



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY



You're either with us or against us, it's that simple!

'Politics' here in Malta and Gozo is the closest we can get to a 'collective craving', a phenomenon that the citizens on these islands seem to savour and cannot live without. It is a love-hate relationship that we seem to encompass with politicians and political parties alike. At the piazza, as we go along, at the café during our lunch break, politics always tops the agenda.

Not only that, we want them involved in everything that happens in our lives; from baptism ceremonies to the opening of the new *kazin* and anything in-between. The pretty thing about all of this is that one and all seem to have an opinion on all that is happening in the country to the extent that everyone feels they can be Prime Minister for much more than a day! Why we remain so affianced with this phenomenon is baffling, especially considering that on the one hand the electorate participates in droves during every ballot but on the other, the Eurobarometer (Autumn 2014) findings indicate that politicians enjoy very little confidence; in fact, only 51% of those interviewed trust the Maltese Parliament and 24% the political parties.

True, at times the harebrained behaviour and the middle-of-the-road MP speeches we note during the parliamentary sessions risk making this institution a laughing stock. Naturally such scenes as we witnessed last week between the government and Opposition representatives are

farfarcical and ludicrous and we really can do without them. But whilst that is a caveat we cannot ignore I confirm that we have some valid representatives on both sides of the House. I am no devotee of any politician, never was and never will be, but I do believe that there are some outstanding MPs who have dedicated themselves thoroughly, sacrificed their lives, their families and their careers to give an out-and-out service to this country.

But the episode that irritates me big time is that in this country of ours we expect politicians to turn into robots the moment they are elected. It's the phenomenon that Professor Oliver Friggieri talks and writes so often about, a country of 'binaries', of 'with us or against us', of 'either on this side of the fence or you are a traitor' - symptoms of an insecure nation that is still in its infancy.

We've had innumerable occasions where politicians at both ends of the spectrum have come out to criticise their party's position/s explicitly or implicitly on one matter or another.

The reality is that along the years we've had so many occasions when members of Parliament took differing positions from their parties. For example, the Sant government, as everyone knows, had its glitches with Lino Spiteri leading the pack. Later on Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca stood out against legalising divorce and had claimed she would be resigning from the Labour Party only to be convinced otherwise by the then leader of the Opposition Joseph Muscat. A similar fate was to be experienced by Dr Adrian Vassallo who kept to his stance against divorce and did not seek re-election. We also witnessed the discord between Dr Franco Debono and the Nationalist Party in government on issues that ranged from justice reform to Cabinet collective responsibilities, from party financing to a myriad of other issues. Slowly but surely Dr Debono's position was interpreted by the party diehards as no longer tenable. A whole host of other MPs on the government's bench at the time were lining up discontent, Dr Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando, Architect Jesmond Muglietta and on a number of issues even



Dr Jean Pierre Farrugia were feeling bumpy.

Needless to say Hon. Dr Marlene Farrugia is the latest dissenter.

Regrettably, if there was anything that can be perceived as being common in all of these narratives is that these MPs are considered 'traitors' by their respective parties and 'deserve' to be censured, disciplined and chucked out of the system.

How endearing, established and democratic that is!

Political parties, the cornerstone of our democratic system, throw people out because the latter do not agree with the mainstream party position or might have a differing stance from their leader or possibly disagree on a point of policy. The funny thing is that the only justification we manage to come up with is that they are considered as helping their adversaries - so there you go the solution is to dispose of them. How sad.

I do appreciate that this is a complex issue because each MP would have been elected on the party list and it is highly unlikely that they would be voted in if it wasn't for the party.

On the other hand what would our political landscape look like if it was all 'yes sir, yes sir' and nothing more?

When Dr Marlene Farrugia talks about the environment and argues that the government is letting people down on this issue why is it perceived as being despicable? Why do you get MPs and die-

hard 'chip on the shoulder' supporters micro-blogging till their finger tips turn blue calling these MPs all sort of names (very often anonymously) - just stopping short of asking for a guillotine to be drawn into the piazza so that the job is complete?

How can our political debate turn so tribal?

How come we don't realise that dissenting voices in a parliamentary group are legitimate and defensible if done in bona fide? (In all probability other MPs would disagree about an issue or two at some point but wouldn't have the pluck to go forward with their criticism).

If I had to shift my focus on Dr Marlene Farrugia, there are a couple of thoughts that come to mind.

As I've had the opportunity to say in other occasions, I have known Dr Farrugia for many years, on a professional level. She was my dentist and in-between check-ups, fillings and tooth extractions we always managed to pick up a conversation on current issues. As they say in Maltese, '*qatt ma kilna l-kirxa flimkien*', (actually I can't recall she ever gave me a discount!) but she always struck me how passionate she is about everything she applies herself to.

She is a woman that thinks outside the box, has a robust character and has never used her money, influence or power to take advantage. She always tried to be on the right side of history even if that meant she had to pay a price.

Now whether I would have taken the approach she is taking is open to discussion. Addressing an event organised by the Nationalist Party last Sunday at Zonqor must have wined a number of Labour-leaning supporters, equally irritated with this same propped development, because they would have felt that Dr Farrugia would have gone there to spite the government.

But Marlene Farrugia is loyal to the agenda she has at heart and rest assured that if the PN had to be in power and mess around with environmental issues she would be as belligerent and determined. She is one's own woman. I have known her for donkey's years and she was always on the side of the argument. Power and repute were never a priority for her and all she is interested in is to serve her country the best way she can.

Now I am pretty sure that Prime Minister Joseph Muscat and ex-Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi, who both had to deal with their share of aggravation, would not have a problem with criticism. They are confident enough that the fact that their MPs take contrasting positions doesn't bother them at all and it is more the party devotees that fuel this paranoia.

Who knows, maybe it's part of our genetic make-up that the moment we find ourselves feeling threatened, that we think our *Partit* will get tempered with, our backs go up and we huddle up against the perceived 'aggressors'.

Whilst this attitude and behaviour is understandable, I think we need to be stronger than that. This doesn't mean that we should idolatrise politicians or fail to question them. The electorate is duty-bound to scrutinise whether what politicians are saying is relevant, truthful and honest. The way I see it though, trying to 'tackle' MPs because they believe wholeheartedly in an issue is a step backwards in this country's political shrewdness!

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