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### WHAT ABOUT OUR NATIONAL IDENTITY?

'NATIONAL identity', to which reference is made *en passant* by the three members of the Dahrendorf Commission in the report on our University submitted to the Prime Minister, can mean so many things to so many people; but, at the same time, like most other vaguely worded phrases, it can mean so very little too, not so much because it lacks context as because its context has not been clearly and unambiguously defined. Foreigners, even if they are known as experts (this word has assumed a pejorative connotation in Malta), generally know much less about us than we know about ourselves and our society.

Malta is one of the smaller countries of the post-war era which became independent after it took direct responsibility for its own well-being and survival from the British who ruled it from 1813 to 1964. The British, in their turn, took over from the French at the request of the Maltese. The French had taken over from the Order of St. John in 1798, and so on, with a fairly long chain of foreign power-grabbing rulers from various parts of the world. Malta has always been like the small fish whose head has been bitten off, or whose body has been mutilated, by the large fish. In spite of this, we Maltese have maintained our national identity intact. No big fish has yet bitten off our head! But that is no reason for self-complacency. We are living in a dynamic age of ruthless Super Powers which exploit the weakness of the smaller people for their own ends. These Super Powers have replaced the one-time British Empire of which Malta once formed part. The one-time British Empire, on which the sun seems to have set for ever as it set on the one-time Spanish and Islamic empires, has now been re-constituted in a more democratic and autonomous manner and re-named

the British Commonwealth of which we Maltese, who take pride in our European identity, form part. In our newly-born freedom we need bear our past rulers no grudge.

In the new game of power politics, independent Malta has widened and broadened the former very restricted political frontiers. Not long ago all roads from Malta led either to Rome (especially during the Fascist regime) or to England. There were no other roads for us. The world was as small as that! Other roads leading to the Middle East and the far-spread Arab states have linked up Malta with a number of other peoples who, like Malta, are still trying to find their feet. Our ill-luck is that we have no oil-fields (economists and anti-pollutionists might disagree about this!). Though this was a new adventure for Malta, it is after all a repetition, on a much smaller scale, of what had happened long before in other Western European countries which had direct contacts not only with their Western neighbours, but also with Russia, the Near East and the Far East. We Maltese are by no means unhappy because of the new bridge between Malta and North Africa. The more friendly neighbours the better. But we shall feel grievously wronged if that will ever mean the dismantling and pulling down of the older bridges that linked us with Europe where we belong by birthright. We Maltese are the heirs of a nearly 2,000 year old Christianity, a much older civilization than Islam. Intellectually and socially, we are also the joint heirs of the heritage of European creative, scientific genius. Briefly, we are as European as our friends in the free West, with whose peoples we share a common heritage.

Malta has its national identity which is clearly defined by the context of its multi-cultural history. The trouble with some of our politicians (many of them by no means culture-conscious) is that so far they have shown interest in political independence which assigns to them personally some of the powers inherent in its public use, but they have shown little, or no real interest in the promotion of our national identity through those media of which civilised countries make use to create a true mirror of the soul of their people. It takes some time to live down centuries' old colonialism. This, in spite of the fact that we Maltese, no less than other countries, have a national heritage to respect and transmit. What we have not yet obtained from those that rule our destiny by the mandate of the trustful people is an Institute of Maltese Studies or

Culture which could serve as the national headquarters, the rallying place, of Maltese intellectuals and artists, authors and indeed all those who, in one way or another, excel in intellectual or creative work. In Malta we have the following foreign cultural institutes: The British Council, the *Istituto Italiano di Cultura*, the *Alliance Française*, the Arab Institute, the German Circle and the United States Information Service. These cultural institutes (there will be more as time passes) are the shop windows of the countries they represent. Like good cultural salesmen, their Directors feast our eyes with the lavish display of the products of the genius of their people in the form of books, pictures and audio-visual aids. Their one-way traffic in Malta is limited to the products of their own people. These foreign institutes are not here to help us build up, prop or save our national identity from the threat of disintegration. They are here to show us specimens of the genius of their people. And they do it well, like really good cultural salesmen of their respective countries. Our national identity, formed by our cultural heritage, is none of their business. They must rightly contend that, national identity and culture being the responsibility of the local people, they should be no less the responsibility of their government – Malta's government, in our case. Fair enough! It is time that the foreign one-way traffic was complemented by the addition of a Maltese contribution towards the creation of a supplementary two-way, and better still, multi-cultural, traffic. The other way, which will be our way, will have to start from Malta outwards. We are at the moment hit very seriously by the oil crisis which is hitting all the countries of Europe below the belt; but that is not necessarily the worst crisis that we are suffering. We can survive the oil crisis with Europe. But can we survive the crisis of our denationalisation? Many feel that our national identity is in the maelstrom. One just wonders what spurious national identity can emerge from the maelstrom to replace the one we inherited from our fathers? This is perhaps a pessimistic note, yet I am not really pessimistic. Malta has enough forward-looking young people, wiser than some of our short-sighted politicians. These are bravely protecting our national identity from the ill-effects of an accumulation of political and moral erosions to which our country is being subjected all the time.

In the meantime, we continue to edit this Journal written mainly

in the English language (we publish also a Maltese review) because we feel that, in doing so, we are continuing the tradition of the use of the English language by Maltese scholars as an additional medium of their cultural self-expression when they want to communicate with the world outside. Regrettably, the British Council, which culturally and educationally operates on a one-way traffic basis (the reversal of Lord Lloyds' policy) has never shown enough interest in the use of English by the Maltese for the stated purposes. This stand-offish policy is in sharp contrast to the policy of the Italian Institutes which has always promoted the use of Italian as a complementary cultural language in Malta. The *Istituto Italiano di Cultura* is publishing, or anyhow subsidising, an Italian fortnightly review for our school children for whom a group of Maltese authors publish a Maltese monthly review called *Is-Saġħtar*.

Before I finish I would like to point out that all I have said about the one-way traffic of foreign cultural institutes is not intended as a criticism of their policy. Their Directors cannot be expected to do for us what it is the duty of the Government of Malta to do for the Maltese. What we have said is just for record purposes, material for the future history of the use of the English language in Malta and the crying need for a Maltese Cultural Institute which, we feel, must be sponsored by the University and the Government. We wish to make the acquaintance of other peoples but we also wish to introduce ourselves to them. We too have much to show and to be proud of.

Our government has rented public places to several foreign powers for their cultural institutes. I think it is time the government reserved one for the people of Malta before we run out of suitable public buildings.

THE EDITOR