
1921: ELECTORAL ISSUES

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The granting of self-government to Malta in 1921 ushered in a new era for the island. Although Malta was still largely controlled by Britain, the Maltese representatives could now voice their claims with a hope of actually achieving something; henceforth, they themselves were responsible for local affairs.¹

As a natural sequel to the granting of self-government, political activity in Malta started mounting slowly until it reached a climax during the general elections which were held in October 1921. In this constitutional frame-work, properly organized political parties were bound to develop. Five political parties were formed in view of the imminent elections. These were the *Unione Politica Maltese* (U.P.M.) under the leadership of Mgr. Ignazio Panzavecchia, the *Anglo-Maltese Party* (A.M.P.) under Sir Gerald Strickland, the *Maltese Constitutional Party* (M.C.P.) under Dr. Augustus Bartolo, the *Partito Democratico Nazionalista* (P.D.N.) under Dr. Enrico Mizzi, and the *Labour Party* (L.P.) under Col. William Savona. The U.P.M. and the P.D.N. had practically the same ideology; they were both pro-Italian and therefore representing the nationalist forces. Their division rested mainly on personal and tactical differences between the party leaders. On the other hand the same could be said of the A.M.P. and the M.C.P. They were two pro-British factions within the Imperialist camp. Personal animosity between their leaders was overruled in time, and just before the elections, they united their forces to form the *Constitutional Party* (C.P.). The only completely original and independent party was the *Labour Party* (L.P.) which had to protect, above all, the interests of the working class.

The elections were approaching, by May the electoral machine started operating and Malta was drowned in propaganda. Yet the electoral campaign was characterized by ambiguity. No specific line of policy could be attributed to any of the parties. Generally speaking, the political arena was ideologically divided into three groups — the pro-British, the pro-Italian and the Labour parties. Parties which had the same inspiration criticized and attacked one another. People with practically the same ideology were sworn enemies.

Each party strived to establish its ideology and differentiate itself from

1. The 1921 Letters Patent adopted a 'dyarchical' system of government, with a bicameral system for local affairs and a Nominated Council to look after imperial interests.

the rest, but on various instances these ideologies overlapped. The U.P.M. called the P.D.N. 'extremist', 'disloyal' and even 'irredentist', but both parties had pro-Italian leanings which they had inherited from the 'old' Nationalist Party. The M.C.P. was ideologically very similar to the A.M.P., they were both imperialist parties yet before they amalgamated they criticised each other severely. In their great anxiety to secure votes, the newly constituted parties all promised every kind of measure to ameliorate the position of workers. In this case the U.P.M., the P.D.N., the M.C.P., and the A.M.P. had to give the impression that their ideology was very similar, if not identical to that of the Labour Party and in fact they all tried to co-operate with it. On the other hand, the *Labour Party* sought to retain its independence claiming that it was the only true workers' party and that the others had ulterior motives when appealing to workers. Rather than on pressing issues such as unemployment, the electoral campaign was mainly fought on these relatively ambiguous ideological principles and on personal animosity and recriminations between politicians. These were the controversies which literally filled up the pages of the press. As regards the issues, there was very little difference between parties the parties were ready to show moderation and compromise on everything including the language question.

To add to the ambiguity which already characterized the political arena, electoral programmes were published rather late. As the new government was going to be run by Maltese representatives, the public was facing a new situation. The people were expecting something radically different from previous electoral programmes which had been mainly directed to fight for a good Constitution. Constructive programmes attempting to give an answer to the most pressing and controversial issues was what was needed at the moment. When the electoral programmes were published the parties went to the other extreme. Instead of being realistic and explaining the great liabilities and difficulties which were bound to be encountered in the working out of the new constitution, the public was promised several things which were impossible to achieve. First and foremost parties sought to establish their identity and remove any possible doubts, which the man in the street might have had, with regard to their basic principles.²

Religion

A principle which was accepted by everybody and which no party ever dreamt to challenge was the guarantee given to the rights of the Catholic Church in Malta. All parties thought fit to declare their support to the Catholic Religion mainly because of the controversy resulting from the interpretation of the Religion Clause in the Constitution. The Draft Letters

2. Dominic Micallef, "1921, A Landmark in Maltese Political History", unpublished B.A (Hons.) Thesis 1978, University of Malta.

Patent establishing self-government in Malta dealt with the religious question only to the extent of laying down the principle of religious freedom for all. Following the disillusioned reaction of the Archbishop, the National Assembly³ in its final comments and suggestions on the draft constitution had proposed the insertion of a clause declaring the Catholic Religion to be the established religion of the island. This proposal was not accepted by the British authorities and some even wanted to reject the Constitution on this issue. The Constitution was accepted on the understanding that during the first sitting of the legislature the House would declare the Roman Catholic Religion as the official religion of Malta. All the political parties, but especially the A.M.P. gave a guarantee to the rights of the Catholic Church in Malta. Having been charged with harbouring designs incompatible with the Church's ownership of landed property, Sir Gerald Strickland wanted to dispel any such suspicion.

Loyalty

Loyalty to the British Crown was another principle which was found in all political programmes published in 1921. The A.M.P. and the M.C.P. were not just loyalist but imperialist parties. While they regarded as unchallengeable the Maltese national individuality and the people's right to be masters in their own home, they expected the Maltese to give something much more than 'lip-loyalty' to the British Crown. The two parties emphasized that imperialism was not an attempt at denationalisation. They claimed that the power of incorporating alien races, without trying to disintegrate them, or to rob them of their individuality was characteristic of the British Imperial system. Considering British policy in Malta in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this claim could easily have been questioned. The cultural feeling at the time had its roots in Italian and so any attempt to dislodge Italian was artificial and forced. The upholding of the Maltese language was only an excuse to promote English and undermine Italian.⁴

The Maltese Imperialists equated the English Language with 'loyalty', anybody who supported the Italian language openly was called 'disloyal', if not 'irredentist'. Using this strategy, Strickland managed to keep the pro-Italian nationalist forces divided. The U.P.M. stressed its strict loyalty to the British crown and its intention to protect the cultural and national

3. L'Assemblea Nazionale di Malta, 25 Febbraio 1919 — 27 Maggio 1921. Processi verbali e altri documenti dell'Assemblea Nazionale delle relative Commissioni, raccolti e stampate nel presente volume per ordine del Parlamento Maltese. Resolution approved by the National Assembly on the 27th May 1921, p. 80 (Malta: Stamperia del Governo, 1923).
4. Henry Frendo, 'Language of a Colony' unpublished M.A. Thesis, 1973 University of Malta.

traditions of the Maltese. In its electoral programme the U.P.M. categorically refuted any charges of disloyalty from whichever quarter they came. The party took great pains to differentiate itself from allegedly 'disloyal' P.D.N. All men suspected of harbouring extreme political views were held at arm's length by the party. The party made it clear that although its members considered themselves British citizens, they were first and foremost Maltese, ready to recognize Italian as their language of culture while acknowledging fully the importance of learning English. Calling itself the 'moderate' party, the U.P.M. tried to steer clear of the so called 'extremists' and especially of the 'irredentists' with the result that it was attacked from both sides.

The Labour Party was never accused of having any excessive pro-English or pro-Italian feelings. It was an independent party which did not think it necessary to declare its categorical loyalty to the British crown. Many workers were directly employed with the Admiralty and War Department and so it was in the Labour Party's interest to maintain the best possible relations with the local British authorities. The party was not interested in the diffusion of either English or Italian to the exclusion of the other. While encouraging the teaching of Maltese, the Labour Party realized the importance of knowing both foreign languages. The party was criticized on several issues but nobody ever questioned its loyalty. It was for propaganda reasons that the Labour Party gave a helping hand to the other parties in accusing the P.D.N. of 'disloyalty' and 'irredentism'.

Enrico Mizzi's P.D.N. was the target for those who, during the electoral campaign, championed strict loyalty to the British throne. The fact that even the U.P.M. called Mizzi 'irredentist' made his urge to prove his loyalty much more difficult. The P.D.N. issued a formal declaration of loyalty in the press, to remove any possible doubts, but this was to no avail.⁵ The 'irredentist' scare was practically the only weapon used by the adversaries of the P.D.N., during the electoral campaign. Mizzi was ready not to make use of the drastic expressions he had used in his youth but he was certainly prepared to defend the Italian language even at the cost of being called 'irredentist'.

Language

The 1921 Constitution sought to settle the language question by taking "equally into consideration the historic and cultural traditions of the island, its position as a member of the British Commonwealth and the everyday needs of the Maltese".⁶ This aim was not achieved, particularly because the Constitution itself was ambiguous on this issue. It allowed controversies to arise on the language clause. The constitution provided for both English and Italian to be considered as the official and cultural languages of Malta.

5. 'Una Categorical Smentita del P.D.N.' *Malta Herald*, May 21, 1921.

6. The Malta Constitution 1921.

However, what proved to be obscure and caused political wrangling was the decree that:- "where both languages cannot conveniently be taken simultaneously regard shall be had in settling the order of priority in which the languages shall be taught to the wishes of the parents in the case of schools and of students in the case of the University and to the ability of the teaching staff for the purpose of the pupils' future occupation"⁷

The crux of the problem was whether both languages were to be considered compulsory and so taught simultaneously or whether this clause simply meant that equal facilities should be given for the learning of both languages. Before the granting of the constitution, the 'pari-passu' system had prevailed in the schools. According to this system there was no option for a student to give priority either to English or Italian, he was required to take and study them with equal proficiency. In a report on the organization of Education in Malta published in 1921, the Hon. W.N. Bruce said that "the attempt to introduce three languages in the elementary schools is extremely contrary to all the best opinion as to the way to train the faculties of very young children."⁸ This opinion must have certainly influenced the decision-makers in London and although they upheld 'pari-passu', they made it theoretically possible for anybody to learn English only if he wanted.

The Language Question had always been the key issue in every election held before 1921. The nationalists had used the Italian language as a bulwark against any attempt at denationalisation or anglicization by the British authorities. In 1921, the language question continued to be treated as a political question. The interpretation of the ambiguous language clause in the constitution proved to be one of the main issues during the electoral campaign. Was there to be the continuation of 'pari-passu' or was "free-choice" to be re-established? The emerging political parties had to define their policy with regard to the language question much more than any other issue. This was a point which could indicate substantial difference of opinion, if not the only divergent opinion between parties. They knew that in the prevailing circumstances, a moderate policy was the best one to follow, and so none of the parties advocated the abolition of any language. No party contested the position of Italian in the Law Courts as this was clearly safeguarded in the Constitution. What caused friction was the system that had to be adopted for the teaching of languages.

The U.P.M., in accordance with the moderate impression it tried to give the public, advocated 'pari-passu' claiming that both languages were necessary and important and that it was possible to study both languages simultaneously as from the first classes of the primary schools. Bi-lingual

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7. His Majesty's Letters Patent. April 14, 1921 — Establishing Self-Government in Malta, Clause 57 (2).
 8. N.W. Burce, *Report on the Organization of Education in Malta*, Malta Government Gazette, Supplement No. XIII, April 15, 1921.

education was introduced in Malta during the war and so in 1921 it had not yet given the desired results. If started, from the first classes of Elementary Schools, the learning of two languages could yield good results, but one of the languages had to be the vernacular. Italian and English were two foreign languages to the Maltese. Notwithstanding the introduction of the "pari-passu" system relatively few people had a command of the two foreign languages.

"No compulsion" was the cry of the A.M.P. The party pledged to encourage the teaching of both languages as students desired, in other words, the party was in favour of the "free choice" system. Strickland pointed out that it was important to specialize in order to excel. He appealed to the workers, saying that those who specialize in English could earn their living much more certainly than those who could speak both languages with glaring imperfections. Sir Gerald Strickland did not preach outwardly in favour of abolishing Italian because this would have been suicidal. He upheld Maltese not because he was sincerely interested in the fostering of the Maltese language, but because he wanted to secure the worker's vote. If Maltese was promoted to the level of an official language, Italian would have to compete with two languages and not just English. Sir Gerald believed that it was only in this way that Italian could be abolished from Malta.⁹

The M.C.P. did not pronounce itself clearly on the language question. The party promised to abide by the provisions of the Constitution on this issue. If the Constitution was ambiguous, the M.C.P. was just as vague on this point. Commenting on the A.M.P.'s programme in the press, members of the M.C.P. supported the "pari-passu" system, however they were in favour of 'free-choice' when adopted in the elementary schools. This 'impari-passu' as it was called by Strickland, had one great drawback. By learning only one language in the elementary schools, the students would have found it impossible to pass an examination in both languages when trying to enter the Lyceum. When the M.C.P. joined forces with the A.M.P. to form the Constitutional Party, it was the M.C.P.'s provision which was adopted in the joint electoral programme. As the elections were on the threshold, Strickland decided to veil his ideas on the language question with ambiguity. He had far from changed — his intention was and still remained that of promoting the English language at all costs.

In comparison with the other parties the Labour Party was very clear on the Language Question. It opted for the teaching of Maltese in the first two years of the elementary schools, English was to be taught in the elementary schools up to and including the fourth standard, while 'pari-passu' would only be introduced as from the fifth standard. Knowing that workers would benefit much more from the English language than from Italian.

9. "Programme of the United A.M.P. and M.C.P. To be known henceforth as the Constitutional Party" — Clause 3. *Daily Malta Chronicle*, Sept. 2, 1921.

the Labour Party favoured the teaching of English. If the simultaneous teaching of English and Italian was dropped in the primary schools, many students who left school after the elementary level of education would at least have been able to communicate well in one foreign language. Employment in the dockyard or with the military services was likely, and so they would surely have benefited from their years at school. The prospect of emigration to other parts of the British Empire was another reason why the Labour Party favoured the teaching of English in the primary schools. As could be expected the Labour Party upheld the Maltese Language both in education and as a language which could be used in parliament. However, its support was limited considering the importance which the Imperial Government Workers Union representatives had attached to the Maltese Language in the National Assembly.¹⁰ The teaching of the vernacular in the first two years of the elementary schools was certainly not enough, even though it was much more than the other parties were ready to concede.

In its political programme, the P.D.N., strangely enough, made little reference to the language question. The party promised to reform the Constitution on this issue. It was clear, however, that Dr. E. Mizzi was in favour of a strict and uncompromising application of "pari-passu". While the party acknowledged the importance of English for certain sections of the population it upheld Italian as a safeguard against any attempt at denationalisation and against the take-over of the best jobs on the island by Englishmen. Italian was considered by the P.D.N. as 'la lingua nostra,' while Maltese was regarded as a patois having no grammar or literature. Maltese was attacked on all fronts by Dr. Mizzi's party. The promotion of the vernacular was seen as the most dangerous tool used by the Imperialists to oust Italian. This was the reason why the party objected to the inclusion of Maltese in schools.

Education

Although the attention of the political parties and of the population was focused on the language question, the introduction, or otherwise, of compulsory education in Malta was another important point at issue.

The British Government had seriously thought of introducing compulsory education in Malta. Governor Methuen had declared, during the war that he wished to be known to posterity as the man who established compulsory education in Malta. But due to Malta's bad financial position and the hostile attitude taken by the Church nothing had been done. Children coming from poor families were either not sent to school at all or else they left school to 'help' their parents in their work before they reached the school leaving age. On the other hand, applications made by parents to enrol their children were very often turned down because there was no room

10. L'Assemblea Nazionale di Malta, p. 199.

for them in government schools.

All parties contesting the 1921 elections promised to improve the educational system. What they did not agree upon was how and to what extent education had to be imparted. The Labour Party advocated compulsory education under the control and guidance of the Catholic Church. The party had a duty, namely that of eradicating illiteracy from among the working class. Knowing what opposition the church had put up to the idea of compulsory education, when it was first suggested, the party had to be cautious when proposing the introduction of compulsory education. The Church would have protested to any complete take-over by the State in education. The Labour Party emphasized that all children should at least be given the opportunity to go to school and for this to happen education had to be compulsory and free.

In its electoral programme the U.P.M. declared that it was in favour of compulsory education only if strictly controlled by the Church. Many members of the U.P.M., including Mgr. I. Panzavecchia had opposed compulsory education when it was first suggested by Governor Methuen, their abrupt change of opinion can only be attributed to the publication of the Labour Party programme. The U.P.M. did not want to become involved in any uncalled for controversies. It sought the workers' votes and so it was ready to compromise on this issue. The Panzavecchiani claimed that it was the parents' right to send their children to school and that the State had no legal obligation to provide education.¹¹ They were, however, ready to compromise and concede to compulsory education if the Church authorities chose the teachers and the materials to be studied. Moreover, the Church had also to be co-responsible with the State for the administration of education.

Dr. E. Mizzi's party promised to put education within reach of all social classes and to fight illiteracy by spreading Catholic education, but it made no mention of compulsory education. The M.C.P. decided not to deal with the question of compulsory education without a special mandate from the electorate, claiming that it was not fair for any party, which might secure a majority on a general programme to take advantage of its temporary power for the purpose of solving this important question of far-reaching consequences. The party claimed that any project to introduce immediate compulsory education was not realistic, when applications for voluntary admission were being refused due to the lack of school accommodation. In the joint electoral programme published by the A.M.P. and the M.C.P., the idea of holding a referendum on this issue was dropped. The L.P. was in favour of granting subsidies to the various educational institutions run by the clergy until the Government could provide additional school accommodation. This proposal was criticized by the U.P.M.

11. Mgr. I. Panzavecchia, "Lingua ed Istruzione", *Malta*, Sept. 17, 1921.

and the P.D.N. on the pre-supposition that if the Government would give subsidies to private educational organisations it would in turn claim the right to interfere in the schools' administration. Considering the circumstances at the time this was certainly the most realistic proposal.

Industry

At the turn of the century industry in Malta was practically non-existent. The manufacturing industry was very limited, being made up of a few minor industries such as tomato-canning, tobacco manufacture and cigarette production, which employed small groups of workers. The only industry which employed a large number of workers was the Dockyard. During the war the Dockyard had employed 12,000 men but it was obvious that the number could not be maintained and that discharges had to take place. Local industry could not absorb any of the discharged men and so many had to emigrate. Constant discharges from the Dockyard created great distress among the workers, which had obvious consequences. In 1921 there were 6,973 persons working in the yard. Malta's main industry could have been used better to employ a larger number of workers. Naval warships were the only vessels repaired at the dockyard; the transformation of the industry to serve commercial purposes would have certainly required the services of other workers. In 1917 Admiral Ballard expressed the hope that after the war Malta would become a centre for shipbuilding.¹² This project had not yet been carried out in 1921 and so both the L.P. and the C.P. regarded shipbuilding as a possible undertaking by the government, to reduce the number of the unemployed. The other parties claimed that this project could never be put into practice and that it was mentioned just to catch the worker's vote. As could be expected all political parties promised to strengthen the existing industries, to revive those that were practically extinct and to create and encourage the development of new industries with the aim of reducing unemployment, which stood at 4,933 in 1921.

Emigration

It seemed as if the only solution to unemployment was emigration. In Malta emigration was closely inter-related to the social and economic conditions of the island. Because of strong family ties Maltese workers choose emigration as a last resort and hardly ever took this course willingly. To make matters worse, many countries issued restrictive immigration laws, which had to be respected. As a member of the British Commonwealth the Maltese worker should have enjoyed free access to any part of

12. Rear Admiral G.A. Ballard, *The Development of Malta as a First Class Naval Base since its inclusion in the British Empire* (Malta, 1917).

the British Empire, surprisingly enough, in most British Dominions, the Maltese emigrant was regarded as an alien. The largest flow of Maltese emigration, in the second decade of the twentieth century, was still directed to the Mediterranean littoral.¹³ This fact was used by the pro-British parties and the L.P. in Malta to promote the teaching of the English Language. As a result emigration became deeply submerged in politics. The Nationalists argued that emigration to the British Empire had failed. Many letters, sent by Maltese emigrants to their relatives in Malta, were published in the nationalist press, in order to warn prospective Maltese emigrants of the widespread unemployment abroad.¹⁴ The government was accused of discouraging emigration to the Mediterranean littoral while promoting emigration to the British Empire simply to prove the utility of learning English.

Social Legislation

Emigration was a safety valve for the unemployed. However, something concrete could have been undertaken effectively in order to ease the miserable state of the Maltese workers. No social legislation had been enacted in Malta before 1921 and this was the main moving factor for the organization of trade unions. This consciousness in turn animated the establishment of the Labour Party, whose prime interest was to propose and enact social reform in parliament. The party promised to raise the status of the working classes as regards wages, hours and conditions of employment but more specifically it wanted to enact the Workmen's Compensation Act, the Old Age Pension Act, the Trade Union and Factory Acts, the National Insurance Acts and an act to regulate the increase and decrease of house-rents.

As could be expected all parties followed in the footsteps of the Labour Party and proposed social reform. Workers formed an important part of the electorate and so their claims could not be ignored. The U.P.M. was in favour of social reform only if it was carried out in a fair spirit of compromise between employers and employees. The party did not favour the precipitous adoption of a vast programme of social legislation due to the depleted state of the Maltese treasury. The P.D.N. agreed to all measures of social legislation but it emphasized the importance of granting pensions to widows and orphans of government employees. The C.P. only promised to consider the advisability of adopting the Workmen's Compensation Act. When attempting to form a coalition with the L.P., Strickland, promised to help enact all social legislation proposed by the L.P., in the future parliament. This indicates that he was only ready to support such reform if the L.P. co-operated with him in the electoral campaign. For such measures

13. Out of 3,385 people who emigrated from Malta in 1921, 2,585 went to countries bordering the Mediterranean while only 800 emigrated to the British Empire.
14. Letter sent by D.M. Borg to E. Mizzi 'I Maltesi a Detroit', *Malta*, June 9, 1921.

to be adopted the government would have had to increase taxation and Sir Gerald would surely have opposed such a measure. One of the main cries of the Constitutional Party during the 1921 electoral campaign was precisely 'No new taxation'.

Taxation

Sir Gerald acknowledged that the existing taxes could not be reduced, but he claimed that they could be made more productive to improve the administration. The proposal not to increase taxation was not realistic when the financial situation of the government was taken into consideration. If the prospective representatives of the people sincerely intended to enact social legislation and to encourage the establishment of new industries, additional revenue was certainly necessary.¹⁵ To encourage Malta's industrialisation, the political parties, pledged to exempt new industries from any taxation for a number of years and so other sources of taxation had necessarily to be found.

The system of taxation prevalent in Malta at the time was, to say the least, anomalous. Taxes hit everybody in the same way as they were largely indirect taxes. With the exception of the Succession and Donation Duty there was no tax aimed at the richer classes. The L.P., the U.P.M. and the P.D.N. proposed to revise the tributary system, so as to distribute the burden of taxation more equitably. However, they claimed that no immediate reduction in indirect taxation, levied on commodities, was possible. It was only the Labour Party which proposed the introduction of an Income Tax "if required by circumstances".¹⁶ As could be expected this proposal brought about a negative reaction from the other parties. Opposition to the introduction of an Income Tax also came from the British Government which wanted to protect British citizens in Malta. As long as this state of affairs continued the future appeared to be very bleak. Without a heavy increase in government revenue which necessarily had to come from direct taxation, there appeared to be little hope of enacting social legislation in the near future.

What normally determines the outcome of an election is the position taken by political parties on the most controversial issues of the time. This maxim, however, did not entirely apply in Malta, in 1921. Besides the issues, what featured most prominently in the 1921 electoral campaign, were the personal attacks and recrimination against prospective representatives in the new parliament.

15. The revenue for the financial year 1920-21 amounted to £1,063,743.6s½d, including the imperial grant of £250,000 while the expenditure amounted to £1,060,664.6s½d. This left a balance of £3,078; when added to the accumulated balance remaining on March 31, 1921, viz:- £61,772, a balance of £64,850 remained.

16. The Labour Party Electoral Programme, *D.M.C.*, Sept 14, 1921.