



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Renzo and Lawrence, 'I'm no pigeon'!

On Monday our attention was taken up by the inauguration of the controversial architectural design of Renzo Piano dedicated to host the foremost institution of this country.

Parliament for the first time ever will have a 'house' it can call its own. Another 'first' is that government has invested money in a project that has a scope and a purpose but is also an investment in terms of art and design. Sure, the concept has triggered a racket but having seen the end product, I, like many others who were sceptical, are starting to like this project a tad more. The bridge, the entrance, the restored balconies on the arcades, the combined use of metal and stone, the paving, the Parliament House and the concept of stilts it rests on are exquisite. But if there is anything that most seem to like is the flight of steps on either side of the entrance to the capital – absolutely gracious and genial. I believe that the revamping of the ditch, the 'dressing up' of the arcade columns and the pedestrianisation together with the removal of the public transport mayhem from the entrance to the Capital will echo the beauty of this project. A downside of this assignment, at least the way I see it, is the so-called *Pjazza Teatru Rjal* – it is boring, confusing and sticks out like a sore thumb.

What I would like to see is that citizens repossess the spaces created in this project; artists, young people, children and adults alike. Formal, informal and non-formal events should be the order of the day.

Nevertheless, I suppose the success of every architectural project is measured by the hubbub that it is surrounded with, the debate it creates and the argumentation it generates. It seems that the new entrance to the capital together with the controversial *Pjazza Teatru Rjal* and the Parliament House will keep spawning debate, squabbles and criticism and this is great. This is what art is about; an engagement, a connection and a rendezvous.

But I believe that the whole Kenzo Piano project centres around the importance given to this institution that along the years, since our first Constitution back in 1921, has had its quaint moments but in many ways has always been central to the way our country evolved.

For example, people my age remember the particular turbulent years of the 80s.

Parliamentary sessions, at the time, were tragic-comedies. Labour MPs, most of whom have been filtered out of the system, used to have a go at their adversaries not by means of argument and debate but by using their fists and screaming hysterically from one side of the 'house' to the other. The PN Opposition savoured the negative impact all of this was having on the Labour Party in government. Watching a televised parliamentary debate was like watching a *Mayweather* versus *Pacquiao* boxing game –



waiting to see who gets slapped with the most jabs rather than focusing on who has the better plans for our country.

In a way it was entertaining, in many others it was sad and demeaning. Yet we have come out of those dark ages and Parliament, give and take the occasional squabble, has evolved and progressed into a courteous institution.

Let us not be tricked into forgetting that with all the confusion that ensued, we have also witnessed significant milestones in the progress of this nation. Even though we have this love-hate relationship with our representatives, we all seem to appreciate that Parliament remains at the heart of this country and like 'every heart' you only realise it is there once you feel pain or if it ceases to function. The same with Parliament, if it dies away the state will collapse, that is why it is important to maintain well this institution.

Lawrence Gonzi, during his tenure as Prime Minister, seems to have understood this and against all odds ploughed ahead with this project. He was the 'concept architect' in blending all of this symbolism, the structural design, the dedicated space and the vision. The fact that Prime Minister Joseph Muscat invited Dr Gonzi to inaugurate Parliament House is recognition of this (and a typical chivalrous reaction of Gonzi when he turned down this privilege). I personally liked Gonzi for his prodigious work rate, for his ability to communicate his thoughts. He was focused, committed to what he believes in and was able to ride the crises thrown at him. Apart from that, he is courteous and sensitive to the 'human' cause strongly reminded of his array of values, clear direction where he wanted the country to go and with a strong sense of social justice and solidarity. He was a pragmatic politician concerned about

the citizen's 'bread and butter' issues and one thing that seemed to drive him up the wall was the political bickering and endless disparagement with no proposed solutions. I believe that when Piano met Gonzi, he understood this Prime Minister and tried to emulate a building that reflects this uprightness.

So like many others I will credit Lawrence Gonzi with having the guts to invest money in a project and architectural design which is contentious but also has a purpose. This building gives a clear message, not to the country, but to our MPs, that they need to take their game up a notch. Parliament is not only about stroking egos but about making this a better country to live in. And while the evidence shows that in Malta there currently is a feel-good factor, yet we still have people who are struggling with unemployment, families who are victims of social exclusion and usury, children who are undernourished, households who lack the basics, people who are homeless, individuals who are over-reliant on welfare and students who are plummeting from our educational system back to Parliament House.

Many have said that they are not completely convinced about the design of the new Parliament. From the comparisons made to Parliament House one imagery I am particularly fond of is when people likened it to 'a pigeon house'. I find this comparison so fitting, figuratively speaking, because if there is anything that politicians should be reminded of is not to try to turn citizens into pigeons and fix them in holes.

As a society we have a duty to speak our minds.

The same way we need conscientious representatives, we also need to have matter-of-fact citizens, proactive, ready to take a position – who will not sit on the fence but neither will they align themselves in ceaseless sightless

loyalty simply because *Joseph or Simon* 'said it'.

We want parliamentarians to stop thinking that they are so honourable we all need to sit and wait for them to tell us when it is good to go.

We want parliamentarians who make social transformations, who listen and speak to the public and not insult the electorate by knocking on our doors prior to elections longing for our vote.

We want parliamentarians who can turn a plea, a pain, a concern into policy and law.

We want parliamentarians who are dignified and gallant, not kneejerk politicians who decide on the spur of the moment.

We want parliamentarians with a vision who appreciate that we need to live today but still plan for a better community tomorrow.

This Renzo Piano Parliament House conceptualised by Lawrence Gonzi is a reminder that we long for a different mélange of politics. If there is something that hits a chord in this building is that it should remind us that citizens will not be pigeon-holed!

I believe that the inaugural ceremony of Parliament House can be a perfect opportunity to instigate the Constitutional reform many have been waiting and calling for.

Franco Debono, the Law Commissioner, Head of the Constitutional Convention and Chair of the committee on the awareness of the Constitution, has been speaking incessantly about this issue the same way that the President of the Republic and many others have been doing.

It is time to sit-down and think this through, get the community engaged so that our Constitution will be revamped, addresses new realities and help steer the country into the modern era of post-party politics. Who knows, maybe the new Parliament House will kick start this longed-for much awaited process.

Dr Andrew Azzopardi
Senior Lecturer, Department of
Youth and Community Studies
Faculty for Social Wellbeing,
University of Malta &
Broadcaster – *Ghandi xi Nghid*
www.andrewazzopardi.org