



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

My Christmas tree

A key symbol at this time of the year is unquestionably the Christmas tree.

In most, if not all homes, offices and public places the centre of attraction remains this icon. Whilst there are many stories and myths on the roots of this tradition, ranging from the Renaissance of Early Modern Germany to a custom dated back to Ancient Egyptians, Chinese and Hebrew civilisations, in more ways than one a Christmas tree exemplifies our communities.

The mix of lights that go on and off, the decorations, some of which are given more prominence than others, the Star at the top can all be linked to the way we contemplate these last 12 months.

In fact, I would say that our country has had its moments of darkness during this last year. If we had to reflect on politics at a national level we are left with a political class which is in crisis. Confrontational politics, personal attacks, unceremonious accusations, mud-slinging, assertions of corruption, alleged mismanagement of State funds, personal attacks on politician's family members and we could go on.

To compound all of this, our chaotic road network, an irresponsible public transport and the way we have dealt with our environmental agenda has left everyone hoping that 2016 will bring some solace to this bedlam and tangible solutions by our legislators.

To compound all of this, except for the occasional decent and intelligent political debate, Parliament has been dubbed a pigsty in the making – it is so gloomy that this institution is struggling to convince of its relevance.

Another political light-out was the immigration issue.

We are still in a conundrum one or two summits down the line. A number of individuals still can't understand that people in the main leave their country of origin because they are unsettled. Hate speech, especially on news portal blogs and social media, is spreading like wild fire and we don't seem to be able to contain it.

Another moment of darkness in this country is our inability to set off the Convention on the Constitution. This highest Law needs to be debated and most certainly reviewed – no more time to waste.

Yet there is light around the Christmas tree.

For example we have a couple of young people who have demonstrated grace and conviction, determination and resolve and are kicking up the system with all their youth strength to bridge the immigration and diversity gap.

Sara Ezabe, the 19-year-old Maltese Muslim law student keeps shining (I will be inter-

viewing her on my radio show *Ghandi xi Nghid* on Radju Malta this coming Saturday) as is Naomi Bugre, a black Maltese law student who is also reaching out, even if they are having to pay a price for this.

Another moment of pride for Maltese youth is that Christian Mizzi, a young political activist who is now working as a youth worker with the National Youth Agency, has been awarded by the Commonwealth for his efforts as a youth worker.

But this year has also seen the loss and consequently the darkness that this brings with it to a number of young people or children.

Leah, this little girl that has passed on to eternal life after fighting non-stop against a rare form of cancer was a beacon for many. She became a nationwide adopted child. We have also lost too many young people, some unnamed because they committed suicide.

Others perished in front of our eyes namely Matthew Demicoli who died of natural causes at 16 years as soon as he arrived at school, Matthew Bartolo, 17 years of age, following an occupational accident in Kirkop and Matthew Meilak the 22-year-old who died on New Year's Day following a traffic accident in Gozo.

I cannot start to imagine what the families of these young people must be going through, especially at this time of the year when gatherings have a special meaning.

Immigration has also given us several dark moments epitomised by the death of baby Allyn with the iconic picture of the year showing him laying face downwards on a beach. He is not Maltese and has not died in Maltese territorial waters but he does represent the immigration struggles our nation is facing. It is another Christmas light that is dimmed.

Extremism has also taken its toll and created even more darkness and confusion in our locals. The Paris and the Charlie Hebdo attacks, the disaster that is happening in Syria and Libya are symptoms of a world that is turning on itself. One tragedy after another with innumerable and sometimes nameless victims.

But like every other Christmas tree we do have lights that shine and young Destiny Chukunyer is one of them! This highly talented and beautiful girl shows us that integration can happen and that Malta is not only about racism and exclusion. Children and art are key to creating bridges and if we want this issue to ever find comfort what we need to do is to listen to children. I would put Destiny in a very prominent position in my

Christmas tree because of her exquisiteness and authenticity.

Another dark moment was the incident at Paceville that left a couple of young people seriously injured and it is only through sheer luck that we didn't have more grave consequences. This could also be said for the *Paqpaqli għall-Istrina* charity event that went horribly wrong.

As far as Paceville is concerned all we are getting are consultation meetings that are buying time when we all know what the problems and the solutions are to these issues. With the flow of people that conglomerate in that area every weekend, the easy access to alcohol and drugs, the immorality and lackadaisical attitude towards the law of most of the club owners, the urban chaos there is and the low police presence it is wrong to think that the solution is in turning Paceville into a 'military no-fun zone'.

What we need is a strong presence of youth workers, better lighting and monitoring of the area, clubs that close earlier, alternative spaces where 'under-age' young people can go, more law enforcement and better health and safety management in clubs.

Another moment when my Christmas tree starts blinking profusely is when we are speaking about the fixed link between Gozo and Malta. Might be my cynical moment but I can't see this happening, sorry!

The Man of the Year, who will surely not find a space on my tree, is Mr Gaffarena. He managed to put our political class in disarray causing a resignation and a half. The 'good thing' about this whole issue, if you want, is that he has managed to expose the fact that some politicians choose to nap with such people. With all the documents we get on governance the truth is that these people will always slip into our political system whether we want it or not.

What we need is a strong Civil Service that is clearly detached from the political class, principled leadership in the management and monitoring of our institutional pillars and a strong and autonomous media set-up that will pop up wrong doings.

Indeed, the media this year has earned a place on my tree. True it has had its moments of boos but it was there in strength and presence.

Another personality that will certainly find space on my Christmas tree is Marlene Farrugia. She might not be the pin-up girl of the PL but at least we have a politician who speaks her mind, walks the talk and is committed to what she believes. She

is not alone. There are other politicians who even though they walk the party line are still opinionated and esteemed. During this year my choice of politician space on my tree goes to Dr Marthese Portelli, Dr Justyne Farrugia, Chris Agius, Kristy Debono, Claudio Grech and Dr Deborah Schembri – for being intelligent, resolute and strong-minded.

The Church has had its moments as well, some good ones for sure. I still think that the Catholic Church is not clear what it stands for and I believe that one way of re-gaining its ground is to re-assert itself in the social milieu and not just sit on the moral high ground telling us how to live our lives. Having said that I think that during this year Archbishop Scicluna has spoken and tweeted his mind and that is good news. We've had too many an Archbishop choosing to disappear. I think I will find some space for Archbishop Scicluna on my Christmas tree, hopefully in time he will get a more favourable position.

Peppi Azzopardi will also decorate my tree. He remains controversial, even if at times he sounds like a broken record but at least he provokes our society into thinking out of the box. I have said this in other occasions, but my fear is that once Peppi is out of the scene we will remain with a social void. Some might claim that he is out of line, boring, uses people's narrative to gain popularity. I will not try to defend him, he can do that on his own – but I know this man well-enough and I don't go by that analysis. He is a righteous man who is always trying to hit the ground running and manages to find time for all those most of us decide they don't merit our occasion.

My tree will also have some space saved up for those who have suffered crime and who have lost friends and family. My heart goes out to those who are in prison, some wrongly accused, others waiting for their accusation to be judged and others who are deservedly seeing through their judgment. Those whose sentence includes reclusion have a special place on my tree. These are people that are completely forgotten because they do not make news. There is also space for the judges and magistrates who have the unenviable role of taking difficult decisions.

But I think that this year's Star will be dedicated to Bjorn Formosa, the founder and sufferer of ALS, a motor neuron condition that is cruel on the body as it is on the spirit – but not on Bjorn who keeps fighting and inspiring – a beacon indeed – a Star indeed!

Ghandi xi Nghid
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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