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Government reduced local councils' autonomy to intentionally decrease their popularity - Swieqi mayor



KYLE PATRICK CAMILLERI

The government has reduced the local councils' autonomy to intentionally decrease their popularity in order to lead to further centralisation of power, Swieqi mayor Noel Muscat told *The Malta Independent on Sunday*.

In an interview with this media house, Muscat asked if over the last 10 years a single measure had been introduced by the central government that strengthened local councils and their ability to govern their localities.

He said that the competences of local councils have decreased over recent years, adding that their official names have been ironically amended to "local governments", despite their inability to govern.

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Five years after road fatality, widow seeks justice

Mark Vassallo died on 27 August 2018, five days after the motorcycle he was riding in slow moving traffic in Pietà towards Valletta was hit from behind by a car. Five years later, his widow Maura is still seeking justice and some form of closure.

Spend €40m on patients, not Hollywood - MAM president



ISAAC SALIBA

Makeshift wards should be a temporary solution to the space problems being encountered at Mater Dei Hospital, the president of the Medical Association of Malta, Martin Balzan, told *The Malta Independent on Sunday*.

It would have been better to spend €40m on patients, rather than Hollywood, he quipped, an obvious reference to the controversy about the €46.7m that the government is to give in cash rebates to the company producing the (Gladiator) sequel film.

Balzan said that what is needed is a proper extension to Mater Dei Hospital, "with proper wards

meaning privacy, hygiene, toilet facilities, everything a modern hospital deserves".

He added that some of the makeshift wards don't have ventilation and lack light. "They're not designed as wards," he said.

Makeshift wards started to be used mostly during the Covid-19 pandemic, a situation which pushed the government into taking short-term solutions to combat the spread of the disease.

Space at the hospital was converted into temporary wards and intensive care units as Malta saw an increase in the number of people who needed hospital treatment as a result of the pandemic. In the early months of the spread of the Covid-19 virus, the government

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News

FILM INDUSTRY

'It is not clear where the monies are going and who is gaining what' - Chamber of Commerce



SABRINA ZAMMIT

The Chamber of Commerce is urging the government and the Malta Film Commission to be more transparent on expenditure and return on investment as "it is not clear where the monies are going and who is gaining what".

The Malta Independent asked the Chamber for a reaction following a story published in the Sunday Times of Malta, which revealed that Maltese taxpayers will be paying €46.7m to the film company producing the Gladiator sequel. The rebate is part of a cash scheme that promises productions up to 40% cash back if they

film in Malta.

"The Malta Chamber believes that government and the Malta Film Commission need to be more open on both the spend and the film (return on investment), to ensure full transparency, full accountability and a level playing field among all the players in the industry", the Chamber said in its reply.

When asked by The Malta Independent on the €46.7m rebate, Tourism Minister Clayton Bartolo defended the scheme and said that the funds are not being taken from other sectors. Minister Bartolo was also asked by The Malta Independent where the funds are coming from and who approved this large sum.

The minister claimed what he

said was a "campaign of misinformation" on the cash rebates, describing it as a "systemic attack on the film industry". He said that it would be a mistake "to continue with this attack on the industry which today employs hundreds, if not thousands, of Maltese people, as we must ensure that the good ripple effect that this industry is leaving continues".

In its comments to this newspaper, the Chamber said that "if developed properly", the film industry "can be a very important sector for the Maltese Islands as it uplifts and engages multiple other industries and services professionals".

The Chamber also said that it has always emphasised that the film industry should be consid-

ered as a niche sector and that "one also needs to keep in mind that there is a lot of international competition", adding that incentives used to attract foreign productions need to "give a good ROI to Malta, provided that Maltese businesses are benefitting as well".

Times of Malta has also revealed how films and TV series filmed in Malta had received €143m in state aid over the course of the last five years.

In another development, and in efforts to have a more transparent breakdown of this state aid expenditure, three Nationalist Party members on the Public Accounts Committee, together with the spokesman for Historical Heritage, Arts and Culture, presented

a formal request to the Auditor General to investigate the expenditure of €136,793,533 from public funds by the Malta Film Commission between 17 September 2018 and 4 August of this year.

In a statement, the PAV said that there are a number of Maltese people and societies in this sector that depend on this type of aid from public funds, both to strengthen Maltese culture and also to improve resources for the development of local talent.

"Therefore, it is in the public interest to ensure that this type of public spending is not depriving discriminating and/or holding back in any way competing to the spending that is being done to accommodate foreign companies."

'We are in crisis mode' - MAM president

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had even considered the building of a temporary hospital close to the Mater Dei complex, an idea that was later shelved.

But, although the pandemic is now over, makeshift wards continue to be used in the hospital. In April, Times of Malta reported that a spokesperson for the Ministry of Health had said that the makeshift wards used during the Covid era had proved effective and would begin seeing improvements to meet acceptable standards and be used as permanent wards.

Balzan is of a different opinion. "We are in crisis mode," he said. "We have six wards which are designed for times of crisis, but we are using them all the time and they are not proper wards." He added that he agrees with improving them to make them as suitable as possible short-term, but that a serious infrastructure investment for the long term is urgently needed.

"What I'd like to see is spend the €40m not on sponsoring Holly-

wood but on sponsoring our patients. We want long term investment. But €400m went on the private hospitals deal, now another €60m went to Hollywood," he said.

Balzan was referring to the €400m awarded to Vitals and Steward Healthcare between 2016 and 2021 when the government transferred three public hospitals to the private sector. The deal has since been rescinded by a court of law and last May Balzan had told The Malta Independent on Sunday that unless a serious attempt is made to try to recover the money, then the suspicion of a cover-up grows.

In March, Prime Minister Robert Abela had written to the Auditor General requesting an investigation into the money passed on to Steward Healthcare as part of a hospital's concession. Abela's specific request



Martin Balzan, president of the Medical Association of Malta.

followed allegations that the government paid €400m to Steward Healthcare and received nothing in return.

The Malta Independent on Sunday also reached out to the general secretary of the Malta Union of Midwives and Nurses, who said that the MUMN has not been informed of any improvements made in makeshift wards. He explained that these wards were meant to be used temporarily during the pandemic.

"At the moment we know that there are a considerable number of elderly at Mater Dei, around 90 people, who are supposed to be in elderly people's homes." He said that he does not know why these people have not been moved to an elderly institution. "As it stands they are filling up these wards and making it harder for Mater Dei and the

staff".

Galea was asked for his thoughts regarding an expansion to Mater Dei. "In terms of nurses, midwives and other related professions, I think it's pointless to have a five-star hotel when you don't have the necessary workers for it - at the end of the day they're giving you the service, not a machine." He said that there is a significant lack of nurses and that the issue needs to be addressed.

MUMN president Paul Pace recently expressed his concern regarding a lack of resources at Mater Dei following revelations from the magisterial inquiry into the death of Doctor Mario Rizzo Naudi. Pace said that the recommended EU standard is six nurses per 24 patients, while the inquiry had established there were only three nurses with 23 patients at the time of Rizzo Naudi's death. Galea said that there is a lack of nurses everywhere and that everyone is feeling the pressure. "You have three being over-worked, doing the work of six."

"From day one, we were saying

that this is not a hospital intended to be acute," Galea said about Mater Dei. "There's a long story beginning in 1994 or 1995. There has always been a feeling that there needs to be an expansion, but more than that I feel that there needs to be more professionals. It's pointless to expand if you already have a lack of workers for the hospitals as it is."

Balzan said that when it comes to doctor availability, he thinks that at the moment they are able to meet the patient needs at Mater Dei. "At the moment we are coping. From our point of view the main shortcoming is space and infrastructure."

Galea said that he thinks the staffing situation at Mater Dei will improve once the agreement the government has reached with the MUMN on a new collective agreement is signed and put into action. "For the first time the agreement was aimed at nurses in particular so they don't leave the profession. It was also aimed towards nurses of a certain age to keep them in the profession along with attracting youths to the field."

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