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The PN reforms

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**the choice
is clear.**



The Nationalist Party has been unelectable for over a decade. I am not only referring to social scientific surveys which consistently confirm a huge gap between the two major parties and no corresponding increase in votes for smaller parties. I am also referring to the ultimate surveys: the general, European and local elections which have been going Labour's way for so long. The most recent European and local elections, in 2019, confirmed this trend even when a significant number of voters, over a fourth, preferred not to vote than voting PN, small party or independent. In this regard, the Party needs to take a step back and analyse this social fact before making *a priori*

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In the meantime, it seems that Malta's Labour is undergoing both continuity and change – the latter includes certain recent decisions to remove controversial figures as well as to moderate its liberal direction through more socially conservative elements. The longer-term impacts of this must be seen, even in terms of who calls the shots in economic policy, but such moves show that Labour has no difficulty in adapting and altering parameters through grounded strategy.

The PN reform process provides it with an opportunity to be more dynamic in relation to today's Malta. Space for deliberation could be created: Coupled with a sense of goodwill and constructive engagement by all players, this can help foster a sense of belonging to both old and new members, as well as to the different factions which exist. The skills of hearing and exchanging ideas could be given priority over having entrenched positions.

There is also opportunity to open the party to those who wish to contribute to the party without necessarily being front-line politicians. The latter, whether as MPs, MEPs, Local Councillors or members of the party's decision-making structures, are all vital for the party. But so are those activists, experts, voters and grassroots members of different ages and social backgrounds who make up the Party's wider community. This does not only include those who are more present in the media and social media spheres, but also those whose presence on the ground, professional background or volunteering can strengthen the party's presence in everyday society, in the articulation of policies and in its day-to-day operations.

In this regard, the announcement that five assemblies of councillors will take place prior to the approval of the Party's general council can help fuel such a process. The method used in such open forums is of utmost importance: For example, having round-table formats may be much more

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decisions, it is equally imperative to ensure that the PN's ideological and strategic characteristics are in synch with the aspirations of both its members and of Maltese society. This requires both expert and on-the-ground input through which the Party can be in a better position to hear the various voices in everyday life. Not all of them are represented in the media, and some have more powerful voices and stronger networks than others. But there are also 'silent' groups and voters who have important electoral influence. Not to mention the significant demographic changes which occurred in Malta in the past years: We are living in a society which reproduces certain cultural, political, economic and social factors, but which is also characterised by increased diversity.

Any political party aspiring for political success needs to analyse and engage such realities. For example, the Village Festa is an important marker of identity for many people, but there are many others who associate with other cultural constructs. An important political goal should be to reconcile such identities into a greater whole: How a universal electoral strategy can fuse different particularities in a sustainable manner, thus avoiding implosion.

In this regard, it is important to note that Labour has been able to win votes through a plurality of methods, including some which raise questions in terms of sustainability and governance. For example, for how long can Malta sustain a seductive economic model which is heavily dependent on overdevelopment and overreliance on sectors such as construction and sale of passports? Not to mention the various instances of deficit in governance. It is also important to note certain uneven impacts of Labour policies. There are lower-income people who are experiencing upward mobility courtesy of planning reforms, enabling them to rent out new storeys over their properties. But there are others who simply cannot afford to live in rented property. Then again, such socio-economic factors dovetail with other realities: For example, one's affiliations and aspirations, access to social welfare and community, the proximity of people to politicians, the power of incumbency and whether the Nationalist Party is offering a more attractive alternative. To me, the million-dollar question is how to articulate an alternative which is at once more popular and more sustainable.

Labour also has a clear advantage over the Nationalist Party in party finances. The former seems to be in a healthy situation, the latter is facing considerable challenges to pay off its debt and finance its operations and campaigns. This may be indicative of the party-financing scenario in Malta. It seems that the winning party, in this case Labour, is more attractive to those who wish to invest in political influence. Which raises the inevitable question: What is stopping Malta's democracy from seriously considering state financing of political parties, where party financial operations would be subject to transparent auditing procedures rather than dependency on big business interests? This challenge also concerns the financing of party candidates. Some have more incumbency and access to finance than others, and the current electoral regulations provide considerable loopholes for hefty expenditure over and above what is permissible.

Thus, a major challenge which the PN will have to discuss in its reform process is how to propose a model which wins more votes than Labour's whilst being in line with the Party's vision.

For this to happen, the PN needs to ensure that internal and external coalitions are created and sustained. Recent political history shows that both major political parties were electorally successful open they adopted this 'umbrella' approach.

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