
RETURN MIGRATION TO THE MALTESE ISLANDS IN THE POSTWAR YEARS

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It is commonly held in Malta that return migration in the post-war period has been practically negligible. This impression seems to have prevailed also in government circles and is implicit in the reports of foreign economic advisers to the Malta Government. Policies on migration have been consequently reduced to strategies on attracting and encouraging emigration; policies on return migration are conspicuous by their absence although some constraints on the economic activity of migrant returnees were introduced in 1977.

The question of return migration is critically relevant for the formulation of demographic and economic policies in the Maltese Islands. An unpredicted high return migration would disorientate projected government plans for social and productive investment and render unattainable the desired rate of growth of employment. Yet, despite the obvious importance of this factor, no attempt has been made to estimate the flow of return migration since the War. Indeed official statistics tended to under-estimate grossly the number of migrant returnees until 1974, when a change in the definition of a 'return migrant' was introduced.

This paper assesses the extent of the return migration to Malta and Gozo up to 1974, that is, during the years when official data register a very low incidence of Maltese migrant returnees. It comments on Maltese migration statistics and derives an estimate of the net return flow. Some implications for economic planning of the results obtained conclude the paper.

The Department of Emigration, established in 1921 to guide prospective Maltese emigrants and assist them in their difficulties abroad, started compiling information on the number and characteristics of the migrants from the Maltese Islands. Since the end of the War and the introduction of the Emigrants' Passage Assistance Schemes in 1948,¹ the Department has provided a virtually complete record of Maltese emigrants to all major destinations except the United Kingdom. This has been assured by the fact that potential emigrants have all the benefits

1. Restrictions on passage assistance by the Malta Government were introduced in August 1980.

to gain by registering with the Department; and the governments receiving the emigrants have generally collaborated very closely with the Department's officials. Information on registered emigrants is currently produced giving the sex, age, occupation, marital status, location, sponsorship, and country of destination.

In the case of Maltese migration to Britain accuracy of recording migrants was introduced by the Commonwealth Immigrants' Act of 1962. Before then the entry of Maltese was virtually unrestricted so that no administrative control, and therefore no record, was required at the Maltese end. Besides, the passage cost was not so high as to deter independent movement. The controls introduced by the Act gave the Department a more active role in the migration process.

Data for emigration to Britain pre-1962 tend to underestimate the true flow of the emigration of Maltese to the United Kingdom. Moreover, they do not include girls who married British servicemen and joined them in England; or Maltese seamen who go and join ships in the United Kingdom; or contract workers who take up seasonal employment in Britain. However, the circular nature of Maltese migration during the fifties and the sixties would render any estimate, other than the official, as reliable a guess as any other.

Data on emigration from the Maltese Islands can therefore be used and interpreted with confidence. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for the data on return migration. Up to 1974 a return migrant was defined as "an emigrant who returns to Malta within two years of departure". This definition was too narrow and covered only those emigrants who failed to settle down in their country of adoption. Since 1975, the data on migrant returnees have included all the emigrants who return to Malta with the intention of remaining here independent of their length of stay abroad. It is superfluous to point out that, for this reason, the data on return migrants up to 1974 are not comparable to those following 1974².

Return migrants are classified by their number, sex and country of last permanent residence which, in most cases, could be identified with the former country of adoption. Returnees who re-emigrate and do

2. Certain comments about the intention of returnees given in the Department's reports are confusing. They leave the reader uncertain as to what is meant exactly by a return migrant as distinct from a visitor. Data on return migration was based "on the declaration of the returning migrants themselves at the time of landing in Malta as to whether they intend to remain or not". Yet, "the most reliable and first-hand information is available to the Department to the effect that the overwhelming majorities of these returnees go back to their receiving countries — in some cases, after a stay of only a few days in Malta. *Report of the Department of Labour, Emigration and Social Welfare, 1966, page 16.*

not book their passage through the Department are not included in the official statistics; those who register are included as "migrants returning to adopted country". However, their characteristics (sex, age, skill, and locality) are not given separately from the general distribution of all emigrants. This means that while it is possible to estimate the first-time emigrants, by deducting the number of returnees to adopted countries, it is not possible to find out who are the Maltese emigrating for a second time.

Of course, a decision to re-emigrate should not disqualify a person from being included in the emigration data for a given year. If migrants return with the sole intention of collecting their families, as seems to be suggested by H.R. Jones,³ they would probably say so. The emigration selection procedures take some time and any emigrant who intends collecting his family would be wise enough not to lose avoidable time, and income, in Malta. If emigrants return for this purpose then it is reasonable to assume that they would remain abroad for two years, at least, and avoid having to refund the cost of the first passage which in all probability would have been financed under the passage assistance scheme. For this reason it is more plausible to hold that those emigrants who returned within two years of emigrating, and were recorded in the official migration statistics up to 1974, did so either because they felt inadequate to fit within the socio-economic structure of the adopted countries, or because they had received incorrect information on the employment situation in Malta. On finding different conditions from the ones they were led to believe, they returned to the country of adoption. The elasticity of migration of returnees in response to changes in the socio-economic conditions in Malta would probably be greater than that of the first-time emigrants. The fear of the unknown tends to fall in inverse relation to one's successful settlement, even for a short period, in another country.

An approximate estimate of the total number of Maltese migrant returnees and the net migration movement from the Maltese Islands may be derived in one of three ways:

1. By comparing the number of registered emigrants in a period to the expected differences between actual population at the beginning and at the end of the period. The difference would represent the number of persons "missing" from the population. An adjustment to the statistic thus obtained would have to be made to account for the inclusion in Maltese population data of the wives and children of the U.K. Services personnel stationed in the Islands.

3. Huw R. Jones, *Modern Emigration from Malta*, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, November 1973, page 104.

2. By comparing the total number of registered emigrants to a country of destination with the census data for Malta-born residents in that country. With the exception of the United Kingdom data, which would include the children born in Malta of British personnel with the Services, persons registered as Malta-born in the countries receiving Maltese emigrants could be assumed to be Maltese.

3. By comparing the Maltese emigration statistics with the data on passenger movements for Maltese nationals. The latter set of statistics include independent, unregistered emigrants, Maltese females married to British servicemen, and Maltese sailors. This exercise is not as simple as one would expect. Maltese data on passenger movements are recorded by country of departure or destination. So return migrants who travel to Malta via Rome or London would be registered as coming from Italy or the United Kingdom rather than, say, from Australia. This system of data collection produces a close similarity between the data on emigration and on passenger movements to Canada, the United States of America and Australia, the three countries that attracted the greater number of postwar Maltese migrants.

The natural increase of the Maltese population for the three periods indicated below is estimated to have been:

Period		
1949 — 1956	:	49639 persons
1958 — 1966	:	39121 persons
1968 — 1974	:	22916 persons

The population estimates, based on the official censuses, for the years included were:

Beginning of 1949 (based on 1948 census)	:	308929 persons
Beginning of 1958 (based on 1957 census)	:	319957 persons
Beginning of 1968 (based on 1967 census)	:	317026 persons
Beginning of 1974	:	317980 persons

The persons missing from the population are estimated at:

Period		
1949 — 1956	:	44,607 persons
1958 — 1966	:	40,969 persons
1968 — 1974	:	16,096 persons

a total of 101672 persons for the period 1949 — 1974.

The data for missing persons have to be adjusted to account for the movements of the non-Maltese population. Information is available on both the total population of the Maltese Islands and on the Maltese population for the years after 1968. Over the period 1968-1974, the Maltese population averaged 94.3% of the total population of the Islands. If it is assumed that this rate was reflective of the Maltese component throughout the postwar period, and if it is also assumed that the composition of the missing persons corresponded to that of the total

population, a tentative estimate of missing Maltese persons may be derived.

Period		
1949	— 1956	: 42064 persons
1958	— 1966	: 38633 Maltese
1964	— 1974	: 15178 Maltese

Migration statistics suggest that Net Migration for the same periods was:

Period		
1949	— 1956	: -51156 persons
1958	— 1966	: -40999 persons
1968	— 1974	: -20493 persons

Data on Net Passenger Movements (Maltese nationality) for the three sub-periods give the following distribution:

Period		
1949	— 1956	: -41196 persons
1958	— 1966	: -33222 persons
1967	— 1974	: - 7792 persons

The above data do not however reveal an interesting phenomenon: while data on net migration suggest a net outward balance throughout the period 1949 — 1974, the data on net passenger movements indicate that a net **inward** flow was registered in 1968, 1969 and 1970. Net inward movements amounted to 489, 1065, and 146 persons respectively in those three years. This means that the population growth rate exceeded the rate of natural increase through a positive inward movement.

Table 1 combines the three sets of statistics.

Table 1
Missing Maltese Persons, Net Migration and Net Passenger Movement
1949 — 1974

Period	Missing Maltese Persons	Net Migration	Net Passenger Movement
1949-56	42064	-51156	-41196
1958-66	38633	-40999	-33222
1968-74	15178	-20493	- 7792

Source: Estimated from data in Annual Abstract of Statistics (Central Office of Statistics, Malta), sections on Population and Passenger Movements.

Net migration data give an emigration balance of 112,648 persons during 1949-1974; net passenger movements statistics suggest an outward balance of 82,210 Maltese — a difference of 30,438 persons from net migration. About 30,000 Maltese returned from settlement abroad in excess of those suggested by the migration statistics.

A different approach adopted to estimate return migration yielded a return flow in the region of the 30,000 obtained above. If it is assumed that no return migration occurred since 1945, and if registered second-

time emigrants are considered as non-returnees,⁴ the population in the Maltese Islands in 1974 would have been 292,206.⁵ The actual population in 1974 was 317,980; that is 26,000 more than that estimated.

Return migration must therefore have been between 26,000 and 30,000 more than the recorded 12,771; total returnees amounted to between 38,000 and 42,000. Government statistics would suggest that all returnees re-emigrated, for the total number of emigrants who declared they were returning to the adopted country was 12,307 between 1951 and 1974. Since the two official estimates of returned migrants and second-time emigrants practically cancel out we are left with the non-recorded returnees (the missing persons) of about 30,000.

Total registered migrants between 1951 and 1974 were 117,791. If net return migration, that is, return migration less second-time emigration, was about 30,000, then net emigration would have been 87,700 or 74.5% of the gross flow. This would suggest a rate of emigration loss of about 25%.⁶

The official population censuses in the countries receiving Maltese emigrants are also useful in estimating the emigration loss. The 1971 censuses for Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand record 77,230 Malta-born persons distributed as follows:⁷

Australia	53,681
Canada	9,225
United Kingdom	16,000 ⁸
New Zealand	324

Source: Australia Census 1971, Bulletin 4, Table 1.

Canada Census 1971, Vol.1.3, Table 34.

New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings, 1971, Vol. 7, Table 4.

United Kingdom Census 1971, Country of Birth Tables, Table 4, page 144.

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4. If the registered returned migrants are excluded, the population in 1974 would have been 279,899.
 5. This implies that the births and the deaths registered do not include any returned migrant in the death statistics or their children born in Malta in the birth data. Using the statistic in footnote 4, and deducting it from the 1974 actual population, we obtain a difference of 38081 returnees.
 6. In a study on *Settler Loss and Gain in Australia*, C. Price concludes: "Leaving aside the early postwar settlers, the loss rates after some ten years of settlement work out at 30 for British, Italian, and Maltese settlers, nearly 40 for Dutch and German settlers, and about 20 and 25 for Greeks and Yugoslavs". See, Immigration Advisory Council Committee on Social Patterns, *Inquiry into the Department of Settlers from Australia: Final Report, 1973*, (Canberra, Australia Government Publishing Service, 1973), Appendix C.
 7. The population census for the USA does not classify Maltese as a separate category. They are included with the residual general category "All Other European".
 8. This statistic is derived from the U.K. Census, 1971, as follows: Persons born

The statistic 77,230 should be compared to the 87,700 estimated above. If it is assumed that the majority of Maltese who emigrated to countries other than the four referred to went to the USA, then the Malta-born population in the USA would have numbered about 10,000 in 1971.

The flow of returned migrants from Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom can be ascertained, in a very general manner, by comparing the Maltese migration statistics with the respective censuses. The comparative data are given in Table 2.⁹

Table 2

Estimated Rate of Emigration Loss from Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom

Country of Adoption	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Registered Emigrants	Return Migrants	Net Mig.	Census 1971 (Rounded)	Missing Persons (1-4)	Rate of Emi. Loss
Australia	72,778	6,781	65,997	53,680	19,098	26.24
Canada	15,618	1,395	14,223	9,230	6,388	40.24
United Kingdom	28,722	3,792	24,930	16,000	12,722	44.29

The overall emigration loss for Australia, Canada and Britain amounts to 38,298 persons, representing 32.6% of total registered migrants. This rate of emigration loss for the three countries is higher than the net rate of 25% obtained previously. The difference could be interpreted to suggest that the emigration to the USA and elsewhere, though much smaller in size compared to that to the three countries considered, has produced a higher rate of settlement.

Return migrants who settled in Malta and Gozo amount to between one fourth and one third of total emigrants in the three decades after the war. If this past trend continues, the probability that a Maltese emigrant would resettle in Malta lies between 0.25 and 0.33.

Such a relatively high rate of return raises several important issues for public policy makers. First, there arises the question of whether Maltese emigrants should be considered a potential or extended component of the Maltese labour force. Public Authorities in Malta appear to have adopted the view that once an emigrant leaves these Islands, he or she is lost permanently to the labour supply. This tacit assump-

in Malta whose parents were born in the New Commonwealth numbered 12295. There were 4390 persons born in Malta whose parents were born one in the British Isles and one in the New Commonwealth. The first category fits Maltese emigrants; the second the children of Maltese married to U.K. citizens. This gives a total of 16390; we rounded the estimate to 16000.

9. Table 2 omits those Maltese living in the respective countries before the War. The Australian Census of 1933, the last to be held before the War, records 2782 Malta-born persons. The U.K. census of 1931 gives a probable total of 1250 Maltese.

tion probably survived because of the peculiar manner in which return migration was defined up to 1974. However, if one in three emigrants could be expected to resettle in Malta, the labour force may increase by an equal amount. Of course, some of the returnees would retire completely from work, while married women may not seek employment outside the home. But the labour force would be increased by the migrants' children who were born abroad. Indeed if the latter were to exceed the returnees who abstain from search for work or who remain at home, the actual labour supply in Malta would be greater than indicated by data on return migration as presently defined.

Secondly, future policies on migration will have to explicitly consider the role of return migration. A neutral migration policy similar to that announced in 1977 — zero net migration —¹⁰ would critically depend for its attainment on the return migration flow. Under such a policy emigration would become dependent on return migration, in which case the number of annual emigrants cannot be established unless a target for returnees is set. The alternative will be to set return migration equal to emigration. But government may find it relatively easier to regulate emigration through the termination of the passage assistance scheme, for example, rather than control return migration. Besides, while the characteristics of emigrants are known in advance, those of migrant returnees are only discovered after they arrive in Malta; being of Maltese citizenship, Maltese emigrants have their right of freedom of movement guaranteed by the Constitution. A policy on return migration is therefore expected to be more difficult to implement if it is to be beneficial both for the migrants and for the non-migrant population.

It would be helpful for a sound migration policy if this aspect is raised in the demographic census scheduled to be held this year but which probably would be postponed to next year. The number of migrant returnees could then be established in a more definite manner.

To sum up, return migration to the Maltese Islands since 1945 has been relatively high. It is estimated that up to 1974, total return migration has been about 42,000, giving a net return migration of 30,000 and representing an emigration loss of at least 25%. The phenomenon of return migration can only be ignored to the detriment of economic and manpower planning in Malta. Preferably a policy on migrant returnees should be explicitly stated after further study of the issue.

10. *Development Plan for Malta 1973-1980 Supplement* (Malta, Office of the Prime Minister, October 1977), page 52.