

The 1948 Gozo Commission: Redesigning a Future

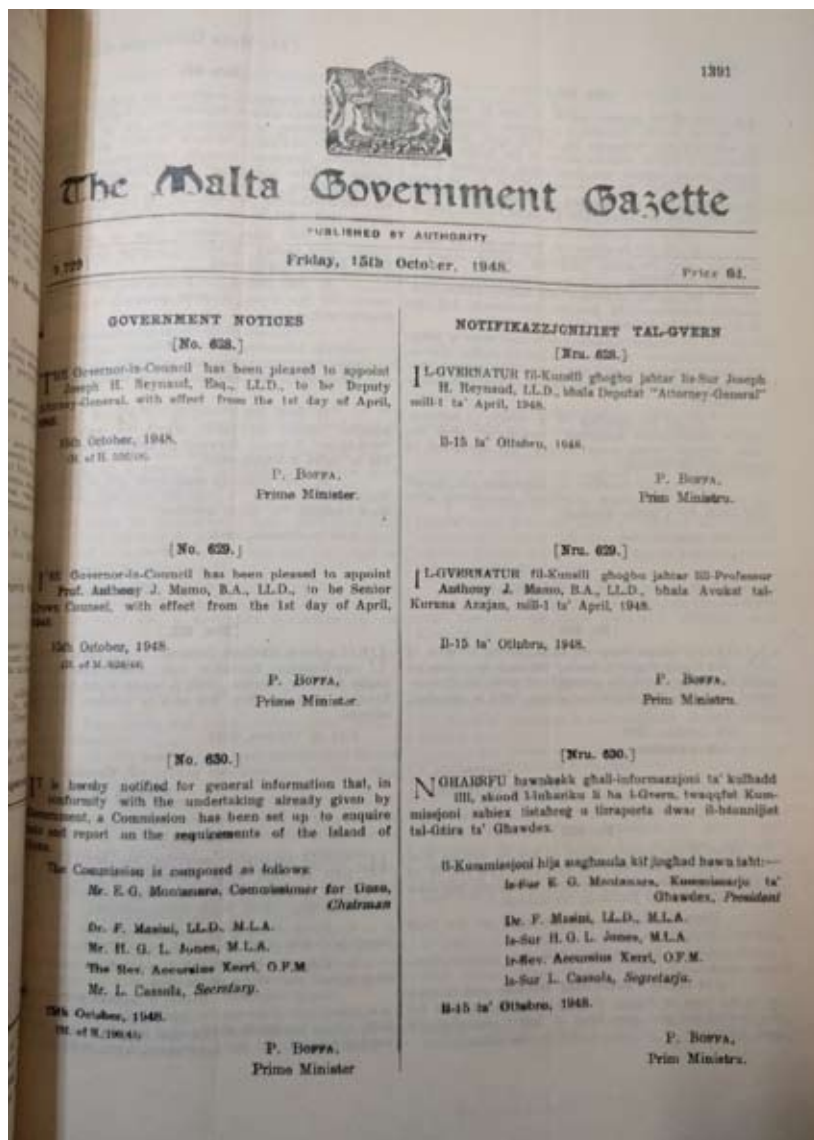
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Introduction

The report of the 1948 Gozo Commission was the direct product of two leading events in post-Second World War Malta. First, there was the restoration of a responsible Government. This led to the re-emergence of political parties. Gozo did not shy off from creating its own distinctive political groupings; the Gozo Party and the Jones

Party. These political formations were expressly formed to look after the needs of the Gozitans. They succeeded in getting five elected members in the Legislative Assembly (Bezzina, 1995, Pirota, 2001).

It was usual practice that before the elections, many politicians promised the Gozitans that they would take good care of Gozo and its needs but instead, after the elections, the island would be put to one side (*Għawdex*, 2 July 1950). Hence, for this reason, this can be considered as an important milestone in Maltese (or rather Gozitan) politics, because for the first time ever in the 1947 elections, Gozo had two political parties whose political manifesto was focused solely on Gozo. Their aim was to have a say in the Legislative Assembly in order to spur the Government to recognise the Gozitan appeals. They started making their voice heard and putting pressure on the Government to act fast. In other words, both parties pledged to fight for a possible future vision of Gozo because after years of neglect, the Gozitans were demanding fast interventions.



Government Notice No. 630 - The recognition of the Gozo Commission. (Obtained from *Malta Government Gazette*, 15 October 1948, 1391.)

Setting Up the Commission¹

The action came through the setting up of a Commission which had to report directly to Government. As a matter of fact, until this Commission was set up, it was well known that whenever a matter concerning the island of Gozo was put forward in the Legislative Assembly, the ministries generally responded with duly factual and arrogant negative answers (*Għawdex*, 25 September 1949).

¹ Report of the Commission appointed by Government to inquire into and report on the requirements of the island of Gozo, 1948.



Mr Edgar G. Montanaro. (Obtained from Joseph Bezzina (1995), 8).



Mr Louis Cassola. (This photo was provided by the eldest son of Louis Cassola, Hector Cassola).

In truth, the setting up of a Commission succeeded in putting Gozo into the national spotlight.

The Commission was composed of five persons, the chairman (Mr Edgar G. Montanaro), the secretary (Mr Louis Cassola) and three members (Dr Francesco Masini, Mr Henry Jones and Rev Accursius Xerri). Following the setting up of the

Commission, one could argue that the voice of Gozo was no longer mute. For the first time, the needs of Gozo started to be actually debated in the Legislative Assembly as it appeared that the elected members were taking Gozitan issues rather seriously (Cassar 2017).

The Commission's Report

The detailed holistic report of the Commission undeniably, exposed years of negligence. The final report took almost a year to be compiled, creating public awareness about the leading problems which led to the island's backwardness. In fact, when the Commission started to gather evidence, it could not but report and expose what was considered to have been Gozo's poor infrastructure. This was considered as one of the reasons for Gozo's backwardness and for this reason, it was described in great detail. They also put forward suggestions which were all feasible and they were aimed to shift the island towards new horizons. Indeed, the report confirmed that Gozo needed serious attention because, the Government, both local and colonial, always treated Gozo as some sort of backwater (Pirota 2001).

The Bulletin described the work of the Commission as 'Monster Gozo Report' by virtue of the fact that it was 'a document of 419 pages, 70 of which constituted the Report proper, 29 title pages and inserts, and 320 pages of appendices' (*The Bulletin* 27 July 1949). In this context, Anton Tabone described the Gozo Commission as:

"... the first serious and exhaustive report that had been undertaken on Gozo's needs. It was a report which laid bare the sorry state of Gozo in the economic and social fields. It also proposed suitable remedies and made serious proposals for the necessary measures to bridge the gaping difference between the level of development prevailing" (Bezzina, 1995: 6).

Unfortunately, the work of the Commission and the prospects of the report recommendations got caught up in the political controversies of the time that had nothing to do with Gozo. However these political controversies were destined to affect Gozo. Due to the split within the Labour Party, the Government ended up in a minority position and needed support from the Opposition if it wanted

to continue governing. Those who defected from the Labour Party refused to support it. Since Prime Minister Boffa was in need of help from other political parties, the recommendations started to be considered in order to entice the representatives from Gozo to support him. To compound matters, this political split ended up shifting the attention from Gozo to local Maltese politics. Worse, it ended up politicising the working of the Commission (Bezzina, 1995; Cassar 2017; Pirota 2001).

Within this context it remained to be seen whether the Gozo Commission was successful or not. With the Islands being led by a minority Government, little attention could be devoted to the findings of the Commissions of Inquiry. For this reason, the Commission became ineffective and its findings lost all their impact. It was at this stage that it started to appear a tool in the hands of the Government to use it to divert attention from more serious matters. It could be convincingly concluded that political controversy in Malta worked against the interests of Gozo.

Due to the Labour split and because of the precarious economic and financial conditions, the Government was defeated. In such circumstances, little time was allotted to the Labour Government to consider the whole report in detail. Unfortunately most of the suggestions were shelved and in a sense, one could argue that the defeat of the Government was the dead-end of the Gozo Commission. This proved the argument that the Gozo Commission was actually an ineffective tool and hence on such account, it could be considered as having been unsuccessful.

The Report's Findings

Despite the fact that the Commission could have served as nothing but a convenient opt-out against all of Gozo's interests, the findings were still very valuable. To start with, the recommendations themselves could be considered as a benchmark of success. In the case of the Gozo Commission, it could be considered successful because it provided a clear picture of the situation of Gozo during the first half of the twentieth century. It was remarkably a flexible means to shoulder the task of raising awareness and identifying the needs of Gozo, as well as to address and give plausible suggestions to solve these same needs.



Dr Francesco Masini. (Obtained from Joseph Bezzina (1995), 8).

Undoubtedly, the Gozo Commission through its voluminous report managed to tackle every aspect of life and thus it managed to underline the social and political problems of public concern. Additionally, the Gozo Commission was able to uncover facts that were unknown to the Government. Besides, Commissions of Inquiry could also be seen as having been successful since its workings and its report helped to inform and educate the public. In point of fact, the public was a direct reference for the Commission in completing its duty as people were allowed to make submissions. Moreover, the fact that many witnesses were asked to appear in front of the commissioners, all persons of integrity, strengthened the Commission's conclusions.

Through its recommendations, one could assert that the Commission was able to re-design a new future specifically for Gozo's improvement. The report indeed could be seen as a step forward from the bleak situation that the island was thrown into immediately after the end of the Second World War. It was written with the utmost thoughtfulness in providing first-hand information about the island of Gozo in order to overcome problematic clichés that were attached to the island. Certainly,



Mr Henry Jones. (Obtained from Il-Partit ta'Jones, 16 October 1947).



Rev. Accursius Xerri. (Obtained from NAG•PA/01/1806).

it also instilled a sense of hope in the future as Gozitans strived for a better future for Gozo in the steps traced by their ancestors.

Conclusion

The report of the Commission tried to unveil the problems that characterised the backwardness of the island. Although it survived only as a paper document, the Commission could still be seen as the preliminary step for modern Gozo. The eagerness of the Gozitans did not vanish with the demise of the Gozo Commission as this paved the way for important developments that took place later on in the 20th century. Time allowed for the rise of new forces that safeguarded the interests of Gozo and promoted them (Cassar 2017), including the Gozo Civic Committee, the Gozo Civic Council, the Ministry for Gozo, and the Local Council (Bezzina 2005).

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