



Press Release

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PRESS RELEASE BY THE OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

Speech by the Speaker of the House of Representatives Anġlu Farrugia on the occasion of the commemoration of Sette Giugno

Prime Minister
Leader of the Opposition
Presidents Emeriti
Speakers Emeriti
Honourable Members
Former Members
Excellencies
Distinguished guests

A year from now we will be celebrating the centenary of the Sette Giugno riots and it is thus fitting that on this occasion we go back in time to see where we departed from, observe what we went through in order to arrive where we are today, and look ahead to where we want to go.

After the end of World War I, our country began to face major problems in agriculture. Among other things, these problems resulted in a lack of basic food, which started to be felt by the population. Wheat prices, and consequently, the price of bread, soared, leading the people to rebel against British rule at the beginning of the twentieth century.

But this was not the only reason that led to the riots of 1919; the political developments of the time also contributed to the events we are commemorating today.

In the first meeting of the National Assembly, which was held on 25 February 1919, the faction led by Dr Enrico Mizzi submitted a resolution which stated that, like other countries, Malta should be granted rights in accordance with the Versailles Peace Conference. This meant that Malta should be granted independence from the British Empire. However, this resolution found strong opposition, especially from Sir Filippo Sceberras, who only envisaged a responsible government. An attempt was made to reach an agreement on a moderate resolution, which attempt was nonetheless rejected to avoid a split between the moderate and the extremist factions.

A few days before the Sette Giugno riots, the Secretary of State for the Colonies had informed Sir Filippo Sceberras that the new governor to be assigned to our country, Lord Plumer, was to carry out a study about the situation in Malta and report back to London about the possibility that Malta be granted a more befitting administration.

Attachments: photos

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What happened was that Dr Enrico Mizzi's followers stated that the imperial government was not to be trusted. These followers included university students who associated themselves with Enrico Mizzi and who, in the midst of all this political turmoil and other issues related to the University, had organised a huge protest on 16 May 1919. The scale of the protest was such that even members of the Police Corps and postal workers had threatened to strike.

Then there were the extremist followers of the politician Manwel Dimech, who had sparked radical thoughts and nationalist ideas among the unemployed. During World War I, Manwel Dimech had been exiled to Alexandria, in Egypt, and had been ordered to stay there until his death, as in fact happened; in spite of this, his ideas and motivation remained strong among the Maltese people. In fact, his followers were determined to see our country gain its independence and establish a secular democratic state with no interference from external forces. This was very much in consonance with the thoughts of Enrico Mizzi, and although the two came from different factions, in this they were of the same mind.

One should note that the effects of the Sette Giugno riots were many. The British realised that they could no longer take the Maltese for granted. So much so that constitutional progress was accelerated and on 20 November of that same year, the Maltese were promised their own Parliament as well as jurisdiction on internal affairs – what we refer to as self-government. However, two years had to go by before our country was granted a new Constitution on 30 April 1921. That same year, elections were held in October and the first Maltese Parliament was opened in November.

When we recall the riots and the reasons that led to them, we cannot fail to recall the manner in which these four Maltese men were killed. Whilst three of them – Manwel Attard, Ġuże Bajada and Wenzu Dyer – were killed by shots fired by British officers, Carmelo Abela likewise suffered a truly horrible death. There was a small gathering in front of the palace belonging to Colonel Francia, who owned one of the flour mills in Malta and at one point a number of people entered the Colonel's palace and started throwing out furniture and some silverware. The British soldiers who were guarding Francia's home did not open fire on them, but that evening, while some members of the British Army were cleaning the palace and its surroundings, Carmelo Abela, who was in the vicinity of the Francia's house, called out to his son. Two Army officers went to arrest him, and when he resisted them, as he was only there in search of his son, one of the marines ran towards him and stabbed him in the stomach with a bayonet. Subsequently, Carmelo Abela died nine days later, on 16 June 1919.

Whilst on the subject of the Sette Giugno victims, one might wish to note that according to some Maltese historians, it is not excluded that two other Maltese citizens, Francesco Darmanin and Toni Caruana, also lost their lives as a consequence of the events we are commemorating today.

I am saying this not only because one ought to reflect on the way the Maltese were treated when they defied the authorities to fight for their rights, but also to be able to appreciate the sufferings our forefathers had to bear in order for us to arrive where we are today.

I now wish to refer to a thesis written by Fr Tony Sciberras – a member of the Society of St Paul, a friend of mine, also from Mosta like me – with the title *The Incarnational Aspect of the Spirituality of Joseph De Piro*. In this thesis, Fr Sciberras explained the suffering of Monsignor Joseph De Piro, who was also a member of the National Assembly. He wrote that:

“In general those who participated in the three-day event were people who wanted to fight for their legitimate rights. This was the only reason why De Piro intervened in such a delicate situation. In spite of the fact that he even risked his own life, the Servant of God spent three days going here and there, at one time meeting some British officer, at another time the Commissioner of Police, at another time members of the Assembly, and at other times, even the mob. It seems befitting to stress all this by a statement published eight years later:

Fr Joseph De Piro, a priest whom nobody can accuse of any fault, is an example of integrity, devoted dedication and holiness. He is also a patriot, who was involved in heartbreaking events - the disorders and deaths on 7 June 1919. On that occasion he was in the midst of firing and close to the injured. De Piro is, for the Church and his native country, an exemplary priest and an ideal patriot. Everyone should love and admire him.”

Therefore, even during the riots, Monsignor De Piro felt that he had to join the crowd. So much so that, in his thesis, Fr Sciberras continued to explain that research he carried out in the manuscripts of the same De Piro shows that, and I quote:

“The shooting of four men by the British soldiers on 7 June 1919, made all Maltese join forces and forget their different opinions about various aspects of their lives. In fact on the 8th June 1919 there met at the “Giovine Malta”, a central building in Valletta, a group of volunteers who created a Committee which would gather money for the families of the victims who died or were wounded the day before. In the fourth meeting of this Committee, Sir Filippo Sciberras was chosen as honorary president and Dr Enrico Mizzi as secretary. De Piro was one of the clerics to join them. He was made the cashier of this Committee.”

This committee met 52 times, the last time being in January 1926. In the Minutes of the meetings of this committee one can find the information that was gathered by the members and also the list of people who were helped, and the amount of money given to each. I am saying this to show that history teaches us that when there is unity, and when there is collegiality, the national interest and the common good come out stronger; as indeed happened after the events of Sette Giugno.

During last year’s speech I remarked upon the need for Parliament to serve as a place where one can debate freely in the national interest. I also said that each Member is elected by means of a democratic process and therefore should be of example to the people he represents. In fact, I had also referred to the citizen’s role in Parliament’s work and mentioned, as I had done on previous occasions, that parliamentary privilege should not be abused. In this regard I had also said that the time had come to start looking at models that address this issue and that in the exercise that was underway to revise the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives, we had to introduce measures that give greater dignity to Parliament, including in the way Members address the House. In fact I had said that:

“One further amendment 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 who abuse their parliamentary privileges.”

I am saying this to emphasise that everyone must be responsible for their actions and it cannot be that year after year we return to this commemoration where we recall a truly terrible episode in the history of our country – and, God willing, next year there will be the centenary of these riots – and remain without an established procedure which ensures that anyone guilty of abuse is held responsible for his actions. The Member of Parliament is a representative of the people and no matter who he is, and no matter which side of the House he sits on, he should always bear the responsibility to speak honestly and in the best interest of the country. No Member should abuse of this right. Therefore, I believe that it is high time that the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives be revised in order to provide a remedy for those citizens who feel aggrieved by the abuse of parliamentary privilege.

Whilst on the subject of the Standing Orders, I would also like to refer to an issue that arose when the Public Accounts Committee was discussing the Auditor General’s report *Analysis of the Effectiveness of Enemalta Corporation Fuel Procurement*, in the previous Legislature. Some of our courts of law, including the Constitutional Court, have remarked that the guidelines for witnesses appearing before the Public Accounts Committee, which guidelines were drafted and subsequently approved by both sides in the House Business Committee in 2011, should not apply with regard to persons summoned as witnesses before the Public Accounts Committee. This despite the fact that the right to silence in the guidelines is guaranteed by Article 19, which states that a witness has the right not to answer any question that might incriminate him. On this issue the Constitutional Court contended that, apart from not answering incriminating questions, a person who is asked to testify before the Committee has an absolute right to remain silent if this person is going through criminal proceedings. I believe I should not comment further at this stage in view of pending appela proceedings before said Court.

In this regard, I feel that the time has come for the Standing Orders of the House to be revised because it is not acceptable that, when conducting parliamentary scrutiny on the correct use of public funds, the Public Accounts Committee – a very important committee – is hindered and prejudiced by court proceedings and court judgements delivered after the legislature during which the case in question had arisen had come to an end. Apart from the revision of the Standing Orders and the respective guidelines, to ensure that these reflect the outcome of the appeal proceedings, we should also consider the possibility of amending the Code of Organisation and Civil Procedure so that testimony given before a parliamentary committee cannot be considered as evidence before a tribunal or a court of justice.

What is being proposed reflects, to a certain extent, the procedures and practices of the UK House of Commons where witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege, the basis of which is to be found in the Bill of Rights of 1689, which privilege is considered to be a fundamental principle in a parliamentary democracy. In practice, this means that, like Members of Parliament, witnesses that appear before parliamentary committees are exempt from both civil and criminal legal action with

regard to the testimony they give. Here, I would also like to say that in the UK Parliament there exists a degree of reciprocity in the form of the *sub judice* rule which limits how much a Member or a witness can refer to matters that are being treated in the law courts.

I would also like to speak about the effects of administrative autonomy on parliamentary work ever since this entered into effect in January 2017. A few weeks ago, I was invited to address, as one of the keynote speakers, the Commonwealth People's Forum that was organised within the framework of the activities connected to the CHOGM meeting that was held in London at the end of April.

In my address about the separation of powers, I spoke about the journey of the Maltese Parliament towards administrative autonomy, also in the context of the Commonwealth Latimer House Principles. I emphasised that for a Parliament to be truly free, its administration must be autonomous; culminating when Parliament is absolutely independent from the Executive in terms of financial allocation, which is the situation that the Maltese Parliament currently enjoys. I am pleased to say that this argument was also included in the declaration of this Forum.

After only a few weeks from the third anniversary of Parliament's move to the new building, I must not fail to refer to the challenges encountered following said relocation, especially with regard to the parliamentary archives we are legally bound to keep in accordance with the provisions of the Standing Orders of the House. This apart from the lack of office space for the current parliamentary staff complement as well as those required by the Parliamentary Service in order to continue strengthening the services offered to meet the expectations of both the Members of Parliament and the public. Now that we enjoy administrative autonomy, this responsibility falls squarely on the Parliamentary Service.

As you know, during these last years a number of parliamentary standing committees have been set up, including the Committee on Petitions, the Committee on Public Appointments, as well as the Adjunct Committee for the Consideration of Bills, that have increased the responsibilities of the Parliamentary Service. We expect this demand to continue to grow when the Committee on Standards in Public Life is appointed.

As I had already announced exactly a year ago in my speech, and also as outlined in the financial plan of the Parliamentary Service for the current year, which plan was passed by the House Business Committee and approved unanimously by the House, the Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation (GHRC) was identified to assist us in the development of the Parliament building's underground level, that is, the site that decades ago served as one of our country's railway stations. The relative development permit was issued by the Planning Authority just last week. I should add that the design of the structure was carried out in full respect of Malta's history and heritage, and in this regard meetings with the respective authorities were held in order to ascertain that this historical site would be fully protected from any structural damage.

The plans include a fourth committee room in the said area which will be equipped with the necessary technology like all the other committee rooms, allowing the proceedings to be transcribed and broadcast visually. This is being done to maintain the high level of transparency that we have reached since Parliament moved into the new building.

One of the main features in the design refers to the Parliamentary archives, which area is to be equipped with security and climate control facilities to limit any form of deterioration. Here, I am not only referring to the printed documents, but also to audio visual media of past parliamentary sessions.

I can tell you that during the year we receive a considerable number of enquiries, both from university students, and historians who regularly use our Parliamentary archives for research purposes. Therefore, the project will also include a reference library that will not only be available to Members of Parliament and Parliamentary employees, but also to the public.

Last but not least, this project will enable us to increase the space where Parliament's research staff and librarians can carry out their duties to assist the Members to perform their parliamentary mandate, both locally and abroad when they participate in inter-parliamentary meetings. This step will also enable us to address an increase in the Parliamentary Service's workload, primarily due to the added responsibilities arising from the new committees mentioned earlier.

I hope that work on this project will soon gain momentum so that it is completed in the shortest possible time. I am confident that the public will be the one to benefit most from this project which is intended to increase and improve access to the work carried out in this highest institution of the country.

I also want to refer to the childcare centre project which is being undertaken together with the Ministry for Education and Employment, the Ministry for European Affairs and Equality, and the Ministry for Health; the plans are at an advanced state awaiting a Planning Authority permit, so that this service is made available in the vicinity of the Parliament building. A recent survey carried out amongst Parliamentary Members and staff has indicated that there is a demand for this facility. Efforts are underway to find a viable alternative until this project is completed and permits are duly issued.

As you can appreciate, a Parliament that aims to remain relevant in this day and age, has to adopt a proactive approach in order to efficiently address the needs and expectations of Members of Parliament and the public. Failing to do so means that we would not be fulfilling our functions in the best way possible.

Bearing witness to the fact that our Parliament, despite its small size, compares well with far larger parliaments is that in 2016 the Maltese Parliament was ranked second amongst those of the 28 Member States of the European Union that made use of the power conferred on them by the Lisbon Treaty to express concern about those proposals of the European Commission that did not comply with the principle of subsidiarity.

I hope that today's opportunity serves to inform the citizens, as is their right, about what is being done in the highest institution of the country, and also for one to reflect on the state of parliamentary democracy in our country, which should always be kept on the highest pedestal, as is fitting.

Thank you.