

PARTY POLITICS IN A
FORTRESS COLONY:
The Maltese Experience

MALTESE SOCIAL STUDIES

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Henry Frendo

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To Margaret

A PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When in December 1989 presidents Bush and Gorbachev formally put paid to the Cold War at their Malta meeting, television journalists from ABC in New York to RAI in Rome tried to put the unfolding event into an historical and geopolitical perspective. Malta was mostly remembered for its epic defence during World War Two when still a British colony . . . and when the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R had last fought on the same side. "What is Malta?", I was asked persistently; "*cosa e' Malta?*"

In May 1990 the rousing welcome given to the Polish Pope, on the first ever papal visit to 'the island of St. Paul', played on socio-cultural strains characteristic of these islands and their people. When in the following October Malta hosted President Richard von Weizsäcker on his first overseas state visit after German reunification, more searching questions of this nature came up. In his Honoris Causa degree address in Valletta, Weizsäcker himself sought to tackle some of them: he referred to Malta at the time of the Knights of St. John – before the Bonapartist takeover – as a multilingual and multicultural cradle of today's Europe, and to its central Mediterranean role.

Few scholarly works devoted to a comprehensive understanding of Malta, her people, culture and history have been written; less are readily available through well-connected publishers in the world today. Much writing about Malta has been either very localised, not distributed professionally overseas, or else intended mainly for a mass circulation sur place among the hundreds of thousands of tourists from Britain, Germany, Italy and France, who sojourn there annually mostly for sun and sea.

The span covered here reaches from the 1870s – the time of the Suez Canal's opening and the Italian and German unifications – to the crystallization of 'pro-Italian' and 'pro-English' postures in the mid-1920s – when the rise of Italian fascism was beginning to influence colonial politics. Many of the burning issues and concerns examined – such as the gripping roles of languages, of their respective utilities and affinities – continue to re-emerge and to linger on in different shades and forms to this very day. The relationship between language, nationality and politics is a thread constantly woven into this history's fabric. In examining how and why parties form and evolve, the study uncovers the origins of social stratification and polarisation in a British colony. A European colony in the British Empire – one centrally situated and strategically very important, with excellent natural harbours as well as an impressive 'pre-colonial' past, 58 miles to the south of Sicily.

Ironically, by the time the book came out in 1979 – a year marking the termination of a British military presence in Malta – its author had joined the Maltese emigration, as several scholars from the then University of Malta had felt constrained to do at the time because of the political situation. Apart from unprecedented ‘Socialist’ gangsterism even on the campus, the Faculties of Arts and of Sciences were abolished and their respective Deans landed one in Dublin and the other in Milan. I first saw the book in Geneva where I went to work for the UN Refugee Commission. Ten years later, when the then University was ‘refounded’, many of those academics repatriated, the University gates fully reopened and student numbers increased. By then, however, this book had both gone out of print and acquired a renewed significance.

In July 1990 Malta – a member of the Council of Europe since 1964, and of the Commonwealth since independence from Britain in 1964 – applied for full membership of the EEC. Fairly consensually, the inslanders now see their future role internationally as a small but viable independent and democratic European state in the central Mediterranean acting as a meeting point between north and south, and indeed a potential interlocutor also between west and east. As insularity and isolation decrease, the self-identity question ‘what is Malta?’ needs to be all the more seriously and meaningfully addressed culturally, historically and politically, just as it needs and deserves to be more widely recognised and appreciated.

Hence my acceptance of the publisher’s offer to have this work reissued, with some slight revisions and a brief update in the concluding chapter. Its generally acknowledged seminal findings and pioneering insights already assume different nuances in the light of our changing perceptions of the old Empire as well as of the new Europe.

Henry Frendo

FOREWORD

A pleasure to read as historical narrative, Dr. Frendo's study of the origins of party rivalry in Malta is also instructive as an inquiry into political conflict within the former British Empire. The political scientist in him is never far from the historian. How useful that is to other scholars may be seen from the themes marked out in his excellent book. They are embedded in the detailed story of these lovely Mediterranean islands, for it is as true of the Maltese, as Rousseau observed generally of mankind, that though men and women are the victims of their history, they remain its authors as well. At the close of the nineteenth century, and for the first two decades of the present century, the Maltese slowly acquired control of their political life. They began to organize. They did so under very difficult circumstances, as Dr. Frendo makes abundantly clear, but they succeeded remarkably well in joining together under rival banners. I can bring nothing to his narrative, except admiration; and very little to his analysis that is not implicit in the arguments used to illustrate the history. Something, however, might usefully be said of the wider significance, beyond his own country, of the story he tells.

The islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino have been built and fought over for almost as long as mankind. The greater part of their history has been one of migration, wars, blockades, conquest and resistance under an astonishing variety of rulers. First Carthage, then Rome. When the Roman Empire divided, Malta fell to Byzantium; when the eastern empire collapsed, Arab control replaced that of the Greeks. Then came the Normans and the Sicilian kingdoms, until 1530 when the Hapsburg Emperor Charles V gave the islands to the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, homeless since its eviction from Rhodes by the Turks in 1523; and for about 250 years the Knights of St. John had their headquarters in the fortified city of Valletta. In 1798, however, the last Grand Master – the German, Ferdinand Hompesch – capitulated to the French under Napoleon. A few years later, Malta came under British rule and was made a Crown Colony in 1814, not by conquest but by cession. It was also a Fortress Colony, equidistant between Gibraltar and Alexandria: in Churchill's phrase, 'one of the master keys of the British Empire', and therein lay its predicament.

The Maltese prospered, and held an affectionate place in British eyes, but still they were subordinate. Perhaps the degree of dependence was not felt to be particularly intense during the nineteenth century. The Empire offered a large canopy of order and justice. Under the familiar rule of the British Crown, belief in national independence as a virtue was tempered by knowledge of the advantages of imperial protection. The result was those very odd phenomena, the self-governing colonies of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Newfoundland and Canada – an evolution away from empire in the direction of what was later to be called decolonization. The whole empire, with exceptions, was sometimes said to be moving by very slow degrees in that direction. Never a steady state, the untidy array of an empire of dependent territories, protectorates, self-governing colonies, protected states, a condominium or two, plus local kings under British suzerainty, was constantly altering its patterns of domination and dissent until – in our own time – the critical element of local fusion and imperial fission has almost put an end to Commonwealth and Empire alike. The account given by Dr. Frenzo is a particular and valuable addition to our knowledge of that changing pattern, not least because Malta was always said to be an exception to the general drift towards local autonomy. Its defensive role under a strict diarchy of local and imperial interests was thought to ensure its permanence as a fixed imperial base: as late as 1958, independence was ruled out of consideration by Lennox Boyd because of its vulnerability and strategic importance; not until 1963 did Duncan Sandys impel Malta towards independence. In effect, however, within the fortress, arguments over forms of autonomy at some point between total dependence and complete independence were always at the very centre of local politics at least as far back as Dr. Frenzo's starting point in the 1880s.

One of the interesting features of Dr. Frenzo's book, therefore, is its examination of constitutional change and its recognition that there was no final turning point in the confused pattern of decolonization until the very end. It is sometimes said to be self-evident, particularly among those for whom history is always a unilinear process, that this or that particular set of events marked the decisive watershed of change from which there was no going back by the United Kingdom government on the transfer of power to colonial leaders. Numerous occasions have been put forward for the prize: the first world war, the second world war, the loss of India, the failure at Suez or the long withdrawal east of Suez after the fall of Singapore, the growth of the European Communities or, more particularly, the personal intervention of Attlee and Creech Jones or Macmillan, Butler and Macleod. Yet the very variety of choice weakens the case. Each of these alleged turning points was certainly important. But the single case of Malta fits uneasily into such general assumptions. There was no simple forward progression from dependence into independence. Between 1880 and 1964, the islands endured a series of advances and retreats. There was little of the controlled

apprenticeship in self-government, or of the nationalist revolt against imperialism, much more a constitutional game of snakes and ladders: representative government in 1887, its abolition in 1903, qualified self-government in 1921, back to Crown rule in 1933–6 until modified in 1939, internal self-government in 1947 after Malta's heroic role in the war, Mintoff's proposals of integration with Britain in 1956, the suspension of the constitution in 1958, a self-governing state in 1962, and independence under a nationalist government on 21 September, 1964, a day which the present ruling Labour Party declines to celebrate. Where was the turning point of no return? The Malta story is one of a succession of compromise solutions to particular crises, and a groping about for adjustment between local demands and colonial concessions, of a kind very familiar to students of the complexities of British rule overseas.

There are many other related issues in Dr. Frendo's study. That of identity, for example, which troubles far more states than Malta but which for a long time posed a problem of particular intensity there. One of the fascinating themes explored in the book is that of national character. The Maltese have squeezed through to independence so to speak between Britain and Italy, not simply as a small state between more powerful states, but between the tug and pull of opposed cultures and the rivalry of Anglicised and Italianate interests. Dr. Frendo shows how complicated that process of growth was amidst church and state, London and Rome, Papacy and Crown, urban and rural classes. He provides ample evidence, too, for placing at the centre of that success the retention of the Maltese language which was once despised by pro-British and pro-Italians alike until the colonial government paradoxically gave it support to oppose the influence of Mussolini's Italy: 'elevating Maltese from the kitchen to the courts' and (in Sir Keith Hancock's phrase) issuing school books 'of Maltese history, told in the Maltese language, with the Union Jack stamped on the cover'.

Whether that sense of linguistic identity, reinforced today by a deeper sense of what is meant by 'being Maltese', will alter the future pattern of party conflict remains very much to be seen. It is surely allied to the questions raised by Dr. Frendo in relation to his central theme – parties. Why *two* parties? The division (blurred from time to time at the edges by additional groups) runs back to the 1880s and beyond. Is it *natural*? That surely depends on the extent to which men and women are given freedom to act naturally. Was it once a reflection of colonial collaboration *versus* colonial dissent, or (more subtly) of constitutional arrangements? Or is it the effect (more simply) of ins and outs – government and opposition – under rival leaders? As a small two-party state, Malta ought to be of close interest to those who survey the wreckage in the world of constitutional government and its replacement by single-party regimes or military junta. Parties (as the author notes) are not artefacts. They form, grow, decline and disappear as

articulated interests, but they also need the free air of constitutional government to compete against each other. Political liberty among the Maltese took root during the long period surveyed by Dr. Frendo, amidst all the difficulties of a colonial government. Very likely it is not so firmly planted as to be incapable of destruction – of how many countries can that be said with assurance today? – yet it has had a fairly long run, and may yet survive even the severity of independence.

Will it also survive the shock of leadership? Small islands, great men – and not altogether likeable! But it is perhaps always probable, when powerful leaders arise in small city or island communities, whether in Malta or the Caribbean or Singapore or Cyprus, that they will dominate local politics directly and personally. A continuing theme through Dr. Frendo's chapters is the remarkable influence of strong individuals. I should like to think that he may be persuaded one day to undertake a biography of the Stricklands (father and daughter) or of the Mizzis (father and son), of Panzavecchia or, nearer to our own time, of Boffa or Michael Gonzi. What a marvellous portrait gallery is waiting to be presented! For the present, however, we have Dr. Frendo's graphic account of early Maltese parties, and we ought certainly to be grateful for that.

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Dennis Austin

Chapter I

MALTA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: FORTRESS, COLONY OR NATION?

What makes a nation, says Renan, is not race, language, geography or religion, but 'the possession in common of a legacy of memories' and 'the desire to live together, the will to put to good use the heritage that has been received undivided'. Nationality, whether or not it coincides with state boundaries, is a spontaneous disposition, more emotional than rational but irresistible and unique: 'une nation est un ame, un principe spirituel'.¹ What people think about themselves is often more important than where their ancestors may have come from or even the language they happen to speak. In practice, community of sentiment may be strongly influenced by linguistic, religious and other agents of cultural transmission. 'La langue invite à se réunir; elle n'y force pas'.²

Was Malta in the nineteenth century a nation?

As a British possession, and a fortress, Malta was clearly not a nation-state in the sense of a political entity wherein those who govern share the outlook and aspirations of the governed; but socially Malta had the characteristics required for nationhood. Isolation and homogeneity, and a common historical experience, aided the feeling of being Maltese; the islands were not, like other British colonies, divided by race, religion, tribe or culture.³ The British occupation indeed – without which Malta might have become one more fragment of a united Italy – acted as a stimulus for the Maltese to come to terms with themselves, and set them on the path leading ultimately to full and separate nationhood: they matured in the course of outlining their rights and expectations as a people.

The Maltese had, before the nineteenth century, a unity of language – they spoke Maltese – and of religion – they were Roman Catholics: the islands were 'a melting-pot where an original race and language were formed'.⁴ The Maltese 'type is South European', the 1911 royal commission reported,

but the people are fairer in colour, in the towns at any rate, and have a better appearance than South Italians and Sicilians. They are a strong, hardy race, and have the reputation of being temperate, thrifty, and industrious. They are clever and adaptable; generally speaking, however, they appear to lack confidence in themselves and each other, and have little power of co-operation. They are much attached to their native islands, and seldom migrate to distant countries.⁵

The ideas of Maltese about themselves were much influenced by the Order of St. John (1530–1798); the Great Siege of 1565 symbolizes their legend: the Knights and the Maltese, under Grand Master La Valette, repelled Suleiman the Magnificent's invading force. This event came to be seen not only as a defeat of the Muslims by the Catholics, but also as a European victory over the Ottoman empire, and even, in the nineteenth century, as a symbol of Maltese fortitude in the face of a foreign enemy.⁶

Sicilian Italian was the language used for all official purposes in medieval times;⁷ but the Order consolidated Malta's Catholic European identity and considerably latinized the culture of the people. Their building of fortifications, towns (including Valletta), palaces, hospitals, aqueducts, naval facilities provided the locals with wide-ranging employment; Malta coined her own money, had a printing press and university, and standards of conduct and modes of thinking were established with which at least the educated part of the native population could associate themselves.⁸

By the nineteenth century Malta had in appearance a thoroughly Italianate culture. Practically everybody, educated or not, spoke Maltese in daily life, and there were also a few prints and publications in Maltese.⁹ Maltese, however, had not been made an official language, and had neither a standard orthography nor a literature. For a Maltese to be educated and for him to know Italian was one and the same thing: for countless generations Italian had been the language of town and gown, of court and cloister.¹⁰

There was a numerous middle class: in the 1870s the 141,775 inhabitants were mostly artificers and labourers or employed in agriculture, but nearly 10,000 were engaged in commerce, 2,290 belonged to the professions, and 1,210 to the clergy; of the 2,133 listed as nobles and landowners, the *titolati* (those entitled to precedence as nobles) were relatively few.¹¹ In 1877 the 'working' or 'poorer' classes were estimated at 112,360, about three-fourths of the population, the remaining one-fourth (36,910) being the 'non-manual' classes.¹²

The parochial structure was intact: religion was at the heart of Maltese life just as the church was at the centre of the village, and formed part of the strong social nexus by means of which the common people looked up deferentially to the 'respectable' members of the community. The parish priest was at hand with his advice not just in his capacity as clergyman but also on a personal level. Similarly, the notary, lawyer, architect or doctor was close by – you went to his office, he came to your house – and such people would be president of the local band club or secretary of the religious confraternity. Practically everybody went to church – people therefore met in church on feast days if not daily. 'The principal recreations of the Maltese have, in general, some connection with their religious ceremonies', observed G. P. Badger in 1838; the numerous processions afforded the stranger many opportunities of seeing 'every rank and class of the people, in their best attire, congregated together in crowds' witnessing such scenes.¹³

Malta was a closely-knit community partly because the small archipelago (122 square miles in all) could not but give its inhabitants a feeling of being Maltese (*Maltin*) besides being *Sengleani* (from Senglea city), *Żebbugin* (from Żebbuġ village), *Furjanizi* (from Floriana suburb), etc. Peasants were never far off from the village square; farmers, petty vendors, middlemen travelled by horse-cart from the country to the city to sell their produce or wares; the employees at the dockyard were mostly recruited from the surrounding cities. Before the railway opened in 1883 – Maltese called it *il-vapur tal-art* (the land steamer) – a journey by horse carriage from the former capital Notabile into Valletta took not more than three hours.¹⁴ ‘As a rule’, explained Dr. Alfredo Mattei,

the men in the casals get up at four in the morning, go to hear the mass of the *Parroco* and after that they go to Valletta or anywhere else where their work may happen to call them and spend the whole day laboriously at work. Then at the *Ave Maria*, at 6 p.m., the poor labourer . . . rejoins his family, says his prayers, his *Rosario*, and goes to bed . . . even at Città Vecchia where you have a few learned gentlemen and a few *Canonici* and *Abatini*, even they get up very early and the few who study and keep late hours prefer candles to olive oil; to save their eyes, they don’t even use petroleum. . . .¹⁵

The mobilization of political opinion within a closely inter-connected area of such small dimensions, where gossip and rumour were necessarily rife, was a relatively easy task. Newspapers in Italian and Maltese were ‘taken to the cafés where the people congregate and read them’.¹⁶ ‘A stranger reading the partisan newspapers’, noted a visitor in 1927, ‘is liable to be rather staggered at the strength of feeling which seems to exist over politics’.¹⁷

In 1798, the year when Napoleon expelled the Order from Malta, the Maltese – clergy, peasants, and gentry – rose up in arms against the French garrison.¹⁸ With the permission of the King of the Two Sicilies whom they still regarded as their lawful sovereign, Maltese leaders were prepared to exchange their newly won freedom for the ‘protection’ of the British Crown.¹⁹ As time passed, new conceptions of duty arose; the notion of *patria* changed from a predominantly religious to a more secular, political outlook.

The British allowed the Maltese the free practice of their religion but denied them, at first, any political rights: critics were persecuted.²⁰ Thus, although Malta was ceded, not conquered by, Britain, the Maltese came to see little difference between cession and conquest considering the way they were treated;²¹ it was not until half-a-century after the occupation that the elective principle was introduced.²² This greatly disappointed the elected leaders of the national *Congresso*, who had taken charge of the anti-French insurrection, and now expected to lay down the rules. According to their charter of 1802, the King would have ‘no right’ to cede Malta to any other power: should he withdraw his protection, sovereign rights would devolve upon the Maltese; the *Congresso*, representing all the cities, towns and villages, expected a *Consiglio Popolare* to administer the con-

stitution that would be agreed upon, particularly with regard to legislation and taxation, subject to the King's assent. Finally, the King was to protect the religion of the country, allowing religious freedom to individuals, and to ensure the rule of law, the rights of life and property.²³ The royal commissioners of 1812, however, felt 'persuaded of the mischievous effects that would result from entrusting any portion of political power to a people so singularly unfitted to enjoy it'.²⁴

'Was it for this', protested the nobles, 'that we took up arms and made our brave stand against the tyranny of France?'²⁵ 'The Maltese gave themselves up spontaneously to the English and in return freedom was promised to them', complained Giorgio Mitrovich (1794-1885), once described as 'the Maltese O'Connell',²⁶ who at the head of a *Comitato Generale Maltese* campaigned successfully for a free press (granted in 1839) and the franchise (granted in 1849):

Have they not on all occasions shown their sympathy and attachment to Great Britain, particularly at the time of the Peace of Amiens, when they had shown a firm determination of never separating themselves from her?²⁷

Apart from newspapers and elections, public opinion was influenced throughout the Italian *Risorgimento* by the activities of exiles who found refuge in Malta (among them Francesco Crispi, who later became prime minister);²⁸ Mazzinian pamphlets were printed in Malta for distribution abroad;²⁹ the bishop warned of 'the incalculable damage' which the presence of Italian nationalists was causing 'in this small island whose language they speak':³⁰ when Garibaldi visited Malta he was both cheered and jeered.³¹

Legalistic attitudes and mercantile interests became more pronounced, especially through the medium of the Council of Government under the Crown Colony constitution of 1849. A noteworthy, transient polarization among the eight elected members took place in the early sixties: four lawyers (Ruggero Sciortino, F. M. Torreggiani, Filippo Pullicino and Pasquale Mifsud) opposed the governor; the other four, led by the two richest men in Malta Vincenzo Bugeja and Emmanuele Scicluna, supported him.³²

There was always 'a small revolutionary party' observed Sir George Bowyer, but 'they only served to bring into more prominent relief the feelings of the majority of the population'.³³

The refusal to delegate power to the Maltese stemmed mainly from Britain's view of Malta as a fortress, not as an ordinary colony. Small, rather crowded, lacking mineral wealth of any kind, and water, with much of the land barren, 'plain, bare, naked Malta', said Charles James Fox in 1803, should have been placed 'in the hands of the Emperor of Russia';³⁴ but the violation of the Treaty of Amiens was rendered necessary, as Canning noted, by the retention of Malta 'not for its own intrinsic value and importance only', but in view of imperial interests in Egypt, and in

India, and as 'that point upon which the honour of this country was committed'.³⁵ Napoleon's advisers were in no doubt as to Britain's intentions: 'On se demande, Malte vaut-il la guerre?'³⁶ The reason why, among other things, Malta was governed by a succession of generals who were at the same time commanders-in-chief of the armed forces, was that, as for example James Lowther told the Commons, Malta was 'not only a colony of some importance' but 'also an important fortress'.³⁷ 'Did not the Duke of Wellington say', wrote Joe Chamberlain, 'that you might as well give a constitution to a man-of-war as give it to Malta?'³⁸ 'There is no doubt whatever', he said, 'that there is a great deal of common sense in that remark, as there was, in fact, in all the remarks of the great Duke'.³⁹ The use of the term 'fortress' with regard to Malta was, as in Aden after 1880, 'a statement of policy'.⁴⁰

The conflict between civil rights and military needs was at the heart of Maltese politics: every time the Maltese petitioners invoked the 'Melitensium Amor' argument – the idea that Malta had been freely ceded to Britain by the Maltese – the British reiterated the fortress formula, the strategic value of Malta made it unlikely that it could be treated like an ordinary colony. Mistrust was fomented on both sides because of this preoccupation; misgovernment was inevitable because generals usually had little knowledge of representative institutions and civil affairs: the head of government was often not the man in charge of running the country. Sir Alexander Ball's prophetic advice to the secretary for war as early as 1801 went by unheeded:

The inhabitants conceive their liberty insecure until the military and civil power be divided. They observe that a Military Governor cannot spare sufficient time from his garrison occupations to direct the Civil Administration of the Island without giving too much power to secretaries, who seek their own interest and not the happiness of the people . . . I speak from a thorough knowledge of the character and sentiments of the inhabitants, and I now write under the fullest conviction of the necessity of this being attended to, otherwise we shall lose the affection and attachment of these brave Islanders and risk serious consequences.⁴¹

To Maltese politicians imperialism usually meant thinking of Britain in Malta rather than of Malta, treating the Maltese not as a people but as the native inhabitants of the fortress. As Britain did not care for local interests, Dr. Fortunato Mizzi (1844–1905) once declared, he did not care for imperial interests.⁴² British rule in Malta, said Sigismondo Savona (1837–1908), was 'government on garrison principles'.⁴⁵ 'We are not sheep! We are not soldiers!' shouted F. S. De Cesare (1836–1905) at the governor.⁴⁴ These three journalists and politicians were rivals, but, at heart, they all tended to subscribe to a patriotic consensus – that *cumulus* of shared experiences and instinctive attachments, embodying common grievances and expressing similar expectations, particularly the desire, indeed the belief, that a Maltese should not be treated or considered as if he were the Englishman's inferior. To assert publicly that Malta belonged

to the Maltese, as Dr. Zaccaria Roncali did in 1885, could be tantamount to sedition;⁴⁵ but clearly this idea was, in one way or another, the overriding criterion, the message, the impulse, and most of all the direction of Maltese nationalism.

As Britain was a great industrial and naval power, the Maltese could benefit materially from the application of British technology and financial resources, as well as from the indirect export of capital through the presence of thousands of servicemen; but in all this Malta generally played the role of a pawn.

Subjected to strategic priorities, Maltese constitutional history lacked an evolutionary development: Malta's 'special' position in the empire was eloquently summed up in 1931 in the observation that it was almost possible 'to plot a graph' of constitutions 'modelled alternately on the principle of benevolent autocracy and that of representative government'.⁴⁶

The turning-point in Maltese political history came at the time of the opening of the Suez canal, the unifications of Italy and Germany, and the subsequent expansionist or precautionary policies in the big power rivalry over the Mediterranean and elsewhere. In response to a new calling after 1870, there emerged a different breed of men destined to persevere in national politics and to stamp their marks on the origin and formation of Maltese political parties: Salvatore Cachia Zammit (1831–1918), first returned to the Council in 1870; Sigismondo Savona (1875); Fortunato Mizzi (1880).

As 'the most advanced post on the European part of the road to India' Malta's value since the Crimean war had grown enormously, wrote the director of navy contracts at the Admiralty, F. W. Rowsell: nowhere else along the route could ships be coaled 'so well, so quickly, or so cheaply as at Malta'. Apart from the increased competition offered to Malta by Italian ports (Syracuse, Messina, Naples),⁴⁷ there was the problem of 'protectionist' food tariffs in Malta, which was seen as a hindrance to the conclusion of an Anglo-Italian commercial treaty. From an Italian viewpoint, said the Cobdenite free trader Bayley Potter on his return from talks in Rome, 'the Maltese tariff appeared altogether inconsistent with English professions of free trade principles'.⁴⁸ Italy, which imposed a 'grist tax' for revenue purposes, was at this stage negotiating a new commercial treaty with France. 'When we talk to Italian statesmen of the wisdom of simplifying tariffs and developing free trade', protested *The Times*, 'they are often tempted to reply that our principles are excellent, but that we show by our practice that we recognize the necessity of legislating with regard to local circumstances, and they end by triumphantly asking how we defend import duties on corn and cattle into Malta':

We are certainly liable to suffer in the negotiations now pending through our negligence in the past, and trade between England and Italy may remain hampered because we have not been vigilant to establish Free Trade in Malta.⁴⁹

Gradually the nature of colonial government changed from a relatively stable, easy-going routine into a businesslike, intrusive, more authoritarian rule. A hint in this direction was the Duke of Buckingham's circular despatch of 1868 whereby official members of legislative councils were reminded that they should vote on 'government questions' at the governor's discretion: when, on Buckingham's instructions, an increase in the Malta auditor general's salary was passed by the official vote, five elected members resigned and were re-elected; a popular petition to the House of Commons in 1869 reiterated earlier claims for a *Consiglio Popolare*, condemned the official members' powers and requested a civil governor.⁵⁰ In 1875 Lord Carnarvon, the colonial minister said to be 'specially interested' in Malta,⁵¹ tightened Buckingham's advice and obliterated Lord Cardwell's principle of 1864 to the effect that great consideration should be shown to the opinions of the Maltese elected members and that

above all no vote of money should be passed against the majority of the elected members, except under very special circumstances in which the public interests or credit were at stake. . . .⁵²

By means of Carnarvon's rule institutionalizing the use of the official majority, the vote for an increase in the chief secretary's salary was passed in 1876, all the elected members voting against, with the majority of one, 'that one being actually the vote of the chief secretary himself'.⁵³

The most serious clash between government and opposition came in 1879 when government passed a vote of several thousand pounds in connection with a drainage scheme for the three harbour cities of Senglea, Vittoriosa and Cospicua, against the unanimous objections of the elected members, again by the official majority of one vote; after the controversial scheme had already been initiated without the Council's approval, the Council was asked to approve the expense.⁵⁴ The representatives were not averse to the introduction of sanitary reforms but they feared that the projected water-carriage system would be inefficient and injurious to health because existing conduits were not regular drains but mere prolonged cesspools cut in the rock; they also envisaged that, on account of the scarcity of water for the population's domestic requirements, the water-carriage system was impracticable as there would not be a sufficiency of water for use as a carrier in the removal of sewage, arguing that the problems of drainage and water supply went together, the former could not be tackled without providing first for an ample supply of water.⁵⁵ But, wrote the colonial minister, the drainage question was one of vital importance 'not only to the local community but to the health of the Imperial forces'; Her Majesty's Government could 'in no case' allow the scheme to be abandoned on the ground that the elected members were unable to appreciate its necessity.⁵⁶

The drainage question led to the holding of several political meetings

resulting in the formation of a rather popularly backed Reform Committee under the presidency of Dr. Pasquale Mifsud: this committee was meant to work for a reform of the constitution. Signatures for a petition to London were collected; on 2 July 1879 a 'meeting monstre' was called to reaffirm Cardwell's principle by supporting the latest petition.⁵⁷ This meeting, at which Cachia Zammit and Savona, among others, spoke, was successfully organized in Valletta's main suburb, Floriana, by the Reform Committee; it was the first political public meeting to be so organized.⁵⁸

Within the short space of two years, 1877–1878, three commissioners were appointed to investigate practically every aspect of life in the colony; it was forty years since there had last been a royal commission in Malta.⁵⁹

F. W. Rowsell, the first commissioner to be appointed, was an Admiralty lawyer, employed as director of contracts; he was also a member of the Cobden and Devonshire clubs,⁶⁰ and he was chiefly concerned with abolishing or modifying 'protectionist' duties.⁶¹ Rowsell suggested, ideally, the abolition of Malta's wheat duty, the island's main source of revenue, or, alternatively, its substantial reduction, and a readjustment of taxes on the principle of 'every one paying his fair proportion of the expenses of government'.⁶²

Opposed for various reasons by the landowning church, private proprietors, wheat-growing farmers, administrators and politicians, Rowsell's projects were eventually deemed to be too controversial and not sufficiently necessary or practicable to be implemented;⁶³ but Rowsell's ideas led directly to an uncommon street riot – what *The Times*' correspondent called 'our small revolution'⁶⁴ – and, accentuating political differences, attracted more attention to Maltese affairs, leading to the appointment of two further commissions of inquiry.⁶⁵ Rowsell's report, observed Michael Hicks-Beach, the colonial minister, raised several other questions 'of no small importance', such as the practicability of lightening the pressure on public expenditure⁶⁶ (for which Rowsell had recommended, among other things, abolishing Malta's university)⁶⁷. Bayley Potter, secretary of the Cobden Club and Cobden's successor in Rochdale constituency, requested a royal commission to inquire into the civil administration of Malta;⁶⁸ he wanted Britain to amend the primary education system 'to secure to the Maltese a thorough instruction in the English language, and thus to give them a full opportunity to avail themselves of the advantages and fulfill the responsibilities of British citizenship'.⁶⁹

In 1878 Patrick Keenan, since 1872 resident commissioner of the National Education Board of Ireland, and Sir Penrose Julyan, a crown agent for the colonies who had served in the army commissariat, were commissioned, the former to investigate educational establishments,⁷⁰ the latter administrative organization and costs.⁷¹

Keenan desired to improve educational institutions through such necessary and useful means as teacher-training, in Britain, methods intended to ensure greater efficiency, and, preferably, compulsory elemen-

tary education; he also wanted the rapid anglicization of Maltese education through the adoption of 'English, and English only', taught through the medium of Maltese, as the language of education. Not believing in 'half-measures', he wanted the implementation of his plan 'at once': teachers and professors who would not have attained the required proficiency in English within a year could be liberally pensioned off. Identifying Maltese with Arabic, Keenan wished to see it purified so as to be rendered as similar to Arabic as possible; the teaching of Arabic was to be promoted actively.⁷² Although, as Keenan recorded, all the teachers spoke Italian besides Maltese, none, with the exception of one former 'mate of a vessel', spoke English to his satisfaction; yet Keenan went about 'in the hot climate of Malta' searching for 'an English air', noting 'cadence', 'accent', 'blunders of pronunciation', 'phraseology', 'expression', even the 'volume of the sound' and 'noise' of schoolchildren's voices.⁷³ The teachers' reaction to Keenan's inspection was hardly in doubt: when during an assembly Keenan began to quiz them as to how the alphabet should be taught, some teachers asked for leave and before Keenan knew what was happening they had all left the hall.⁷⁴

Sir Penrose Julyan found 'too much charity' in Malta. Of the three commissioners, Julyan was the strongest exponent of the individualistic ethic, complaining, for example, that:

Everybody in Malta who lives by daily labour, that is every working-man, as well as every beggar, is considered to have a claim to receive medical assistance and medicines gratuitously, when he or any member of his family is ill.⁷⁵

The system of 'doing gratuitously for the public what it ought to do for itself' was unbeneficial.⁷⁶ Julyan, like Rowsell and Keenan, mentioned certain social needs, such as a new poor-house and a reformatory for juvenile criminals,⁷⁷ but he well represented the nineteenth century creed and concern, expressed in the repeal of the corn laws and the navigation acts, 'to make every element of the economy free to carve out its own path to prosperity'.⁷⁸ Julyan, however, also advised, ineffectively, that Malta should be relieved of some of the defence expenses as defence was a British, not Maltese, interest, and the island was poor.⁷⁹ He was, like Keenan, bent on anglicizing, recommending the gradual substitution of English for Italian in the law courts, the prohibition of Italian in the public service, and in the legislature, and slighting some of the country's most erudite men by referring to Italian-educated lawyers as 'less educated' than their few colleagues who knew English.⁸⁰ Unlike Rowsell and Keenan, but in common with most of the legal gentlemen whom he offended, Julyan did not think that Maltese was 'adapted for exclusive adoption or for written communications'.⁸¹ More insidiously than either of the other two commissioners, Julyan vaguely attributed seditious motives to some of those Maltese who strongly favoured maintaining and cultivating the island's Italian language-culture.

The persistent encouragement given (by the government) to Italian so far, said Julyan, was 'not more strange as an exhibition of mistaken tolerance than deplorable in its effects on the condition and prospects of the people of the island':

By this means political agitators have been assisted in gaining a few converts to their theory that the Maltese, though really of alien race and temperament, are akin to the Italians, and ought to look forward to a union with the kingdom of Italy instead of that of Great Britain. . . .⁸²

There was, he told the Colonial Office, 'a small but growing party' who advocated union with Italy.⁸³

Looking at Malta and her role in the empire with distinctly British eyes, what the commissioners all basically demanded was a greater interference by the state in the regulation of public affairs: taxes, schools, languages; even Julyan hesitated about Rowsell's advice regarding selling government properties to invest the money in consols.

As the great landlord of the colony, the Government secures an influence which is not without its advantages at present, and which may be far more important in the future.⁸⁴

Desiring 'retrenchment and reform' at the same time, their primary concern was to change and condition Maltese society according to their own standards of what was right, desirable, or necessary. The temptation 'to see in British economic and imperial power, the proof of being the "fittest", was too great to be resisted'.⁸⁵ So, like Walter Bagehot, they sought 'to pour forth what we can of a civilization whose spirit is progress into the form of a civilization whose spirit is fixity'.⁸⁶ In that age of imitation and good example, the English language became, with the best of intentions, the supreme embodiment of colonialism.

'Extraordinary as it must appear at first sight to anyone who is interested in the subject of education in Malta', observed the tough new governor General Borton (who shared with his predecessor an ignorance of Italian), 'and bears in mind that Malta has been for some 78 years under British rule', it was nonetheless true that Italian, not English, was the medium of education. Expecting Keenan's inquiry to bring 'a total reform of the present Italian-Anglo system of education', Borton welcomed such an inquiry at a time 'when even the acquisition of Cyprus under British rule would alone make a more extended knowledge of the English language of the greatest utility to a Maltese emigrant'.⁸⁷ Borton had made available to Keenan a memorandum by a reverend Mr. Bishop (possibly the liturgio-logist-historian Edmund Bishop who was at the Education Office in 1864-1885): returning from a formal inspection of government schools in India, Bishop had inspected Maltese schools, pointing out

the advisability of setting aside the Italian language altogether as a medium, and leaving it only to be learnt as a classical language, and making the vernacular and English, the two practical languages of the Maltese people, on the Indian system.⁸⁸

The Tory chief secretary of Malta since 1855, Sir Victor Houlton, observed that 'the time has now arrived':

The question of the change of language, and the adoption of the language of the governing race, by the governed, will be the turning point in the history of Malta.⁸⁹

But the Gozitan Sir Adriano Dingli, the crown advocate since 1854, was worried. Admitting that community of language tended, to a certain extent, to bring about community of feeling, and by that additional link, to increase mutual attachment, it was to his mind

the worst public course, for the attainment of the desired consummation, to resort to compulsory measures, in a place like Malta, where the effects would be disastrous to the immediate, personal interests of the professional classes, and thereby injurious also to other classes. The attempt would be resisted by all lawful means, and by all classes of the population, whose feelings would naturally go with their suffering countrymen; perseverance in it might engender an acrimonious feeling, which the rising generation would share in, and which might continue long after its origin would be forgotten. . . .⁹⁰

To impose another language on a people is to send their history adrift, to tear identity from all places, wrote Herder. 'To lose your native tongue, and learn that of an alien, is the worst badge of conquest – it is the chain on the soul. To have lost entirely the national language is death; the fetter has worn through'. Has a nationality, he asked, anything dearer than the speech of its fathers? 'In its speech resides its whole thought domain, its tradition, its history, religion and basis of life . . . with language is created the heart of a people'.⁹¹ But what happens in a small island where people read and write in a language which they do not commonly speak? What language will they uphold as their 'national cause' in the face of a colonial system intent on imposing its own, alien language? The spirit of the nation is at stake: clinging steadfastly to their patrimony, they resort naturally to the established language of education and literary culture rather than to their own undeveloped vernacular.

NOTES

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