

Speech on the occasion of Sette Giugno - 2017

Another year has passed since I delivered my last speech on the occasion of the Sette Giugno Commemoration, and I am pleased to note that today this celebration today is being held in a place which truly befits this important event in our country's history. I remember well that during the last speech, as well as in the one before it, I had referred to this, and I quote:

“... this monument by Sculptor Anton Agius should be relocated in a more appropriate and visible place. There is an intrinsic and precise connection between what is represented by this monument and the Maltese Parliament”.

It is thus an honour for me to be addressing you in this square, which has witnessed many historical events; in front of the Palace, which from 1921 to 2015 housed the Maltese Parliament.

This day should always serve to commemorate one of the most important events in our country's history. It was precisely on 7 June 1919 when the Maltese people, with good reason strongly voiced their concerns with regard to Malta's rights as a nation.

There is no doubt that this annual appointment helps us to better understand what we should expect from a parliamentary democracy which commenced its journey when Malta was granted the Amery-Milner Constitution

in 1921 three years later - as many contend - as a consequence of what occurred on 7 June 1919.

Before I outline the parliamentary work carried out during my term as Speaker, as is customary in every speech I gave on this occasion, I would like to refer to an interesting point which came to light during our research on the subject matter from the newspapers published at the time, and evaluate said report from today's perspective; history indeed tends to repeat itself.

We have just been through an electoral campaign and a general election during which, similar to what happens in other countries, the mass media has been used extensively and where apart from news, we have heard and read a lot of denials; where often the same news is described as untrue; nowadays popularly referred to as “*fake news*”. But as they say, there is nothing new in this. I am saying this because when the events related to Sette Giugno took place, one comes across a report which one may argue to have contained incorrect information about this event. In fact, in the issue of the newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia* of 13 June 1919, that is six days after the Sette Giugno events, this newspaper of Benito Mussolini published in Milan, carried the following article on its front page, and I quote:

“Viva Malta Italiana! un eccidio.

Tripoli, 11 giugno

Il giorno 7 sono avvenuti a Malta gravissimi tumulti, provocati da un incidente verificatosi davanti al Circolo militare tra ufficiali inglesi e maltesi a causa del malcontento per l'inasprimento del prezzo della farina.

La popolazione è entrata alla Valletta, ha saccheggiato la casa del proprietario del mulino, incendiando la redazione del giornale "Daily Malta Chronicle". Intervennero reparti di marinai inglesi che fecero fuoco. Vi sono sette morti maltesi e una decina di feriti. Sembra si tratta di un movimento politico tendente all'autonomia politica amministrativa, esplosa per le cause eccezionali sudette. La situazione appare gravissima. Malta è occupata militarmente.

I nostri lettori ricordano certamente la corrispondenza che pubblicammo alcuni settimane fa, sulla situazione tristissima degli Italiani di Malta. Molti giornali riportano la nostra corrispondenza. Era la prima volta che - nel perdurante regime di censura - si poteva parlare di Malta che è Italiana e vuole rimanere Italiana, anche a dispetto degli inglesi. Il sangue italiano che è stato sparso a La Valletta, non farà che alimentare l'agitazione per la rivendicazione dell'italiannità di quell'isola.

È tempo che l'opinione pubblica italiana s'interessi di Malta. Laggiù ci sono degli Italiani."

When one reads this article, one may be led to believe that what took place on the day happened because Malta wanted to become Italian or because it wanted to align itself closer to Italy. Everyone knows that this was not the case, despite what was reported in this issue of *Il Popolo d'Italia*. In fact, in an exchange of correspondence dated two years after having been granted the Amery-Milner Constitution, the then Speaker of the House of Representatives, Salvatore Borg Olivier, wrote to Governor Lord Plumer, and on behalf of the Legislative Assembly thanked him for the honour given to the Maltese flag when it was hoisted on the Palace on the occasion of the National Day of 8 September upon the Governor's directions. I consider this to be a gesture which symbolizes and addresses the already patriotic sentiment of the same Assembly which represented the Maltese people at that time.

This means that similar to what sometimes still happens nowadays, a news item is used to influence the popular sentiment concerning facts, in a way which may not be entirely correct, just like what happened in this case, when the news item was spinned in such a way as to mislead the public opinion with regard to the real intentions and reasons behind this event.

However, the best way to remember and honour those Maltese citizens who sacrificed their lives during the country's democratic development is to evaluate where this has brought us, and also what we aspire to achieve through our parliamentary work. I am satisfied that during the past four years we have made considerable

strides towards this end, and in this respect I shall now outline what has taken place during this legislature up until Parliament's dissolution on 1 May 2017.

Parliamentary Work

Distinguished guests, the legislature which has just come to an end was a rather demanding one for my Office, also because I was determined to affect a number of reforms in the interest of transparency and democracy. During 507 parliamentary sittings, 186 Acts of Parliament were enacted, significantly more than the 117 during the eleventh legislature, the 116 during the tenth legislature and the 122 during the ninth legislature.

Whilst on the subject, I cannot fail to emphasize the importance of two Acts of Parliament which were also enacted during the past legislature and which shall directly be affecting parliamentary work for years to come.

Administrative Autonomy

I shall start by mentioning the Parliamentary Service Act. After repeated calls by myself as well as by many of my predecessors during speeches on this occasion, the Maltese Parliament has finally joined national parliaments from around the world who have long been enjoying administrative autonomy from the Executive.

This was an important milestone whose effects shall result in a stronger parliamentary democracy for our country. The two main functions of a parliament in a truly democratic society are the enactment of legislation and the scrutiny of the Executive. This Act has addressed criticism reiterated by various Speakers on this occasion that the highest Institution of the land can never truly carry out its functions if on the administrative level it operates as a government department, and therefore dependent on the Executive.

In this regard, I would like to thank the Clerk of the House of Representatives and his staff for drawing up a report and a draft bill which I, as Speaker, had tabled on 21 May 2014 following discussions within an internal commission set up for this purpose. I would also like to thank the Government and the Opposition who endorsed and took on this report, as a result of which we finally have this long-awaited legislation by means of which, for the first time in its history, the Maltese Parliament may start enjoying administrative autonomy.

Standards in Public Life

The second Act of Parliament which I believe shall have a marked impact on the Members of Parliament is the Standards in Public Life Act. In this regard, I would again like to thank the parliamentary staff as well as that of the Attorney General for the report and the draft bill prepared following a number of meetings of a Select Committee of the House appointed for such purpose. I

wish to convey my appreciation to Dr George Vella and Dr Justyne Caruana from the government side and to Dr Francis Zammit Dimech and Mr Ryan Callus from the opposition side for their valid contribution during the five Committee meetings which I chaired.

The most noticeable impact of this Act is the appointment of a Parliamentary Standing Committee and a Commissioner on Standards with the power to investigate breaches of statutory or ethical duties of categories of persons in public life, including the same Members of Parliament. In practice this shall mean that, amongst other things, for the first time there shall be an entity with the power to verify the veracity of the declarations of assets presented to the Speaker by Members of Parliament. This alone should raise the level of accountability which all Members are duty-bound to uphold with respect to the citizens who elected them and therefore bestowed upon them the honour to serve in the House of Representatives.

Standing Orders

Other important developments regarding parliamentary work which merit mention are the amendments made to the Standing Orders of the House during the past legislature relating to the Members' attendance, the submission of petitions and the televising of debates.

By means of a resolution adopted by Parliament just before the House rose for its summer recess in 2016, a

provision was introduced in the Standing Orders which levied an administrative fine of €50 on each Member of Parliament who absented himself without a valid reason during a parliamentary day. One notes that as from the coming into force of this provision, Members who are abroad on Government or Opposition business are now to be considered as excused, an issue which has been raised and discussed repeatedly in the House Business Committee during various legislatures.

Another important amendment also introduced with the agreement of both sides of the House concerns petitions which may be submitted to Parliament for its consideration. By virtue of the above-mentioned resolution, citizens have now acquired the right to submit a petition themselves directly to House. The same provision also provides for the setting up of a Standing Committee with the power to see how best to address the complaints raised in such requests.

An equally important amendment related to the introduction of the broadcasting of the Parliamentary debates on a dedicated TV channel following the adoption of a resolution to this effect in 2015. Thanks to this initiative which also necessitated an amendment to the Broadcasting Act, the level of transparency and openness of parliamentary proceedings was enhanced, thus bringing the parliamentary Institution closer to the citizen

I therefore believe that Parliament has never been so close to the citizen as it is today.

Change in Parliamentary Work

During the past legislature, certain changes in parliamentary work were introduced by way of a motion of procedure whose effects were therefore applicable only to that particular legislature. I hope that during the next legislature these changes find their place in the Standing Orders of the House. I am referring mainly to the time allocated for each Member to address the House which I believe should not exceed 20 minutes, with the exception for the Minister moving the Second Reading of a bill and the first speaker from the Opposition who should be allotted not more than 45 minutes. This reduction in time – which still exceeds considerably the time allocated in other national parliaments – allows, amongst other things, a better use of parliamentary time with regard to the consideration of more bills, the planning of parliamentary business, as well as the possibility for more speakers to participate in the debate. Whilst on the subject, I wish to convey the opinion expressed by a number of Members that Parliament should meet during family friendly hours so as to allow them more time with their loved ones. The above issues, together with the possibility of having full time Members, may further facilitate the work of this Institution. There is no doubt that we have to keep on working in this direction.

One other procedure which was regulated by the above-mentioned procedural motion and which I would like to

see become part of the Standing Orders during this new legislature concerns the time allocated to another important scrutiny tool used considerably in every legislature. I am referring to ministerial statements by means of which Government informs Parliament about matters of national importance, whilst at the same time providing Members with the opportunity to seek clarification on any point mentioned in the same statement. From experience, I can say that in order to better manage the business of the House, the length of these statements should not exceed 10 minutes with subsequent questions not taking up more than 3 minutes each.

Another amendment which I would like to see incorporated in the Standing Orders relates to the *quorum* rule so that the relative Standing Order reflects the provisions put in place by different administrations during past legislatures, which granted the Members a time frame of 20 minutes within which they have to be present in the House following a call for *quorum*. This is necessary in view of the fact that the Members' work has become much more demanding due to their having to actively participate in other fora such as Parliamentary committees which are nowadays covering a wider variety of sectors. Moreover, due to the citizen's increasing expectations vis-à-vis their representatives in Parliament, Members need to spend much more time in personal contact with their constituents. Therefore, it is understandable that it is not always possible that a *quorum* be present in the House.

The citizen's right of reply

One further amendments I would like to see being moved to the Standing Orders of the House, concerns the citizen's right of reply. In 2015, on this occasion, I remarked:

“Much remains to be done to continue improving the level of transparency and accountability of each and every one of us towards the people we represent. For instance, I believe that the time has come to address issues which arise when citizens feel aggrieved by statements made about them in Parliament, and to establish a mechanism which grants citizens a right of redress. This obviously needs to be done without impinging on Parliamentary rights and privileges, since these are intended to allow Members of Parliament to speak without fear.”

I believe that by granting this right, we would be bringing the citizen closer to Parliament because we would be tangibly providing him with the means to voice his concerns in the highest Institution. At the same time, we would be showing him that the Members of Parliament are ready to be more accountable because this step in itself should serve as a means of control in respect of those abusing of their parliamentary privileges.

More parliamentary work

In addition to the above, I would like to list other parliamentary work carried out during the last legislature.

Parliamentary Sittings - 507

Meetings of Parliamentary Committees - 565

Ministerial Statements - 80

Motions - 464

Private Members Motions - 53

Laws approved following a call for division - 23

Parliamentary questions - 33,595

Documents laid on the Table of the House - 8,778

Adjournment speeches - 380

Parliamentary delegations - 247

Delegations led by the Speaker / Deputy Speaker -70

Meetings of the Speaker with Ambassadors - 202

Exhibitions inaugurated by the Speaker in the Parliament building - 18

Sessions in the Parliament building with the public's participation, both local as well as foreign - 28

Visitors to the Parliament building - 5,200;

Books published by the Office of the Speaker:

Is-Sedja titkellem - 6 (109 ruling);

mill-Parlament - 15;

The Voice of Parliamentary Diplomacy;

Il-Futur tas-Setturi Kulturali u Kreattivi; and

The State's duty to inform.

I would also like to add that the Parliament building has been used for the launch of the following books under my auspices:

Nidħku bina nġusna written by Dr Tonio Borg;
Iċ-Ċirasa written by Mr Mario Galea; and
Contemporary Architecture in Malta with Professor Conrad Thake.

Apps for Parliament

I would like to now refer to the collaboration agreement recently entered into with the University of Malta allowing the Maltese Parliament, for the first time, to launch a number of mobile apps. The principal aim of this initiative was to increase the visibility, accessibility and transparency in parliamentary work. In this regard, apart from the University Rector, I would like to thank Dr Charles Abela and Dr Joel Azzopardi from the Intelligent Computer Systems Department in the Faculty of ICT at the University of Malta because thanks to them, to the involvement of their students, as well as with the help of the Parliament's staff, two apps were developed, one regarding parliamentary questions and the other covering the parliamentary dimension of the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The PQViz app provides an innovative visualization of the large amount of information contained in the PQ

documents, in such a way that users may more intuitively understand how Parliament holds the Executive to account by means of this effective scrutiny tool. Apart from providing access to the actual text of both questions and answers, through the use of this app, one may easily notice trends in certain constituency-related interactions between backbenchers and Ministers. Further developments are planned to facilitate the extrapolation of data and trends about specific topics raised by Members of Parliament in order to address both constituency and national issues. I would like to thank MITA's Chief Executive for the sponsorship provided, thanks to which this project came to fruition.

The app relating to the Maltese Presidency provided access to all proceedings that took place during the inter-parliamentary meetings which I shall shortly be referring to in more detail. Through this initiative the public and particularly the staff of national parliaments of the participating Member States could access all the relative documentation concerning the agenda items discussed in said meetings, all being topical issues that affect us all. Moreover, the app facilitates live and on demand video streaming facilities, thus providing an engaging and immediate access, both important features necessary for the strengthening of transparency in the work carried out by Parliament.

The Parliamentary Dimension of the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union

The Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which is now drawing to a conclusion, also meant a significant increase in work for the Maltese Parliament, which in the last five months organised six inter-parliamentary meetings in the context of what is referred to as parliamentary dimension of the Presidency of the Council. Although there is a tendency for these meetings not to be given as much prominence as the Council meetings themselves, some of them have a history which dates back many years and feature from one presidency to another. Since January the Maltese Parliament has welcomed to Malta around 750 delegates from national parliaments of the European Union, candidate countries, observer countries, as well as from the European Parliament. During these six meetings, themes which are considered important for the European Union were discussed, amongst them Malta's priorities for the Presidency of the Council, the European Union's foreign and defence policy, the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, migration, the EU maritime policy, poverty and social exclusion, and the economic opportunities for climate change. Various distinguished guests addressed these meetings.

In spite of having a small administration, the Maltese Parliament managed to successfully take on big challenges. I am proud to say that the Maltese Parliament has shown that it has the ability to achieve the highest European standards in all aspects relating to the

organisation of these meetings. In fact, we have honoured our obligations also following dissolution of Parliament, when on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday 28, 29 and 30 May 2017 I presided over the 57th COSAC meeting with the participation of around 250 delegates.

Inter-parliamentary activities

I must say that the Parliament's work was not limited to what took place here in Malta. A lot has been achieved on an inter-parliamentary level. Amongst them, is the recognition by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) of the work carried out by this Parliament and the Chair, so much so that the Chair was elected member of the executive of the Conference of Speakers of the Commonwealth, where the present Speaker shall hold this position until 2018. Furthermore, during the 35th annual conference of Small Branches of the CPA held in December 2016, the Chair was elected Chairperson of the CPA Small Branches, comprising 43 countries or small branches throughout the Commonwealth who have a population of half a million or less. This means that the work carried out on the inter-parliamentary front within CPA has been fruitful and has contributed to the prestige and honour of the Maltese Parliament abroad.

All this could be done and was possible because we worked together as one family. It was also possible because thanks to parliamentary autonomy, which, as I have already said, became a reality on 5 August 2016,

we were able to increase the staff so that now we have eight research analysts and a records officer who takes care of the Parliament's archive and library.

Further strengthening of the Institution

Is there more to be done? Yes, more remains to be done. Have we arrived at our destination? We have made progress but there are still goals we need to achieve. As I always insisted, in our new building we are still encountering problems because those who were in charge of the works did not do so adequately. In various parts of this building there is work which has not been carried out properly and therefore, one such task is to find a remedy for those works which have not been completed according to the original plans.

We also have to ensure commencement of work on the subterranean level of the building, in that area which housed the old railway station. This level is earmarked to provide space for Parliament's archives and the research library, both areas which shall also be accessible to the public. The area shall also accommodate a fully equipped committee room to cater for the needs of the parliamentary committees which today amount to 13. I have to say that, for the first time, funds have been allocated in the Parliament's budget so that in the coming months work on this part of the building may commence.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all the Parliamentary staff, as without their untiring commitment throughout the legislature that has just ended, all this progress would not have been possible. I have to say that this has been a great experience for me and it has been with pleasure that I have invested all my energy so that together we could offer a better Parliament; a Parliament with greater dignity and enjoying more respect. Today everyone is aware of what goes on in the House of Representatives and the work expected from the person elected to carry out the role of Speaker. Today all persons, be they IT literate or not, can follow how their Member of Parliament is representing them and bringing to the fore their concerns.

All of this makes us worthy of being of service in this highest Institution of our country; this is what should fill us with hope to achieve a level of service which addresses the ever increasing expectations, always in the interest of all the Maltese and Gozitan population.