

## Giorgio Borg Olivier's Biography

## The political life of a M

DR SIMON MERCIECA

If one reads Henry Frendo's latest book, *Patrijott Liberali Malti - Bijografija ta' Gorg Borg Olivier* expecting to read the life of a national figure now deceased, this is not the book. Quintessentially, this book is not a chronicle of a man's life but an analysis of Giorgio Borg Olivier's political actions within the context of his times.

In the introduction to his book, Frendo himself warns the reader that s/he should not expect an account of Borg Olivier's private life, which is typical in traditional biography prose. On the contrary, this book is primarily a study of the man within the context of Malta's contemporary history, with special emphasis on how he marked these events and how the gravitas of these events marked this man's political career.

## Borg Olivier in history

The study of past political figures is one of the tasks that a historian is called upon to undertake as part of his professional *portfolio*, in order to preserve the image of prominent, outstanding individuals for future generations. According to Ranke, a theoretician on the writing of history, the lives of politicians ought to be studied so that the resulting chronicle can provide a role model of behaviour for aspiring disciples. Undoubtedly, Frendo's interest goes beyond this. His foremost interest in preserving Borg Olivier's memory is to rehabilitate Borg Olivier in the collective memory after having undergone cultural and historical displacement, as well as to present the life-story of this man as a form of political manual.

In brief, the author wants to give to the fledgling Republic of Malta, its first post-independence hero. As correctly shown in this study, hero worship was a central feature of 20th century politics and Malta witnessed the burgeoning of its first political figures; Fortunato Mizzi, Manuel Dimech, Mikiel Anton Vassalli.

It is the duty of a historian to study the protagonist of his story within the context of his times, but it is also the historian's job, to feature his subject within the wider historical, European and world context. Henry Frendo totally succeeds in this task and goes on to show how Borg Olivier features in what Ferdinand Braudel used to call *'la grande histoire'*.

Frendo is in no doubt that Borg Olivier's figure transcended the shores of our island.

Frendo starts his book by placing Giorgio Borg Olivier within the framework of his family traditions; a family of illustrious lineage with important personalities on



Borg Olivier during the Queen's and Duke's visit in November 1967 with Sir Maurice Dorman, Lady Dorman and Archbishop Michael Gonzi

his paternal side who had achieved prestigious positions in the corridors of power. It was also a family with strong roots at parochial level; the Collegiate Church of St Paul's in Valletta had a number of canons from the Borg Olivier family.

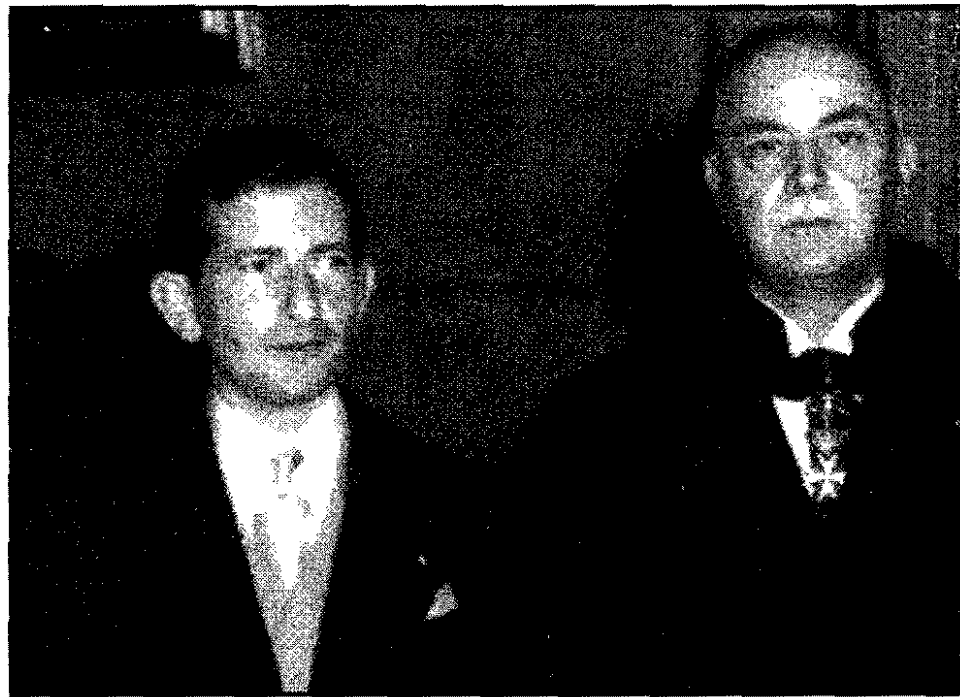
Borg Olivier had a sheltered childhood lived in the Valletta of the 1920s and 1930s, protected and greatly cared for by his mother. This serenity was disturbed when he reached the threshold of adulthood with the loss of the father. Once at university, the young student involved himself in the principal student association and his educational development is portrayed within the context of colonial Malta.

The 1930s were difficult years for Malta. The escalation of war on the continent brought about social and cultural tension on the island. The identification of the

island with Italian culture by members of the elite was translated locally as a sign of lackey behaviour towards Fascist Italy. The party chosen by Borg Olivier to express his political ideals and affinity, the *Partito Nazionale* of Enrico Mizzi and Sir Ugo Mifsud, came under fire once war broke out in Europe in 1939. The situation escalated with the exile of Nationalists supporters, including Enrico Mizzi, one of the main pillars of the *Partito Nazionale*. At the time, Borg Olivier was not only a member of the *Partito Nazionale* but also one of the three party candidates, together with Mizzi and Mifsud, who made it to the Council of Government in 1939.

## The political life

At this moment in time, Borg Olivier showed great courage. He stood alone in a totally hostile Council defending the



Giorgio Borg Olivier together with Nerik Mizzi after the war



Independence Day Celebrations

ideals of his party and the interest of its members. Enrico Mizzi was still in exile while Sir Ugo Mifsud, the other elected member for the PN died in 1942 from heart failure after taking a resolute stand against the government's motion to intern Maltese citizens in Uganda.

On his own in the Council of Government, Giorgio Borg Olivier endured great political and psychological pressure. Standing up in defence of the Maltese who had supported Italian culture in Malta, when Italy was not only run by a dictatorship but also sending its aeroplanes to bombard Malta, was not only a risky business but a dangerous endeavour.

Yet history would soon repay Borg Olivier for standing by his principles. Unexpectedly, the local political spectrum was overturned after the war. It was an irony of history that the

party, which had blown the British Imperial trumpet, turned out to be the big loser in the post-war elections. The emerging Labour Party led by Paul Boffa obliterated the pro-British Constitutional Party.

On the other hand, the party which should have disappeared from the local political scene, the PN, would restructure itself, participate in the 1947 election and after three years, the leader of the party, the person who during the war was considered *inimicus patriae*, Enrico Mizzi, was called to form a minority government thus becoming Malta's Prime Minister. Borg Olivier became Mizzi's right hand man and deputy leader.

Frendo recounts the uneasiness of Borg Olivier's climb to power. The PN went through a political schism when two party members left. The first to leave was Professor Guze Hyzler who

set up his own party. A decade later, Ganado did the same. Borg Olivier's proved his ability when, despite that Ganado one of his appeared to be popular, he still managed to win election; in fact in every election his party always in its number of votes party's electoral victory in 1950 also meant that Borg Olivier became Prime Minister at the age of 39. He was the youngest Prime Minister to gain office to date.

Frendo goes into the details of the political course by Borg Olivier and successfully operated a precise and calculated 'machine' through which Malta gained independence. The book makes for a pleasant reading in particular those chapters on Borg Olivier's early career and his ability negotiating independence for Malta. The author feels comfortable writing more chapters than those of the 1960s excommunication of the Labour Party, events leading to the *horribilis* in the political life of Borg Olivier, which ended in 1977.

## The historical documents

Taking advantage of the fact that he was researching the contemporary period, Frendo interviewed a number of protagonists who had lived through the days of glory as well as the days of disaster. This first information is the backbone of this historical account supported by a number of documents, mainly from the local and foreign press, parliamentary documents as well as documents from the Public Record Office in Britain. Based on this extensive documentation, Frendo not only succeeds in

# Maltese patriot

the political history of this man while providing personal commentary and analytical study, he also relives the history of the last decades that led to independence, intertwining the political history of Malta and that of the Empire and establishing it within the framework of the Commonwealth.

Moreover, the author shares his documents with the reader as the latter can avail himself of most of the documentation used or quoted in this book as they are reproduced in full in the appendix. Yet, despite Frendo's lament that the PN lacks historical records - for example, the minutes of the Executive Council meetings have disappeared - Borg Olivier was well conscious of his role in history, to the extent that he kept copies of letters sent to him or by him at his summer residence in St Paul's Bay; copies of parliamentary debates, his personal writings, Cabinet papers together with other type of correspondence were also stored in this house. Unfortunately, after his death, no one took any interest in this wealth of information to the extent that the house was broken into and vandalised. Could it be that this was wilfully carried out by individuals who wanted to obliterate a historical memory?

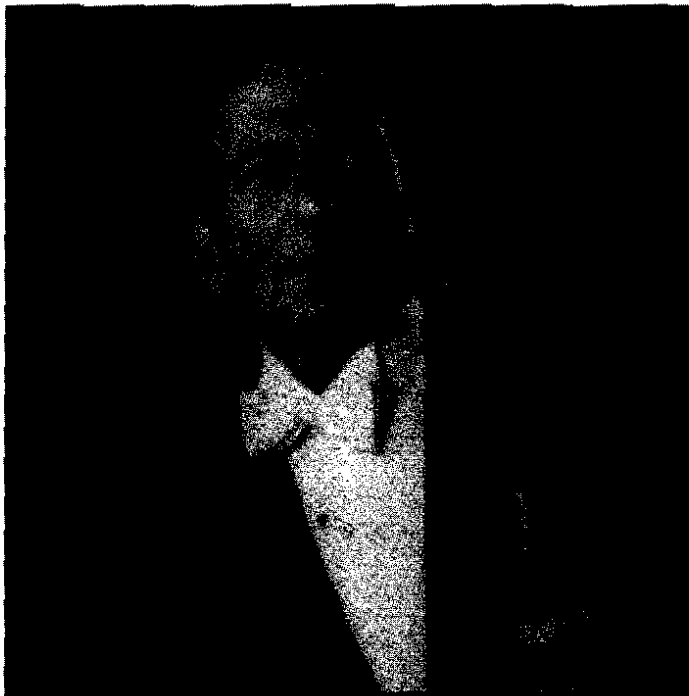
Frendo admits that he was not interested in Borg Olivier's family affairs, which were somewhat disturbed, as both father and mother turned out to be idiosyncratic parents. This does not imply that the children were neglected or that the father was absent or relinquished his paternal duties. Despite Borg Olivier's marital choice, a woman with an aristocratic background, he could not quite affix his shore to his wife's boat. The marital relationship of the Borg Olivier couple fell under public scrutiny and the resulting sexual scandals were used by all his political opponents as a source of criticism. These scandals form part of the political rhetoric of the 1960s, considering the Church's teaching on sexual behaviour. One has to remember that Borg Olivier jumped on the Church bandwagon and grasped the great political advantage following the Church's excommunication of the Labour Party. Indeed, one cannot but agree with the author that Borg Olivier did not agree with the Church's position because at heart he was a liberal, yet he still capitalised on the situation and gave sterling support to the Church's authorities by forestalling the introduction of Labour newspapers in public hospitals (a decision later revoked by the courts) and

more importantly by forbidding excommunicated citizens from being buried in their family graves in public cemeteries. I cannot understand why this scandal was not included in the biography, particularly in light of the fact that another sexual scandal is discussed - the one involving the abuse of Maltese children who had been sent to Australia on the initiative of the Maltese Church. At the time, Borg Olivier showed foresight and criticised this scheme.

Frendo goes into detail

regarding the economic, social and political developments that took place after Malta's independence, with industry and banking developing in tandem. After 1964, the population grew. The island experienced the rise of modernism. Modernist and modern infrastructure began to emerge in the quaint rural areas of Malta in the form of hotels, villas or apartments to host the rising number of tourists and the *nouveau riche*.

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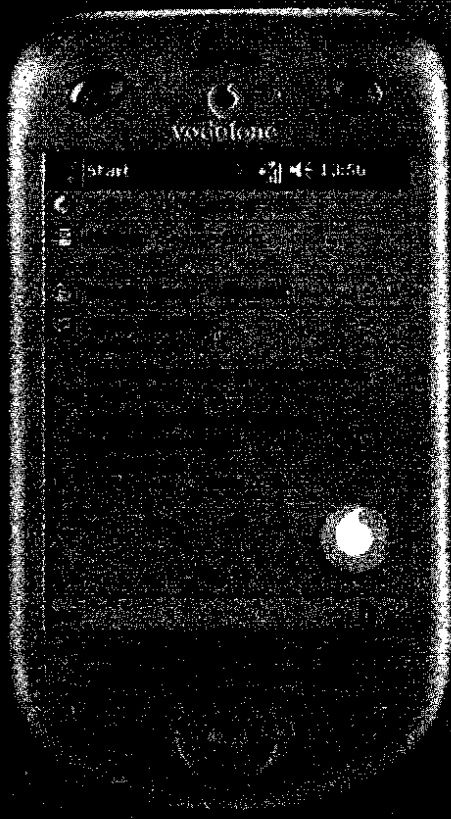
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# A Maltese liberal patriot

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## The 'annus horribilis'

Nonetheless, Frendo is not only interested in recounting the days of glory. He is also interested in shedding light on the darker days of Malta's political history, and how Borg Olivier reacted to Mintoff's clumsy policies. A number of violent thugs, active on Mintoff's side, resorted to violence as a form of political weapon. It is very strange that some of these violent elements in the Labour Party converted to the Nationalist principles once the PN returned to office in 1987; unfortunately they are still being served on a silver platter up to this very day in the achievement of their sinister aims.

Frendo is no admirer of Mintoff's political behaviour but, at the same time, he does not hide his admiration for Borg Olivier, for whom he reserves words of praise. The author portrays Mintoff's tactics as infantile compared to Borg Olivier's lightweight but far-reaching policies.

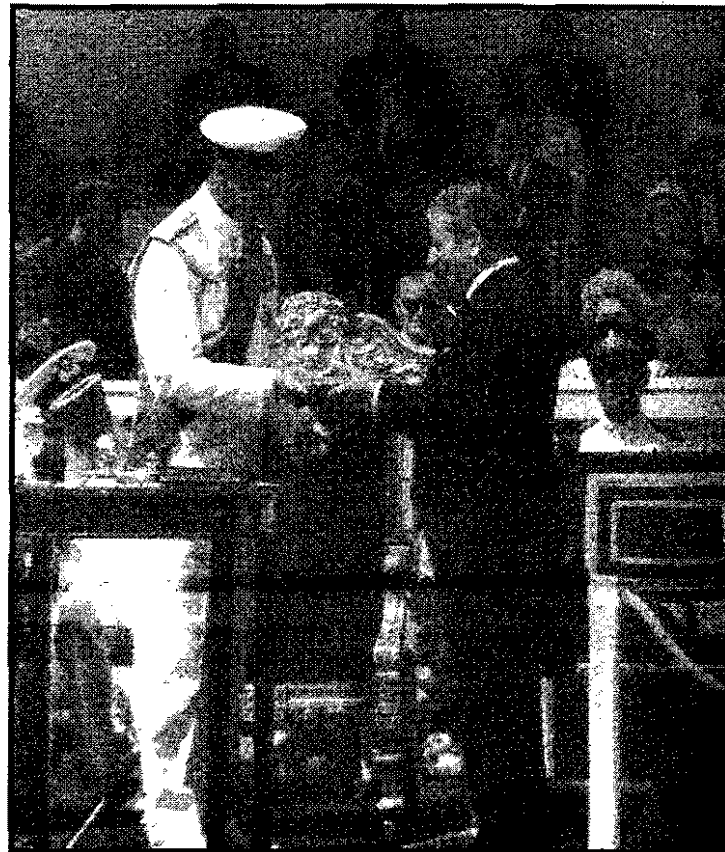
The author recounts the political brickbats of the early 1970s; the loss of two successive elections, that of 1971 and 1976, which brought about Borg Olivier's downfall. Frendo talks about the removal of Borg Olivier as leader without going into the grizzlier details of the tactics used. Giorgio Borg Olivier was forced to resign as the younger generation considered him physically incapable of performing his duties and standing up to his popular arch-antagonist Mintoff. Borg Olivier's policies, in particular his procrastination when taking decisions, was the cause of strong dark cynicism from his political opponents. The younger generation in the PN began to feel that over-the-top manifestations were needed if their party wanted to defeat Mintoff. History proved them right.

After the loss of the 1976 election, the general feeling in the PN was of moral bankruptcy, which could only be redeemed through the choice of a young, devout Catholic as their new



leader. In other words, the Nationalist Party wanted to adopt a populist approach. Ironically enough, it was a position that had been advocated by Ganado but which Borg Olivier had strongly resisted, resulting in a split within his party. Sinister undercurrents began to form within the higher ranks of the party with the aim of removing Borg Olivier. The PN political strategy after 1976 was for harsh measures while taking a soft approach to the hard details; in this sense, the elected leader metastasised Borg Olivier's line of attack.

Once pensioned off, Borg Olivier felt worthless. He was not the person to give in to an idle life. His image is that of a person mentally incarcerated in his own home, alone and friendless and emarginated from the local political scene, experiencing the feelings of a person who had been stabbed in the back. Frendo covertly hints at this sense of betrayal when recounting that Borg Olivier's political successor had been saved from downfall by Borg Olivier himself. Indeed, it was Borg Olivier who had encouraged Edward Fenech Adami to remain in politics after the latter suffered two personal electoral defeats. Despite this personal setback, true to character Borg Olivier did not moan; he remained, as always, a singularly generous man until his death.



The Duke of Edinburgh presenting Dr Borg Olivier with the Maltese Constitution on 21 September 1964 in Floriana during the Independence celebrations

## A Maltese liberal patriot

In this biography, the author brings out the gallant traits of the man, in particular the episode of how Borg Olivier stood by his party leader, when the latter was interned in Uganda. Borg Olivier kept Enrico Mizzi's place in Parliament vacant, with the result that Mizzi remained *ipso facto* and *de facto*, member of Council. And again, when Mizzi returned, Borg Olivier supported his leader until his death. With hindsight and in the light of Borg Olivier past behaviour towards Mizzi, one can easily understand why the former was hurt by the harsh way he was removed from the leadership.

More importantly, Frendo's book has sparked local controversy, which is quite unusual for books on local history. Rarely are statements made by historians seriously challenged. The title of the book, *A Maltese Liberal Patriot, Giorgio Borg Olivier*, was put to the test, as there was disagreement on the use of the word 'liberal' in the context of Borg Olivier. No one can deny, after reading this biography that in the Maltese context, Borg Olivier was a 'Maltese Liberal'. There now exists a strong and general consensus that he was also a patriot. This book also seeks to rehabilitate Borg Olivier's figure from the adverse criticism levelled against him, by his

political opponents. Without doubt, Henry Frendo used the word liberal in a very much wider sense, that is, Borg Olivier together with other local politicians across the spectrum of all political parties, had sown and cultivated the seeds of democracy and, after being defeated in an election their term of office came to an end, they accepted to step down. Borg Olivier's respect for the rule of law in post-independent Malta set an example. Malta's political traditions as set by Borg Olivier meant that the island was spared of taking the path of other Commonwealth countries, where after independence, instead of moving towards democracy, they ended up becoming banana republics.

Therefore, Borg Olivier's most important achievement was not independence *per se* but the fact that he ensured that Malta's democratic values would be safeguarded for posterity. He himself was the role model for his successors by accepting the verdict of the people and sitting on the opposition benches after an electoral defeat, while guaranteeing the democratic transition of power. One sincerely hopes that such a tradition will continue to be safeguarded by the emerging new class of politicians, the offspring of the post-independence and post-colonial period.

Perhaps the most important factor in this engrossing work is that the author has succeeded in presenting the reader, in particular those like myself who have never known nor met Borg Olivier nor of course ever will, a faithful and incisive biography. The political history of Borg Olivier is written in enjoyable prose, alternating with verse in some sections – a hallmark of the author's style when writing in Maltese. Frendo succeeds in combining the statesmanship of Borg Olivier with the human element. Using the right expressions, he is very mild in his criticism of certain political actions or personal behaviour, such as Borg Olivier's statement on the eve of 1971, which forestalled any idea of a change in Cabinet or for turning up three hours late for an interview with the author. Nevertheless, the author does reserve a lot of praise for the man.

Frendo has honoured a great Maltese political leader with a biography full of subtle affection and human truth. In a nutshell, taking into account the 1977 events, this publication, sponsored by the Nationalist Party, does Borg Olivier justice.

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