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## Politicians, finance, lobbying

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Thursday, 6 August 2020, 07:38

Last update: about 11 months ago



In political commentary one often hears about party finance, party and individual links with businessfolk, and the influence of lobbies over politics. Malta is no exception.

A cursory look at press articles on the matter shows prevalence of such concerns, albeit in a sporadic and selective manner. We read about gift exchanges, unofficial meetings, networks, and other social transactions which hint toward business and personal interests influencing political open ons.

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political decision-making.

In this article I wish to highlight some practices which I believe exist in the Maltese political way of things and which deserve further investigation. Rather than focusing on political parties, which get quite a lot of attention in the press, I will focus on candidates.

In a small-island state characterised by personalised politics, clientelism and patronage are key tools for political investment. We often relate such transactions to the districts of the respective politician and his or her client, both of whom can influence each other by exchanging votes for favours. A parallel political world exists in this regard, one that goes way beyond what makes the news headlines. Here, politicians and voters discuss jobs, parking, housing, health and other matters which mean the world to the voter, but which are deemed too petty for journalists seeking snackable media. Some claims may be deemed legitimate, for example when the voter tries to grab the attention of the politician to act on inaccessible pavements. But on the other hand, other claims may be dubious, for example when a politician promises a job paid by the taxpayer to someone for the simple reason that he or she is a constituent, or a campaign volunteer.

Given Malta's small size, clientelism goes beyond individual localities or districts. In European elections, Malta and Gozo form a single district, but I have reason to believe that clientelist transactions take place at this level too.

Another matter which deserves attention is that of candidate revenue and expenditure streams.

By virtue of their current political office or employment, some candidates enjoy incumbency, which apart from giving them the privilege of having closer access to local, national, or European sources of power, can also give them more financial resources at their disposal.

Some other candidates may not have such incumbency, but somehow have resources to carry out massive campaigns at local, national, or European level.

Some examples of candidates' expenditure are: coffee mornings, receptions, 'tent' events, seminars, street propaganda, flashy leaflets, postage of promotional material, phone calls to many constituents, and adverts. The latter range from in-yourface promotion in social media and adverts, to the less direct 'advertorial', an expensive, glossy, and favourable feature on a politician, which would naturally have been paid for.

Here one must note that campaign expenditure is a must for all candidates, and that this can be a legitimate way of raising awareness. The problem is that Malta's regulations on electoral finance - which set expenditure limits during the official time window of the respective electoral campaign - simply stop there. They do not account for expenditure and revenue committed before the official time window, but which would be equally designed to promote the respective candidate for the elections in question. Besides, at any election one can note that the promotional material and activities of some candidates exceed what is permissible by law. I wonder whether the Electoral Commission has investigated this and its possible political ramifications.

Another point of note is that of politician's networks and connections, which require increased transparency measures. These could include the logging of meetings and systematic networks open between politicians and other influential social actors, and the analysis of operational aspects

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have to subscribe to basic financing and lobbying procedures and the information could then be made publicly available. Otherwise, as things stand, those politicians who are the most creative and least scrupled about breaking and bending rules start the race at an advantage over the rest who play by them.

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