

TheSynapse meets H.E. the President of Malta

HE Dr George Vella, President of the Republic of Malta, can be described as a seasoned family doctor, a hardened politician, or simply, as an inspirational statesman. He accompanies Dr Ian Ellul down the memory lane, walking through his childhood, how he managed to enroll at the medical school, his work including his early years at the Drydocks, as well as the political turmoil of the eighties.

The interview also touches on the notion of GDP as an economic measurement tool, as well as national unity. Dr Vella possibly perceives national unity as kintsugi, the Japanese art in which broken ceramics are meticulously mended with a lacquer resin mixed with gold or silver, turning them into magnificent pieces of art.

YOU WERE BORN IN ŻEJTUN DURING WWII AND GREW UP IN ITS AFTERMATH. WHAT ARE YOUR CHILDHOOD MEMORIES?

I was born in April 1942, a month which demarcated Malta's heaviest bombardment in any given period. Fifteen days later, an anti-personnel bomb fell in the village's main square, leaving 27 dead and many injured.

I spent most of the childhood at my grandparents' house, also in Żejtun. The toys were rudimentary at that time. Street games included 'iċ-ċirku', 'noli', 'gwerra franciża' and 'il-karretta'. However, my parents did not let me or my siblings, Violet and Freddie, to participate in street games. Fortunately, what was missed outside was aptly compensated by what was found inside; my grandparents lived adjacent to the Domus. The Domus lent itself as youth club, providing a large courtyard which served as playing ground, and it also housed theatrical performances, catechism lessons, mass and other events.

The highlight of our week was Sunday, when after lunch, our parents would take us for a walk in the

countryside just outside the village. I still remember the sandwiches which my mother used to make. When my father eventually bought a car we used to go further out from Żejtun.

There were no TV, washing machines or fridges; poverty and social unrest were seen and perceived everywhere, stemming from the uncertainties faced by industry in post-war Malta. In Żejtun the majority of people, besides farming, worked at the Drydocks, including my father Emmanuel, and the future seemed bleak. This paved the way for mass migration. At one stage even my father had applied to go to Canberra in Australia; nonetheless, my mother Mary, on her mother's insistence, eventually convinced him to forget about migration.

Growing up, my mother missed on school since she was the eldest and had to help take care of her four siblings. However, eventually she was self-taught. Being an avid reader, books were all over the house; she even wrote poems and scripts for theatrical performances. As a consequence she had all eyes on us to ensure that we perform well in our studies. After primary education I attended De La Salle College. I have fond recollections of that period since the core values passed on to us were ingrained in the ethos of the school.

The Rediffusion radio broadcasting played an important role in Maltese culture. It consisted of two channels, channel A and B, transmitting in English and Maltese languages. Programmes related to music, literature, comedy sketches, especially by Radju Muskettieri, as well as serials including 'Hitan tas-Sejjieħ' and 'Il-Farfett l-Aħdar'. Everyone used to hear them. I still vividly remember walking to my grandparents' house in Summer and listening to entire comedy sketches of the Stage Commandos as I walked down the street, with the same voices bellowing out through the open windows of the different houses.

At 14 years of age, in 1956, Malta experienced the advent of television which heralded a silent revolution which percolated through all societal strata. At the beginning, those few houses which had a TV had to keep up with the neighbours who used to self-invite themselves to watch the local news and other programmes.

The TV obviously had an impact on fashion, football, Italian songs, etc. Of note is the fact that it led to an uglification of the environment in Malta, with the 'afforestation' of rooftops with antennas that were needed for receiving TV signals.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO BECOME A DOCTOR?

I was neither exposed to anything like today's numerous TV series relating to hospital practice nor did I have relatives who were medics. I believe that my interest in medicine must have stemmed from Dr George Hyzler. He was a friend of my uncle and used to call regularly at my grandmother during his undergraduate years at the medical school, where he used to sometimes bring a human bone or two and show them to me. (His son, named after him, would eventually also enter politics and currently serves as Commissioner for Standards in Public Life). My interest in medicine however, abated over the years.

At that time De La Salle did not have a 6th form and University used to open courses in Medicine every two or three years. It was also a period when the majority of students opted for an executive officer job with the government; however, after finishing secondary school in 1956, I decided to further my studies. A friend advised me to seek guidance from Mr Glass, headmaster of the Valletta Lyceum to enter their Sixth Form. Mr Glass informed me that I had to sit for 13 exams to enroll at Sixth Form, and I reiterated that, in that case, I might as well do the Matriculation exams on my own. His reply still echoes in my head ... 'Some people do think highly of themselves.' That meeting proved to be a watershed moment. I decided to sit for the Matriculation exam on my own steam.

A few weeks after, I also visited Laurence Pace who was the registrar at the University, in Valletta, to seek advice with regards to my possible enrollment in the medicine course. He bluntly pointed out that I did not have any Biology, Chemistry or Physics exam certificates. Nonetheless, I still remember his words of encouragement; he proposed that I study Additional Mathematics since it equated to a science subject. Thus I studied for the Matriculation exams, including the Additional Mathematics, whilst working as supply teacher at De La Salle.

During that summer of 1957 I also remember speaking to Prof. Edwin Borg Costanzi, who was the Rector of the University, asking what would become of me if I failed the Additional Mathematics exam coming up in September. I was worried, of course, since choosing to study at the University was pricy. The fee amounted to around 54 Maltese Lira for one

academic year. (In 1960 the fees doubled which led to various student protests). Returning to Prof. Borg Costanzi I remember him saying that failing the Additional Mathematics exam would mean forfeiting my enrollment in the medical course. This fuelled my motivation to pass. Indeed, I successfully obtaining all exams and started studying medicine in 1957.

I HEARD YOUR NAME FOR THE FIRST TIME THROUGH MY FATHER WHO USED TO WORK AT THE DRYDOCKS. YOU GRADUATED AS DOCTOR IN 1964 AND AFTER YOUR HOUSEMANSHIP PERIOD ENDED, YOU STARTED TO WORK AT THE DRYDOCKS TILL 1974. WHAT DO YOU RECALL FROM THIS EVENTFUL PERIOD, ALSO GETTING MARRIED AND HAVING YOUR THREE CHILDREN?

During my two years working at St Luke's Hospital I decided that I would specialize in industrial medicine at the University of London. However, chance has it that my brother asked me whether I was interested to work at the Drydocks to relieve the resident medic. So I started as a locum there while I was also working as physiology demonstrator at the University. I was getting married soon. Eventually I was offered a part-time job at the Drydocks with an annual salary to the tune of 1000 Maltese Lira which was enticing, to say the least; in comparison, a seasoned District Medical Officer used to earn 800 Maltese Lira. I accepted the job, keeping my budding practice as family doctor in Żejtun and also, working as company doctor in industry and various hotels, including the Sheraton [in place of the Westin Dragonara Hotel]. In the meantime, I still aspired to specialize in industrial medicine.

As it happened, one fine night I was called to assist a cyanotic patient suffering from wheezing. With a young racing heart, expecting the unexpected, I arrived in the Biskallin area of Żejtun [known as 'ir-Raħal t'isfel'] where I found scores of people waiting for me outside the patient's door. After gauging the situation, I started the process of administering IV aminophylline, a relatively new treatment ... explaining what needs to be done to the numerous relatives, addressing their doubts, then pulling out the syringe, hearing murmurs in the background, administering the treatment slowly over 15 minutes whilst addressing again their loud thoughts, and ... hoping for the best. Thankfully, everything went exceptionally well. The patient even recovered his strength and accompanied me to the door. This proved to be an unexpected boost to my practice, which was to be followed shortly by another unrelated event which affected my fortunes.



Dr John Borg, a very popular and much loved doctor in Żejtun died unexpectedly. This meant that his patients started calling me to become their family doctor. The result was that my aspiration to specialize in industrial medicine had to be shelved [to this very day] and my employments with the Drydocks and University terminated to work as a full-time family doctor.

ANY EVENTS YOU REMEMBER IN PARTICULAR AT THE DRYDOCKS?

In the sixties the Drydocks were synonymous with hardships and occupational hazards which were often disregarded. Safety measures, considered as ubiquitous today, were unheard of ... no safety shoes or helmets, no fume extractors, etc. I came at loggerheads with management regularly on such issues.

I remember visiting Manoel Island where workers used to produce Melita fiberglass boats. As expected, there were no fume extractors, no safety helmets, no safety flooring, etc. After I stopped all work in the huts [until the safety issues were addressed], Major Stanley Clews, who was in charge of personnel at the Drydocks, called me in his office and asked me whether I was employed with the Drydocks or the workers. I simply reiterated that my duty was to safeguard the work conditions of all employees while being paid by the Drydocks. This informal meeting was followed by numerous reports from my end soliciting for the introduction of safety gear for the 5,300 workers who worked at the Drydocks at that time.

Numerous memories relating to occupational incidents come my mind. We used to have workers getting injured from falls, fires, etc. When shifts were introduced this heralded a new set of problems ... headaches, vomiting, vertigo. Obviously, people used to visit me to discuss their personal problems, including job insecurity and salary issues.

I must admit that the most harrowing memory is that of a naval vessel which, in 1967 during the Six-Day Middle-East war, was caught in friendly bombardment resulting in 15 dead soldiers entrapped in the entangled metal of the bow. This Israeli ship came to the Drydocks to be cleaned and repaired. Awnings had to be set up to avoid inquisitive eyes from Senglea's bastions. I remember water being pumped from one side of the bow to cleanse the area, with blood-tainted water gushing out from the other side.

Another seemingly minor incident had dire consequences. A worker was on staging inspecting the shaft of the propellor of a tanker which was removed for repairs. As he was gauging the alignment of the shaft, his wedding ring [which shouldn't have been worn] was caught in the shaft's slow rotatory movement, was lifted bodily and his head struck the strut. Following that event the worker started suffering from regular fits, headaches, and recurrent bouts of feeling unwell until he retired.



An amusing incident happened at the beginning of my career. The captain of a ship had a dislocated shoulder on deck and I advised him to go to St Luke's Hospital. He vehemently refused and bravely insisted I put the humerus back in place. To keep up appearances, I accepted to do so, obviously advising him that it would incur great pain. Being the first time I ever did this textbook manoeuvre, I thoughtfully removed my shoe, cautiously placed my foot in his axilla and pulled! Thankfully all went well.

I also want to mention another accident. Back then when work was required in the bow of a ship, especially tankers, workers had to descend from the middle of a vessel to walk approximately 150 metres through the bilges to reach the front part of the vessel. It so happened that during one such repair, a fire developed between the bow and the entry point. Fortunately, the fire was extinguished with minor consequences to the workers. In the management meeting which followed I proposed that a manhole is cut in the bow whenever such works are required, to serve as emergency exit in case of fires. As a young doctor I was derided, of course. Two months later, precisely on a Saturday, I was called in because of a fire on a tanker. I arrived there and saw people gathered around the bow. On my arrival I was informed that for the first time they fortuitously followed my advice of drilling a manhole in the bow! Fifty workers were saved by that small action that day. This safety measure is still being done to this very day.

HOW DID YOU PERCEIVE THE CHANGES IN THE FIELD OF FAMILY MEDICINE DURING THESE PAST FIVE DECADES?

The practice of medicine has made quantum leaps. In my opinion, this can be primarily attributed to technology. Let me give an example. It was the seventies and a twelve-year old girl suffered an injury, with a pair of scissors penetrating the sternum and causing pericardial injury. Prof. Victor Griffiths operated her and

a continuous ECG was required, something we had not seen before. Getting an ECG done meant submitting a formal request for the ECG to an ECG technician, wait for your turn and then wait for its arrival.

When I graduated there was no ultrasound so, in obstetrics, one had to have good semiotics to try to guess whether the mother was having one or more babies, figure out the position, etc. In keeping with this we were heavily assessed on auscultation skills during our undergraduate years. Cardiology interventions being performed locally, on the other hand, were basic, if any. The first time I experienced open heart surgery [for aortic stenosis] was in 1962 during my surgery clerkship in Berlin. I remember coming back and being asked by Prof. Joseph Zammit Maempel to recount the procedure.

Of note is the introduction of fibre optics which heralded a new era in endoscopy. Prior to this, doctors could only use rigid straight tubes, which were of course, inadequate, uncomfortable and gave limited information.

YOUR CHILDREN, GEORGE JR, CLAIRE AND ELAINE, DID NOT FOLLOW YOUR STEPS. IT SEEMS THAT THIS HAS BEEN APTLY COMPENSATED BY YOUR GRANDCHILDREN.

I guess my work-life balance deterred my children from choosing medicine. I worked from Monday till Sunday, regularly clocking up to 80 hours weekly. Doing urgent home visits up to three nights a week was common practice. In those times there were no polyclinics and frequently, patients refused to go to St Luke's. This meant that I had to treat them to the best of my knowledge [and hope for the best]; treating three heart failures in one night with digoxin and strophanthine together with morphine was not a rare event. Although the work brought food to my table, together with social respect, this meant that the upbringing of my children rested entirely in the caring hands of my wife. Eventually I came to realize that this was not sustainable, so I decided to stop my clinic early Saturday afternoon to dedicate more time to my family.

Skipping a generation, three out of my seven grandchildren are now enrolled in medicine. George's daughter is in 4th year whilst the daughters of Elaine and Claire are both in 2nd year. Although I tried to avoid influencing them, I am obviously pleased that they are following my steps.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE PIECE OF ADVICE TO YOUR GRANDCHILDREN?

Malta has progressed considerably when compared to years past, with social justice now ingrained in our culture. I strongly believe that specific values constitute

the foundations of an orderly society and these do not age with time. They include honesty, transparency, accountability, speaking the truth and doing what is right. Living these values means that when one grows old and looks back, one can peacefully state that any past deeds have been done with good intentions.

MOVING ON TO POLITICS, DO YOU IDENTIFY YOURSELF WITH CONSERVATIVE SOCIALISM?

Socialism does not equate to conservatism. Traditionally, conservative policies have been invariably associated with the Nationalist party; socialism, on the other hand, identified itself mostly with blue collars. Socialism is progressive, at times slightly revolutionary in a pacific sense.

Socialism is built on the foundations of labour which is the workers' movement lobbying for right to work, decent salary, and right to enroll in unions. Socialism, on the other hand, relates more to camaraderie, with workers contributing to assist disadvantaged and disabled colleagues. This includes paying taxes to subsidize housing projects, social services, etc. Needless to say, all this should be distinguished from extreme socialism which is, in fact, communism.

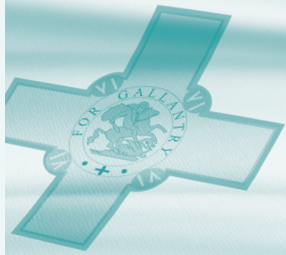
Socialism was seeded in me by my working class family and nurtured by living in post-war Malta. When I stepped in the Drydocks I felt inherently obliged to advocate the rights and well-being of the workers, penning various articles in local newspapers, challenging the pernicious perception that Drydocks workers were social loafers.

As time passed by, socialism became infiltrated by more liberal ideas. How can I not endorse specific changes in civil liberties, including LGBTI rights? However, euthanasia and abortion, portrayed as being 'liberal' measures by socialists, are a different story. I strongly believe that core values stem from life, rather than politics. In keeping with this, prior to accepting my current position I was clear that I will never sign any legislation relating to the introduction of euthanasia or abortion in Malta.

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO RUN AS A LABOUR PARTY CANDIDATE ON THE 3RD DISTRICT BACK IN 1976?

Back in the seventies, all political parties turned to doctors since they were considered knowledgeable on the general electorate sentiment. At that time up to 25% of MPs were doctors. By 1974 I was a young family man with a working class background; this, together with my expanding medical practice and my experience at the Drydocks seemed to tick all the right boxes for my candidature. Notwithstanding this, I resisted all attempts





I SUDDENLY HAD TO FACE UNEXPECTED CONSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES WHICH POSED KNOTTY LEGAL CHALLENGES DUE TO DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS BY LEGAL EXPERTS. THESE RANGED FROM REQUESTS FOR THE REMOVAL OF A PRIME MINISTER FROM OFFICE AND TO CHANGE THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, TO PRESIDENTIAL PARDONS

to run for election. Actually, Wistin Abela used to tell me that he was constrained to run for election on the 3rd district because I did not want to do so!

One day as I was in St Thomas Bay in Marsascula someone came along congratulating me for accepting to run for the 1976 election. Upon enquiring, he informed me that Lorry Sant had declared so, earlier on, in a meeting in Tarxien. The rest is history. I did not get elected in 1976 but when Emmanuel Attard Bezzina resigned from parliament to take up the role of Maltese Ambassador to Germany, I was co-opted on 16 January 1978.

AS MINISTER YOU WERE ALWAYS ASSIGNED FOREIGN AFFAIRS. WHY WERE YOU ALSO HANDED THE ENVIRONMENT BETWEEN 1996 AND 1998?

After being co-opted in 1978 Dom Mintoff asked me to attend the Conference of Local and Regional Authorities in the Council of Europe on matters relating to neighbourhood councils with the intention to implement a similar system in Malta. [This concept eventually led to the introduction of local councils]. At the Council of Europe I was then asked to choose a working group and I opted for the Committee of the Environment. There I was appointed rapporteur on maritime pollution from maritime sources [oil transportation at sea, maritime disasters including oil spills, etc].

The Council of Europe is a steep learning curve since it provides a cornucopia of subjects, opinions and countries. I strongly advice all prospective electoral candidates to work there for some time if the occasion arises. My experience there in both foreign policy as well as environmental matters motivated Dr Alfred Sant to assign me a Ministerial portfolio including both, after the Labour Party won the election in 1996.

ANY ANECDOTE DURING YOUR POLITICAL CAREER?

Parliamentary life has its share of satisfaction which more than compensates the sacrifices which one makes, including any income lost from one's private practice in order to attend parliamentary sessions, attend meetings abroad, etc. Indeed, the balancing act on the twin peaks of politics and family medicine created opportunities for

me to voice the concerns of patients in the corridors of the highest governmental institution.

Unfortunately, sad recollections also come to mind. Political acrimony and indiscipline crystallized the seventies and eighties. The murder of Karen Grech in 1977, the Żejtun tal-Barrani march in November 1986 and the ensuing murder of Raymond Caruana in Gudja epitomises that era.

The 1977 medical strike at St Luke's Hospital was a thorny issue. How can one run a national hospital without any doctors? I volunteered to close my clinic to go and work there. Doctors working at St. Luke's had to be very careful since the government was ready to declare a state of emergency and coerce specific surgeons to return to work, if need be. If an acute abdomen presented itself at St. Luke's, did it warrant surgery? What if we requested surgery in an erroneous manner and a state of emergency was invoked in vain? I also remember going around St Luke's at night switching the lights to allay patients' concerns that there were no doctors; in reality there were very few.

I still believe that the medical strike was heavily politicized. Because of the strike though, for the first time, medical doctors arrived from countries other than the UK, including Algerian, Egyptian, Belgian and Yugoslav specialists, to bolster our ailing efforts. This led to an influx of foreign expertise which Malta lacked. Obviously, after the strike ended, strike-breakers, including myself, suffered the brunt of social boycott by medical consultants for a number of years.

The 1981 elections which followed constituted a watershed moment. The Nationalist party got the absolute majority of votes, but a minority of parliamentary seats. This created a political conundrum. Dom Mintoff formed a government, as he was constitutionally obliged to do. I remember going to the Council of Europe together with Dr Joe Buttigieg and Leo Brincat to defend our case and explain that we were constitutionally correct. Dom Mintoff, in an attempt to cross the river by feeling the stones, started a reform process from both sides of the House to correct this anomaly and made it clear to us MPs that the following year he would call fresh elections.

In 1982 the agreement to call another election faced strong opposition from the parliamentary group. In view of this, Mintoff felt that his only way out was to resign from Prime Minister and party leader. This he did in 1984, but not before appointing Dr Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici in his stead. He wisely decided to not appoint Lorry Sant or Lino Spiteri, since this would have retained the political inertia within the Labour party. With all his good will, Dr Mifsud Bonnici did not manage to clean the Augean stable; regretfully many people took advantage of his naiveness.

Following the Żejtun wedding incident involving Dr Eddie Fenech Adami in June 1989, Dr Wenzu Mintoff and Dr Toni Abela resigned from the Labour party in protest. The evening before their resignation they were at my house in Żejtun inviting me to join them. However, I had consistently made it clear that one can only advocate for change from within the party ranks. I recall challenging Dr Mifsud Bonnici, on what would happen if three incidents similar to the tal-Barrani incident would happen at the same time ... a civil war would be on his hands. Although painstakingly slow, through a concerted effort from few willing people we managed to press forward important reforms such as the Commission for Discipline and Vigilance, Ethics Committee, etc.

IN 2017 YOU RETIRED FROM POLITICS. AFTER TWO YEARS DEDICATED TO YOUR FAVOURITE PAST-TIMES - PHILATELY, READING AND CLASSICAL MUSIC - YOU WERE INAUGURATED AS THE 10TH PRESIDENT OF MALTA IN APRIL 2019.

At 75 years of age I was becoming increasingly convinced that I should pack up and thus I decided to call it a day. This meant that I had ample time to dedicate to my hobbies. I read over 45 books in 2018 alone, mostly relating to history. My interest in history stemmed from a visit in 1960 to Florence when I came to realize that viewing renaissance sculptures without any knowledge of art or history, in reality meant nothing to me. Along the years this passion extended to history in general. However, if I were to recommend a specific book, I would mention the volumes of the Jesus of Nazareth series, penned by Pope Benedict XVI, relating to the last few days of Christ.

On the other hand, my passion for philately traces its roots to my childhood days. I would go to the Strand in London and buy stamps from shops there. I eventually branched to UK postal history, and eventually postal stationery. Today I have a good collection of Victorian postal stationery of 1837 - 1901, as well as postal stationery relating to various UK prime ministers.

I also love all types of classical music. I am not a cognoscente but when I was at my home in Żejtun, classical tunes were played in my study, changing accordingly to reflect my mood.

All this changed two years ago. Regretfully the pandemic has now redefined my day-to-day official activities, of course. I miss the official functions, as well as the community outreach which characterize the work of the Presidential Office.

THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE IS INTRINSICALLY ASSOCIATED WITH CHARITY WORK. NONETHELESS, SINCE YOU TOOK OFFICE YOU HAVE BEEN ROPEDED IN ISSUES STEMMING FROM THE DAPHNE CARUANA GALIZIA SAGA [PRESIDENTIAL PARDONS, CIVIL SOCIETY PROTESTS, ETC] AS WELL AS ISSUES RELATING TO LEADERSHIP TURMOILS OF THE BOTH MAIN POLITICAL PARTIES. RECENTLY YOU QUOTED DUN KARM PSAILA'S WORDS, 'SEDDAQ IL-GHAQDA U S-SLIEM'. WHY DO WE NEED NATIONAL UNITY?

I suddenly had to face unexpected constitutional challenges which posed knotty legal challenges due to different interpretations by legal experts. These ranged from requests for the removal of a Prime Minister from office and to change the leader of the Opposition, to presidential pardons. Although I am now a retired physician, I am still practicing those very same medical principles which have been ingrained in me over the years ... listening without any prejudice and with an open mind, assimilating all information, making a differential diagnosis, gauging all possibilities and then acting.

The dichotomy of our small population is beguiling. There are way too many societal fractions which are present even at a local level, including band clubs, football clubs and political parties, of course. On the other hand, our society manages to unite on specific occasions e.g. national fund-raising activities, and facing the pandemic.

My role is to try to bridge unnecessary differences and push for awareness for the need of national unity. I need to respect you if I am willing to accept these differences. The things which we have in common must unite us. We have been kicking the can down the road for too long. I am referring here especially to the abuse we see on social media, including disrespectful communication and sheer insolence.

I intentionally did not invite politicians for the conference on National Unity held by my office a few weeks ago. I wanted to avoid partisan politics. However, I expect them to sit down and listen to the conference



proceedings relating to the entire spectrum of opinions of the civil society participating in the conference.

GEORGE VELLA AND FUNERALS WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP?

One of the most distressing life traumas was my attendance to a funeral of a fellow student when I was 14 years old. The grief and overwhelming emotions which I witnessed marked me for life and I decided to never attend funerals again. In 1973 I convinced myself to attend the funeral of Dr John Borg, mentioned earlier, but those very same emotions - experienced 17 years before - set in again and I had to leave early. This second lugubrious experience reinforced my conviction to never to attend funerals again. In fact, I did not attend my parents' funerals.

I admit that I never found any difficulties to make house visits to issue death certificates, but whenever the coffin arrives, uneasiness sets in. When it comes to state funerals, these are very different since they are more formal and less intimate; however, I try to avoid them as much as possible.

ACCORDING TO EUROSTAT, MALTA RECORDED THE 2ND HIGHEST GDP GROWTH AMONG EU STATES IN Q4 OF 2020. BETWEEN 2013 AND 2019 WE HEARD MUCH ON THE SINGAPORE GDP MODEL OF ECONOMIC PROGRESSION WHICH MALTA SEEMED TO ASPIRE TO EMULATE. DO YOU CONSIDER NEW ZEALAND TO USE A BETTER INDEX IN RELATION TO A NATION'S ECONOMIC WELLBEING?

I totally agree that the GDP must be superseded by other more granular economic tools to measure the wealth of a nation. Many other variables should be considered, including socio-economic issues including social justice; this includes violence on women and mistreatment of children. The environment including access to open spaces, is another important variable, which has a direct effect on mental well-being.

THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

My role is to actively promote the SDGs whenever possible. In reality, Malta has progressed markedly when it comes to education, civil rights, etc. The environment is especially important. Five SDGs relate specifically to the environment with the remaining SDGs referring indirectly to them. Similar to what has happened to their precursors, the Millennium Development Goals, I am convinced that the set target of 2030 will be extended again. In keeping with this, it is important to keep in mind that the achievement of these goals will not lead

to a perfect world; rather, these goals serve to achieve a more sustainable future for all.

MAYBE IT IS TOO EARLY, BUT WHO WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE AS THE 11TH PRESIDENT OF MALTA? A TECHNOCRAT? A MEMBER FROM THE OPPOSITION RANKS?

I do not believe that the chair of a President of Malta can be adequately filled by a technocrat. Political experience is of the utmost importance. If one interprets the constitution ad litteram from a legal point of view only, one may miss important political implications. One's political experience is worth one's weight in gold when occupying this position.

When I was approached for this position, I was reluctant at first. However, one then starts wondering whether they asked you because they see qualities in you which might make you fit for purpose. Logically, I cannot guess which person would be most fitting for this role in three years' time since I do not know what the circumstances of Malta will be in 2024. However, similar to what happened in my case, I strongly believe that a nomination for President should be agreed by both sides of parliament.

I can reassure you that whoever occupies this position manages to remove one's partisan cloak. I dedicated enough time and energy to partisan politics. I describe myself as a hardened politician with five decades experience as family doctor. In spite of this, it is still heart-wrenching for me to see all the Community Chest Fund's requests, especially those relating to young, severely ill, children.

EVERYONE HAS PERSONAL REGRETS. YOUR GREATEST ONE?

Leaving my private practice in 2013 left a void. At times, a previous patient of mine phones me for medical advice and something rekindles in me, making me yearn for those days when I was of service to my patients.

DESCRIBE YOUR LIFE IN ONE SENTENCE?

I thank God Almighty of all the gifts of life which I received from Him. I do not know whether I have deserved them all. Many other people may not have had my good fortune because of illness or family misfortunes ... I feel lucky.

WHY DO YOU READ THE SYNAPSE MAGAZINE?

I always eagerly await its arrival and read it from cover to cover. It keeps me updated on what is happening locally in the medical field including new technologies, interventions and treatments. Keep up the good work!

Editor's note: This interview is dedicated to my father, William Ellul, who worked at the Malta Drydocks for 47 years between 1953 and 2000.