousin who was also a member of parliament elected from the 4th district, namely Dr Karl Chircop. His sudden, early, untimely demise 15 years ago at age 43 was a shock not

only to his family but also to the constituents and patients that he served. His life was a mission focused on those wanting to help those in need both in their health and also in their social issues. Having lost his own father also at the age of 43, he could really and truly understand the loss of a loved one and consequently, he strived hard to lessen the suffering of others.

The second and perhaps most influential person is my own father who spent a lifetime working in politics as lead designer and public relations officer but really and truly his aim was to focus mainly on empowerment and social mobility. He himself deserved to further his studies as an adolescent but these were cut short because University tuition at the time was not free of charge and my grandfather could not afford to fund University for all of his 8 children. A strong believer that education is the foundation of social mobility made him work hard in several positions both as a teacher, education officer and Director at the Ministry of Education and then also as Mayor of our hometown Fgura where he was elected as such several times. He still works hard in his ideals and is the President of the Veteran Section and a member of the executive of the party. Moreover, he is the Vice President of the European Senior Organisation (ESO) and also the Vice President of the AGE Platform Europe and now works hard against ageism. It is also worth mentioning that my father works pro-bono as a lawyer since he followed his dream and attained a warrant to practise at the age of 69.

However, there were and still are other influential persons. My mother Ruth started off her career more or less at the same time as my father. Both attended teacher training college in the late 1960s. However, my mother chose to marry and had to relinquish her post as a teacher, as in the seventies it was an accepted fact that men were the only breadwinners for their family. She was reinstated in 1980 also through a measure of the Labour Party in government but she lost six years of service and retired three whole hierarchical career levels lower than my father. I attribute this due to the fact that she had to start her career from scratch and also because by default, our society expected her to manage the household.

My husband Kenneth is the result of another successful strategy adopted by the party I represent. He hails from a humble working-class family, but attained a Ph.D. from the University of Malta and is also a Resident Academic. He fully represents what my father could not achieve at his age. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines social mobility as the change in a person's socio-economic situation, either in relation to their parents (inter-generational mobility) or throughout their lifetime (intra-generational mobility) (<https://www.oecd.org/stories/social-mobility/>). This possibility was made available through the policy of having education as "free for all" by the party I represent. Finally, I must say that my son and my husband's daughter are influential in different ways. My son accompanies me and supports me in all the activities I do. He is really the reason for which I would tend to agree with Vote16 although Godli (2015) and Ribeiro et al. (2022) state that there is an ambivalent perception regarding young people's political maturity to vote at 16. My husband's daughter is slightly more laid back when it comes to active politics although she would make a good spokesperson representing reasons for which the younger generation seems to be so alienated and discouraged from the political arena as a whole. These significant others are my life and the backbone of my decision as well as my will to serve.

Choosing to serve

It is worth mentioning that prior to deciding to contest for the general election, I had contested elections for the University Council twice. It was indeed easier for me for some reason, to get elected as the first female and first psychologist in parliament than to be elected on the University Council! I must admit that the gender corrective mechanism (Sammut et al., 2019) was to me a good motivator. On the day of the bi-elections, I was surprised to see that I was in fact elected from a vacated seat by the Hon. Deputy Prime Minister Chris Fearné. There is still a lot of work to be done in this respect however as on that district there are three ministers and a parliamentary secretary

who are male. Having been elected is the first step but women deserve much more in terms of representation with respect to gender balance in the 4th district. More so, young females deserve more female role models to aspire to.

Another reason for which I chose to serve as a parliamentarian is to use my knowledge and skills in the educational field. I graduated as a teacher in 1998 and subsequently as a psychologist in 2003. However, since 1998 I have always worked in educational institutions spanning primary education to further and higher educational settings. I strongly believe that we are always lagging behind in how to guide and enable agency for our young people with respect to their further and higher educational opportunities. Those who are practising guidance in this respect have not experienced the confusion that the younger generation is now faced with. Career guidance practitioners of my age had two choices: either attain O levels and do the academic route or find a job in a factory. As career advisers, they would have chosen the former scenario without experiencing anything about the world of work. This leaves them without any knowledge of apprenticeships, work-based learning, boundaryless careers and a whole lot of other factors and variables contributing to the fast-paced change scenario that the younger generation is faced with. According to Morgado et al. (2016), Malta has one of the highest rates of both horizontal and vertical skills mismatch and therefore our country is experiencing a skills mismatch in essential fields. Career guidance is an important tool both for social mobility and skills enhancement.

My choice of becoming a psychologist was a laboured one as making choices for me at secondary school was very hard. I can say that I never particularly excelled in any subject, but I was a good all-rounder making subject choice very hard for me. Psychology, which is a multi-disciplinary subject was my lifesaver. As a student, I realised that the formation of a psychologist as a professional in Malta was hard and this led to awkward situations with other professions performing roles which are similar to ours. Later, as chair of the Malta Psychology Profession Board, I came to realise that as a profession we should be more tolerant towards others who work in our field and will strive for mutual respect and collaboration. Only this behaviour shall truly make our clients the centre of our practice and mission.

I would also like to work hard against ageism. I have witnessed discrimination against those who are older in age. It is harder for them to attain a job and society seems to push them aside once they attain their pension. This is a great loss for society because we are not managing knowledge in the right way. Enabling structures which would include experienced persons to participate fully would only contribute to a better society and avoid a costly, care-taking attitude.

An organisational psychologist in parliament

It is overall inevitable as an organisational psychologist in parliament, not to observe what goes on around me. There is, as one would expect, an overrepresentation of lawyers who supersede the second largest occupational groups taken together (doctors, bankers, engineers and teachers). It is worth noticing that two of the lawyers in parliament are also ex-teachers. It is therefore evident that the jargon and the ways in which parliament is managed are closest to what a lawyer is used to. Other professionals stand to be at a disadvantage and have a steeper learning curve. Moreover, lawyers are socialised into winning disputes. That is what earns them their bread and butter especially if they are working within Courts. Other professions would prefer situations where there are win-win opportunities and a more collaborative approach. Parliament should not only be representative with regard to gender, but it should also represent its people in other ways. Some of these ways should be the professions and/or occupations of its members. The more diverse the representation is, the more chance there is that parliament is truly representative.

Parliament is not only about speeches in the plenary. There are also committees (<https://parlament.mt/menues/committees/standing-committees/#/>) and other bodies which require government representation. One of the committees within which I serve is the Welfare Committee where funds are allocated to homes for older persons. Another committee of which I am a member is the Children's Council, an ex-ufficio membership I hold as Chairperson of the parliamentary Social Affairs Committee. Other parliamentary committees of which I am a member are the Family Affairs Committee and the Petitions Committee. The role of these committees is to invite stakeholders, discuss and present matters to the plenary for consideration. It is important to have academics present because of the research studies that Non-Governmental Organisations and other entities present. These research studies need to be handled with a critical eye and not taken for granted because they claim to be research. Should policy be evidence-based, then we should have the right people on board to ensure that the evidence is gathered and analysed in the right way.

So what else does a psychologist and an academic bring to parliament? Our training mandates understanding people and the ability to maintain good human relationships. Inherent here is the understanding of change management which, more often than not, requires dealing with people and providing a shoulder of support. A psychologist can also link real-life experiences and translate them into a political manifesto. I believe that politics should go round full circle: it is a process initiated by the people and for the people. The politician is only the enabler who should also be in direct contact with people and who can organise proper public consultation. As a psychologist in parliament, I feel I am a strong advocate for resilience and mental health as well as for an inclusive society without the use of stereotypes and pigeonholing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Parliament is there to represent our people who come from all walks of life. Getting talented and skilled individuals into office is important (Gulzar, 2021). Similarly, our parliament should be a representative sample. We cannot afford to be misrepresented as misrepresentation may lead to bias. In order for this to happen, we need to stimulate our students to aspire to become politicians. The political scenario in our country needs professionals hailing from the social sciences not only for elections but also within the administrative support structures of parliament itself.

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