

---

# THE KEENAN REPORT: A DEFINITION

**J.J. Camilleri**

---

About 1870 two active rival factions emerged in the local Council of Government. The *riformista* group favouring the introduction of the teaching of English in the schools came into direct conflict with the pro-Italian party who desired to maintain the o'd dominance of the Italian language and culture. The British Imperial Government considered Italian as a direct challenge to its policy of anglicisation. They encouraged the promotion of any method by which English could be brought to supercede Italian. While the pro-Italians accused the *riformisti* of subordinating Maltese intersts to British Imperial policy, the *riformisti* in turn accused them of using Italian as an instrument of class domination.

The *riformisti* admitted the impracticability of teaching three different languages at elementary level, but purposely complicated the issue further by suggesting the introduction of the English Language. The new emphasis laid on Maltese discredited Italian at the expense of English and Maltese. The teaching of Maltese in schools was in reality only a side issue, introduced obliquely in the political controversy.

Because of its parallel association with English, Maltese grew and gained in importance. Within the 'Italianity' party, anti-British feeling mingled with anti-Maltese linguistic bias. Initially the pro-Italians had an advantage over their opponents, but gradually the *riformisti* gained in strength and had the ultimate victory. The pro-Italians threw away the opportunity of allying themselves to Maltese.

The introduction of the teaching of Maltese was never treated objectively. The opposition was mainly based on prejudice and sentiment. Little or no consideration was given to the intrinsic educational values and linguistic potentialities of the language as a means by which a child could develop progressively his mental powers through self-expression. The 'Language Problem' became a political rather than an educational issue. For many years after it was to be the king-pin of Maltese politics.

The 'Language Problem' is a popular subject for research as ample material still awaits scrutiny.

The 'Language Problem' dragged too long. It consumed too much energy and resulted in the retarding of Maltese education. It revolved mainly round

the question of which languages should be taught, particularly in elementary schools. Of this controversy I have singled out one particular aspect.

As Chief Director of Elementary Schools, Canon Paolo Pullicino D.D. strove hard for over thirty years (1850-80) to better the local educational system. In spite of his efforts he was the object of much criticism. A fiery war was declared against the schools and *his* system of education. Did he deserve such censure or was he the victim of the political activity which animated the whole controversy?

In 1879 two Public Commissions of Inquiry<sup>1</sup> were sent from London and two exhaustive reports were published a year later.<sup>2</sup> The criticism levelled against Pullicino culminated in the report prepared by Patrick Joseph Keenan. While praising the Director's efforts, Keenan was neither considerate nor sparing in his attacks. He lashed at everything which Pullicino had endeavoured to do.

Keenan had been described as "radicale e coerente fino all'estremo limite, quasi cinico<sup>3</sup>." Agostino Savelli believed that British political ascendancy was offended by the obstinate resistance of the Maltese to English Language and Culture. He accused the Commissioners of deliberately intending to discredit the prevalence of Italian culture. The same views were expressed on Keenan by Antonio Cini<sup>4</sup> and Temi Zam-

mit<sup>5</sup>. Cini said that Keenan "venne qui coll'idea preconcepita di imporre forzatamente la lingua<sup>6</sup>." He described the Commission as "lo scandolo gravissimo del 1879<sup>7</sup>." Zammit maintained that this Commission was not well received because the people believed that Keenan aimed at introducing English at the expense of Italian.

Keenan accused the Director of being obsessed by his zeal to cultivate the teaching of Italian to the extent that the teachers were inspired and the pupils stimulated by the idea. Pullicino was accused of organising a system of education in which Italian predominated, and of feeling such a strong repugnance to Maltese that he wanted to eradicate it even from the country itself<sup>8</sup>.

Keenan admitted that Pullicino entertained at times a sympathy for the English Language. However, he

- 
1. Julian, P., *Report of the Civil Establishments of Malta*, (London, 1880).
  - Keenan, P.J., *Report upon the Educational System of Malta*, (London, 1880).
  2. The sum of £1,300 was paid to the Commissioners; viz. £700 to Sir P. Julian, £300 to his secretary Bourne and £300 to P.J. Keenan. See, P. Pullicino, *Raccolta di Pensieri Notizie ed Estratti*, anni 1873-1881.
  3. Savelli, A., *Storia di Malta*, (I.S.P.S., Milano).
  4. Cini, A., *Le Questioni della Lingua in Malta*, (Siracusa, 1901).
  5. Zammit, T., *Il-Gżejjer ta' Malta u l-grajja Tagħhom*, 1934.
  6. Cini, *op. cit.*, p.11.
  7. *Ibid.*, p.10.
  8. In *Notizie, Estratti e Riflessioni*, 1869-72, Pullicino showed that he was proud that the Maltese had kept their language.

was offended by the fact that the Director made it subordinate and only supplementary to Italian. As proof, he stated that most of the official reports, circulars, programmes of lessons and his early correspondence with the Government were all written in Italian. Keenan was very conscious of the language issue and felt perturbed by the fact that English was still playing a secondary role after almost eighty years of British rule.

This perhaps was not a fair accusation. Pullicino sincerely believed in the utility of Italian but not to the extent of advocating the seclusion of all other languages. The teaching of languages in Maltese schools has always been a thorny question. Opinions differed greatly: Keenan himself did not agree with the suggestions on language teaching of the Royal Commission of 1836, which suggested the teaching of Maltese and Italian and considered English of less practical value. Similarly, the Storks Commission of 1865 had also suggested Italian as the basis of all instruction.

A Commissioner on the Board of National Education of Ireland, Mr. MacDonnell, told Pullicino that since English was not in general use in Malta, children should not be obliged to study it; it should be totally abolished at least from the rural schools<sup>9</sup>.

Long before Keenan's remarks, Pullicino had given his reasons for writ-

ing his official correspondence in Italian. He had brought the matter up in his letter of 28 April 1856 to V. Houlton<sup>10</sup>. He preferred Italian "per la maggior esattezza e più pronta speditezza degli affari al pubblico ufficio alle mie cure affidate." In those days, Italian was the normal medium of expression and Pullicino knew it perfectly well and better than any other language.

Keenan criticised those teachers who could not speak English, most of whom did not have the opportunity of learning the language in their student days. Pullicino's system for the teaching of languages had been in operation for twenty-eight years, but Keenan was referring to teachers most of whom had been teaching for more than thirty years. Though admitting that the teachers had manifestly made a genuine effort and had a great desire to teach English, Keenan was still disturbed that they did not make this their prevailing disposition.

Pullicino was also blamed for not adopting a regular system for the training of teachers and for making use of makeshift substitutes. However, Pullicino had pioneered teacher-training on the Island and realised the need for such training as far back as 1850 when he initiated an intensive professional and academic course for teachers. In fact he had tried to introduce a system of training which was then most prevalent in England and on the continent. He

9. Pullicino, *Giornale, Visita ed Esame degli Istituti di Educazione dell'Irlanda*, anno 1849, volume I.

10. Pullicino, *Agli Amici della Nuova Riforma*, p.16.

even established a university course for teachers and a Model School at Valetta. A regular training college for teachers was to be introduced in Malta as late as 1955<sup>11</sup>. It was hardly practical for the Director to organise a regular teacher training college at this stage as the number of schools was small and the demand for teachers restricted and fluctuating.

Keenan discussed at length the low pay of teachers. He said it was not creditable to adopt such a cheap labour system in which teachers at the Model School were paid less than policemen, or harbour labourers or washerwomen<sup>12</sup>. "I am quite at a loss to understand, or even to conjecture, how these poor teachers continue to clothe themselves as respectably as their official position demands of them; to find anything like a comfortable lodging to dwell in; and at the same time to provide themselves with proper nourishment." This was indeed a grave defect which Pullicino tried to remedy, but salary

adjustments and increases were the Governor's prerogative. It was also a fact that while the Governor of Malta was enjoying the fabulous yearly salary of £5000, the Chief Director of schools received annually a mere pittance of £100.

The report mentioned the bad state of schools. Playgrounds were lacking and in many instances the classrooms were small and badly ventilated and utterly unsuitable. Out of twenty schools which were Government's property only two were built properly to serve as school premises; the Government rented sixty-one other buildings to serve as schools. Because of the lack of accommodation, classes were set up in odd places: a convent chapel, the Bishop's Palace of Vittoriosa, the prison of the Knights, a hospital and a Court of Justice.

Keenan did not blame Pullicino that the buildings were not more suitable; he was in fact aware of the difficulties which the Director had to encounter in obtaining proper ac-

- 
11. Two emergency Training Colleges for teachers were opened in 1944. In 1947 the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart opened two training colleges on contract with the Government, one for males and the other for females. At first, the courses of training lasted for one year; a two-year residential training course was inaugurated in 1955. In 1971 the course was extended to three years and in 1973 the Malta College of Education was established, incorporating the two colleges. Further changes were effected when a Department of Educational Studies was formed at the Polytechnic. A new scheme of teacher training is being introduced.
  12. Salaries at the Valetta Model School for Boys were as follows: Headmaster £90 *per annum*, 1st and 2nd Assistant Masters £36 p.a., 3rd Assistant Master £21 p.a., Teacher of Drawing £55 p.a., Teacher of Vocal Music £45 p.a., the teachers of wood carving and wood engraving were paid 2s 6d per lesson. Ten temporary assistants were paid at the following rates: one at 9d., two at 8d, one at 7d., one at 6d, one at 5d, one at 4d and three at 3d a day. The daily wage of a policeman was then 1s. 6d.

comodation. Pullicino had drawn the attention of the Government to the unsuitability of school buildings on innumerable occasions. The Chief Secretary to the Government, commenting in a margin note to a report, said that this was "all for the future<sup>13</sup>." In his first Report<sup>14</sup> Pullicino stated that the sites of the schools were not convenient. This assertion was repeated in other reports. He was against the procedure adopted by the Government to rent houses to serve as schools. He said that it was always preferable to build premises for schools rather than to convert houses<sup>15</sup>. The small rooms of a house were usually haphazardly planned. "In iscuola ove molte numero di persone devono raccogliersi, e stare insieme per molte ore della giornata, è cosa di somma importanza l'avere sito talemente ampio, da impedire, per quanto possibile, molta corruzione dell'atmosfera<sup>16</sup>."

The Government was paying about £200 in rent per annum. Pullicino used to submit the actual plans for new schools and he stopped doing so after he was given "the impression that the Government was not inclined to incur expenditure on a large scale to carry out my recommendations<sup>17</sup>."

He suggested that £2000 a year should be set apart for building schools.

Keenan did not agree with Pullicino's

adoption of the simultaneous method of teaching. His main objection was that this system was being carried out with an insufficient staff. The Director had introduced this method because it was then the most recent and successful; he wanted to organise the local educational system on the current principles which were being adopted in England and the continent. It is not difficult to conjecture Keenan's criticism if Pullicino had remained stagnant and persisted in the outdated monitorial system of teaching.

Keenan also objected against the official timetable designated by Pullicino as a "standing rule of the school". He said that Pullicino determined the distribution and the judicious employment of the time of the teachers and the pupils; the teacher became a mere "automaton". According to Keenan, Pullicino ought to have left the function of organisation to the teachers themselves. Pullicino's criticism, control and absolute direction were only to be tolerated in cases of very inferior teaching. Though on one hand Keenan did not seem to have been favourably impressed by the local teachers, he wanted them on the other hand to be left free to organise their teaching.

This centralised system of education criticised by Keenan was not peculiar to Malta. Nineteenth cen-

13. *Official Correspondence*, volume I, 10 gennaio 1851 — 20 aprile 1855, p. 339.

14. Pullicino, *Primo Rapporto*, p.4.

15. *Id.*, *Letters with Enclosures*, p.23.

16. *Id.*, *Quinto Rapporto*, p.5.

17. Keenan, *op.cit.*, p.5.

tury education was nowhere liberally organised in the sense that teachers were left free to adopt their own method of teaching and to select their own curriculum. The system in Malta did not differ much from that in Ireland and as a National Commissioner of Irish Schools, Keenan could well discriminate.

Keenan found little satisfaction in his visits to the local schools; hardly anything enlivened or pleased him<sup>18</sup>. In order to help the teachers in their work, Pullicino published a series of programmes of instruction. Keenan considered these programmes too ambitious and that no school could fulfil their requirements. The syllabus of the Lessons of Method<sup>19</sup>, though regarded as masterly and comprehensive was also so ambitious that it could take an eminent professor in a Training College two or three years of daily lectures to exhaust it.

Keenan reported that discipline in schools was not maintained and noise was the prevailing defect; the high-pitched reading voice of children could be heard beyond the precincts of the school. The textbooks were unsuitable. The English Readers were not meant for Maltese pupils and the three Italian reading books, which Pullicino compiled, though containing a great deal of valuable information, were written in a language too difficult for children of school age. The level of Italian reading, though much higher than

the English reading, was passable. Keenan found nothing or little good with Maltese reading, dictation, English and Italian spelling; the children were badly prepared in the rudiments of arithmetic; geography was monotonously taught on the question-and-answer system and the children knew more about the countries of Europe than about Malta. Grammar monopolised mostly the energies of the teachers. He was only pleased with the Infant Model School at Valetta and with the Valetta Secondary Girls School.

Keenan found out that many pupils were repeating the same class. Many left school from Class I as it was the habit in Malta to send children to work at eleven or twelve years of age or even earlier. He said that he met "not groups but crowds of children" who never attended school. As there were no local agencies to stimulate and encourage attendance at school, he suggested the passing of a law rendering it obligatory to send children to school from five to twelve years. He would favour modification to such a law so that compulsory attendance would be limited to two-thirds of the school days; such an arrangement would enable the children to help their parents. Because of the lack of schools and accomodation, he considered immediate compulsion out of the question. Keenan offered the alternative of making it illegal to

---

18. Before compiling his report, Keenan visited all the Government Schools in Malta and seven in Gozo. On all occasions, except at Dingli, he was accompanied by Pullicino.

19. See Pullicino, *Sesto Rapporto*.

employ children for manual labour or to keep them at home for domestic or other purposes unless they had satisfactorily passed the examination of the fourth class or if they had been absent for more than sixty days during the preceeding twelve months.

Keenan suggested the formation of an Education Department<sup>20</sup>; an improvement in the teachers' qualifications; the organisation of schools; the distribution of prizes to clever and industrious children and the institution of a system of local management for schools with the parish priest as chairman and school manager in a committee of four<sup>21</sup>. He also proposed payment to teachers by results; he believed that this remuneration supplemented to a system of moderate fixed salaries would contribute immensely to the efficiency of the schools. He also favoured the introduction of adequate school fees on the principle that "what the people get for nothing, they esteemed to be of little or no value." Keenan estimated an annual income of £1,200 from school fees which could become part of the

teachers' salaries. School fees were fixed at ten shillings, two shillings sixpence, one shilling and a sixpence per quarter according to family income. Poor children were to be admitted free on tickets.

Keenan's recommendations on language teaching in Primary Schools were based on the principle that the existing plan of teaching two foreign languages should be totally abandoned. Children were to be taught to read Maltese on specially prepared books. English taught through the medium of Maltese was to be the future language of the schools. On reaching the third standard, children might be allowed to study Italian but after the ordinary school hours. To ensure success to these recommendations, Keenan also suggested that those teachers who could not carry out these regulations were to be suspended on pension as from 1 January 1881.

To carry out these changes proposed by Keenan, Government could not possibly leave Pullicino in charge of the Primary Schools. By the notice of 5 June 1880 appearing in the Government Gazette<sup>22</sup>, the office of

20. Keenan concluded that the Department of Education should consist of the General Council of the University of Malta, with the Rector to be known as the President of the Education Department. The Rector was to exercise the functions of Rector of the University and the Lyceum, and Head and Organiser of the system of Primary Education. The post of Inspector was also recommended.

21. The Governor approved, with reservations, the suggestion for the formation of Committees for School Management. See Savona G., *Report on the Educational Institutions of Malta and Gozo*, 1883.

22. "A further improvement of the arrangements concerning public education having necessitated the abolition of the Office of Director of Primary Schools, hitherto held by the Very Rev. Canon Pullicino D.D., with so much credit to himself, and, under the circumstances, with so much advantage to the public, His Excellency the Governor desires that it should be made publicly known that he fully concurs

Director of Primary Schools was abolished. In an other notice bearing the same date, the appointment of Sigismondo Savona as Director of Public Education was notified. The powers and the duties of the new Director as Head of the Education Department were those indicated by Keenan in his report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in article 57, paragraph III, page 103<sup>23</sup>.

However the Government did not implement all of Keenan's suggestions, but took into consideration the Language Problem and the establishment of an Education Department. Pullicino was pensioned off and from the very start Savona tried hard to effect Keenan's recommendations. The Anti-Reformist Party opposed Keenan's suggestions on education, and in the Council of Government, Fortunato Mizzi resisted what he considered Savona's attempt to impose English at the expense of Italian.

Pullicino did not deserve such a hard censure. In his diaries and correspondence he frequently referred to his adversaries who were doing their utmost to obstruct him in his work. He said that he had to face the liberals whose principal aim was

the secularization of the schools and the reformists who accused him of extreme italianism.

He considered that the "unjust opposition made only by a party spirit<sup>24</sup>" had been the result of the division which started to appear between pro-English and pro-Italian groups. As far back as 1860, Pullicino was already denying the accusations that he was obstructing the teaching of English in schools; he assured his critics that the teaching and practice of English had in fact been extended "malgrado le malevoli insinuazioni colle quali alcuni per ragioni personali, ovvero per calcoli meschini di proprio mal definito interesse, pretendono di screditare le scuole, dicendo che in esse non insegnarsi sufficientemente l'inglese<sup>25</sup>."

In his attempt to boost the teaching of English, Savona was only able to introduce a few changes. He had to compromise and favoured the *paripassu* system, a system which gave equal importance to the teaching of Italian and English.

---

*J.J. Camilleri, M.A. is Education Officer  
I with the Department of Education.*

---

in the opinion expressed by Mr P. J. Keenan C.B. in his report to the Right Hon. the Secretary of State for the Colonies, of June 1879, concerning the great services rendered to the Government and the public, by that Very Rev. Gentleman, in organising in 1850, and since gradually developing a sound educational system out of a state of things so strongly and justly condemned in that report."

23. *Government Gazette*, Tuesday, 8 June 1880.

24. Pullicino, *Corrispondenza dal Luglio 1870 al Marzo 1875*.

25. *Id.*, *Sesto Rapporto*, p.18.