

SETTE GIUGNO

2020



**Valletta
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Cover photo: Department of Information

Official Programme and
Address by the Honourable Anġlu Farrugia
Speaker of the House of Representatives
Parliament of Malta
on the occasion of the commemoration of
SETTE GIUGNO

Saturday, 6 June 2020

SPEECH ON THE OCCASION OF SETTE GIUGNO 2020

We are today remembering the historical day of the Sette Giugno 1919. Regrettably this year the commemoration has had to take on a different format due to the particular challenges brought upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are currently facing together as one. However, we should not allow these particular circumstances to hinder us from recalling the challenging circumstances our forefathers had to endure throughout the Sette Giugno events, so that on the basis of the lessons learnt from the past we can forge a better future for our country.

I am making this statement because it is important to look at how the protagonists of the 1919 events behaved before and after the Sette Giugno riots, as well as during the discussions that followed the Sette Giugno events. I would like to mention, amongst others, Manwel Dimech and Nerik Mizzi, who in spite of surely not sharing the same political belief, were in agreement on the direction Malta was to take. So much so, that we note that both the followers of Manwel Dimech, better known as the Dimechjani and whose ideology was continually being obstructed by the British administration, and those of Nerik Mizzi, moving forward in unison against the British rule. Various historical documents attest to this.

Nerik Mizzi, who believed that Malta should foster close links with Italy and not with the United Kingdom, and who actively participated and took every opportunity to push forward his ideals, lacked the necessary support because his pro-Italian sympathies were deemed by many as being too extreme. In the struggle against the British Government for Malta to be given its first self-government Constitution, we see Nerik Mizzi fighting with all his might and without fear; we see him not shying away from criticising the British authorities

during his testimony before the Commission set up to prepare a report on the 1919 riots. We see him placing the blame for the damages that occurred during the riots squarely on the British Wheat Commission where he contended that the said Commission was endorsing higher prices purposely to decrease bread consumption. His anger was so acute that he referred to the British rule as a ‘Harsh Military Regime’.

This complemented the position taken by Manwel Dimech who inspired the people with his ideas and writings on workers’ rights, social reforms, right to education for all and the importance of the Maltese language. At that time, these were very progressive ideas, which literally rattled the authority of the British Empire. Manwel Dimech, who ended up being exiled from Malta by order of the British Government in 1914, is described, in the writings of the Manwel Dimech Foundation, as the personification of all the ideological, social and psychological aspirations of the Maltese people at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was responsible for contributing to, printing and distribution a four-page weekly newspaper *Il-Bandiera tal-Maltin* (The Flag of the Maltese) in 1898, as well as establishing the *Xirka tal-Imdawlin* (The League of the Enlightened) in 1911, which later changed its name to *Ix-Xirka Maltija* (the Maltese League), that strived for Malta’s liberation and constitutional independence. Dimech believed in national unity, especially in the right and duty of every citizen to take an active interest in all events taking place in Malta at that time. He is considered as one of the most important persons in Maltese history, a person with a political vision who worked tirelessly in favour of Malta’s interests and who believed in the right of the people to move ahead as a sovereign state without any foreign interference. It is for this reason that he argued against both the Italian influence – contrary to Nerik Mizzi’s beliefs – and to British influence.

In the period that led to the Sette Giugno events, we observe these two protagonists from our history move in the same direction against the British colonial rule and in favour of the Maltese people. In those times the national interest always prevailed, irrespective of any personal political belief.

We also know that the Governor at that time, Lord Plumer, had requested the Police Commissioner to provide him with the list of persons that had been arrested, accused and sentenced following the Sette Giugno riots. In fact, we know that there were some 114 individuals who had been handed down prison sentences, with 24 persons having been held in prison for some time and another 90 persons, including 42 women, who were indicted for of stealing a number of items during and in the days following the Sette Giugno riots. We also know that due to the impending threat of further riots, Governor Plumer was forced to issue revocation orders with respect to many of these sentences. All of this is documented and evidences how long the Maltese had to battle in order to win their rights.

Following the Sette Giugno riots, namely on 20 November 1919, it transpires that the aforementioned Governor Plumer had urgently convened the Council of Government in order to inform its members that he had received a telegram from the Secretary of State for the Colonies informing him that the British Government had decided that the time had come to give the Maltese people the responsibility to manage the internal affairs of their country and to make the necessary preparations for the introduction of self-government in 1921. It is interesting to note that nine days later, Nerik Mizzi publicly thanked Governor Plumer for the move which would see Malta trusted with self-rule.

At this point I would like to make reference to the Constitution granted to our country on 4 May 1921, after the State Secretary Amery had written to Governor Plumer about the granting of this Constitution, and quote from its article 30 that clearly defines this concept of responsible government:

“... Malta will elect and which they can change, responsible to that Legislature and to their fellow citizens. If the Government makes mistakes in administration or legislation, there is no outside authority to which the blame for these mistakes can be imputed. The responsibility for those mistakes and for correcting them by bringing about a change of government will rest with the people themselves. That is the whole meaning of Responsible Government.”

This part of the 1921 Constitution clearly states that whoever is leading the country must be held accountable for its actions to the people and, if deemed necessary, the latter have the responsibility to address such actions during a general election by making the necessary changes in leadership. This sacrosanct principle remained intact notwithstanding the many changes made to the Constitution of Malta since the granting of the Amery-Milner Constitution in 1921; this shows that all the political forces since then have always worked in favour of the Maltese people controlling their own affairs.

It is worth mentioning that a national committee, the Comitato Nazionale pro Maltesi morti e feriti il 7 e 8 Giugno (pro-Maltese National Committee for the injured and deceased on the 7 and 8 June), which was in place before the 1921 Constitution was granted, and which included among its members Nerik Mizzi and Edoardo Borg, agreed to purchase a grave at the Addolorata Cemetery so that the four

victims of the Sette Giugno, who up till then were buried in different graves and localities, could be buried together in one place; I am referring to the grave that we can still see to this very day and on which we lay wreaths as a sign of respect, gratitude and recognition. I would also like to add that I believe that the purchase of this grave further attests to the common yet humble collective efforts of the various political forces towards the national interest. Even today, there are lessons to be learnt from this behaviour.

During the past year, since my last Sette Giugno speech in 2019, the Maltese Parliament has already been convened 94 times, and there have been over 100 meetings of the parliamentary committees, which to date stand at 15. A division at Third Reading stage was called on three out of the 39 laws that were passed since. Although the Chair was called upon 13 times to rule on procedural matters, I must state that in my opinion some of these requests for rulings could have been avoided had there been more cooperation between the two sides of the House. I am stating this to show that in the vast majority of the work carried out in Parliament, there was always agreement that what was being done was in fact in the national interest.

However, at this point, the Chair feels that it should point out that there could have been more mature behaviour last November and December, when a number of protests and demonstrations were being organised by groups of people in the vicinity of the Parliament building. I would like to state, without any hesitation, that these persons had every right to protest, but with the same conviction I state that during such protests nobody has the right to break the law in respect of the institution embodying parliamentary democracy. Everybody acknowledges that the Members of Parliament, the representatives of our people, who are elected democratically by the same people, deserve to be protected

when carrying out their duties; this is the reason why the Chair felt, on a number of occasions, that it had to take those measures it considered necessary to protect all the Members from both sides of the House. In so doing, the Chair acted within the powers and in observance of the House of Representatives (Privileges and Powers) Ordinance and the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives, and according to the circumstances acted to protect the rights and provide for the safety of the Members of Parliament who have been mandated by their constituents to represent them and to work in their best interest in the country's highest institution.

There were instances in which some individuals, who were protesting in front of Parliament, carried out offences against Members of Parliament and also caused damages to their vehicles. It is for these reasons that the Chair was compelled to take the necessary measures in the precincts of the Parliament building in order to protect and guarantee unhindered access to the Members of Parliament, as it is legally required to do. There were also instances in which the Chair had no other choice but to limit public access to the Parliament building in order to diffuse tensions and to ensure that the work of the House of Representatives could carry on without interruptions. I have to confess that at times these were difficult decisions, but I believe that the circumstances required such decisions.

In this regard I believe that there should have been more cooperation between the two sides of the House so that all the necessary precautions in the Institution's best interest could have been taken together, something that regrettably did not occur. On the contrary, there were those who tried to give a different interpretation to these action and attribute ulterior motives to the measures that the Chair was compelled to take in order to protect the same Members of Parliament. I believe

that in so doing we were not leading by example and that therefore we should learn from this experience, possibly by considering strengthening the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives in this regard.

However, I cannot say that during the past year there were no instances where common sense prevailed, when together we took important decisions to allow Parliamentary work to carry on uninterrupted. In fact, just a few weeks ago the Chair found full cooperation when, on 20 April, agreement was reached to provide for the online participation of Members as well as of witnesses summoned before the parliamentary committees. This was in line with the various regulations and directives issued by the Health Authorities in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this agreement, those persons who qualify as vulnerable persons, together with persons who are requested to appear or give presentations before a committee of the House can now opt to participate in parliamentary committees by way of video conferencing instead of being physically present at the meetings. I have to add that this proposal was submitted by my Office and found the support of both sides of the House. The same unanimous agreement and full cooperation between the Government and Opposition Members also characterised the discussions on a number of laws and resolutions that were presented urgently in order to address a number of matters related to the administration of the country arising from the COVID-19 outbreak. The laws include Act No. X of 2020 which amends the Public Health Act that lays down the powers and authority given to the Superintendent of Public Health; Act No. XII of 2020 that amends the Budget Measures Implementation Act to allocate additional funds required as a direct consequence of the measures implemented by the public health Authorities; and Act No. XIII of 2020 related to the Suspension and Interruption of Legal and Other Time Periods,

conferring specific powers to the Minister for Justice to issue regulations related to the legal time frames when the Superintendent of Public Health issues an order for the closure of certain premises under the Public Health Act. All of this was possible not only because there was the will but also the commitment to work together in the national interest.

We have done more than this. In fact, towards the end of last January, the Maltese Parliament organised an inter-parliamentary workshop of the Small Branches of the Commonwealth that discussed how to provide for the necessary impetus in a sustainable manner, to the economies of small states. This workshop was attended by more than 20 Members of Parliament from around the world. In this context I would also like to mention the work carried out by the Chair during the three years it presided over the Small Branches of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which came to an end in September 2019. During this term the Chair managed to conclude the CPA Small Branches Climate Change Toolkit for Parliamentarians aimed at guiding countries, and in particular the Members of Parliament, in the fight against climate change. This document was in fact presented at the workshop held in Malta last January, and I would like to quote from my concluding remarks at this conference:

“The idea of a workshop on sustainable economic development arose in early 2019, and I am delighted that this activity now comes to fruition. During my term of office, I focussed on strategy and climate change, and I am pleased to see that this work has been carried forward feeding into this workshop. Also, I believe that my own country, Malta, has a lot to contribute to this topic in terms of economic activity, and I am pleased to see

that many local resource persons have shared their knowledge to that effect.”

I would also like to add that works at Level -2 of the Parliament Building intended to strengthen the services provided by this Institution relating to the access to its archives and additional facilities for the committees of the House have started this year. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 outbreak these works were interrupted, however we hope that they will resume as soon as possible. We hope that this project will be completed by 2021, that is on the 100th anniversary from the first Parliament in 1921, and that these new services will, by that time, be available both to the Parliamentarians and to the Maltese public in order to raise the awareness about the present and past work of the same Parliamentarians.

I would like to conclude by assuring everyone that all I have said in this speech was said in the best interest of each and every Member of Parliament, of the people and especially of the Institution. What I have said reflects my belief that Parliament must lead by example and should also aspire to be one of the leading national Parliaments in Europe in the promotion and implementation of parliamentary democracy.

Therefore, we have to see how we can improve not only those procedures relating to the efficiency of Parliament, but also those relating to the implementation of parliamentary democracy that our forefathers have worked so hard for. I would therefore like to close this speech by saluting the victims of the Sette Giugno 1919.

Thank you.