

Politics, Religion and Education in Nineteenth Century Malta

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Abstract:

Malta became a British colony in 1800 and its function was that of a fortress within an imperial network. This influenced all that happened in the colony along the nineteenth century. Not least affected was the sphere of education where a main feature of Anglicisation was the forceful attempt to change Malta's everyday school language from Italian to English. This was no easy task as the Maltese pro-Italian party, the Nationalists, made every effort to impede and overturn any such British attempt. To add to the tension, the British were religiously Protestant and this clashed with the sentiments of the predominantly Roman Catholic native population. Thus the vigilant Catholic Church viewed with suspicion all that was attempted in education by the colonial Government. There was a continuous concern that the British would use schools to convert the Maltese to Protestantism. In such an atmosphere life in schools was by no means easygoing. Teachers bore the brunt of contrasts and concerns without having the space to show their distress.

Politics is the means through which countries are governed and if a country happens to be a colony, it is the coloniser who determines its political affairs. Such policies are often dictated by the interests of individuals living in a foreign land and whose ideas and objectives may very well differ from those of the inhabitants of the dependency. This was the situation in nineteenth Malta, a fortress colony whose every-day life was wholly determined by its very function as an important military base in the British imperial network.

In Aristotle's words, politics is "...the art of controlling and reconciling the diverse interests within a state" (Scruton, 1983, p.361). Such a definition may lead one to assume that British politics must have 'controlled' but that it also sought to 'reconcile'. From the Maltese experience, the Governors, as representatives of the British Sovereign, were quite rigid in their control of the country. However, with regards to reconciliation, it was not always possible, or indeed within their powers, to arrive at a compromise with the aspirations of the locals. This situation caused political clashes with a section of the politically versed Maltese, as the latter sought national liberty and opposed whatever was not considered to be in the interest of their native country.

There was in Malta, a class of politically versed inhabitants who generally disagreed with the British on a considerable number of issues. Yet culture was one of the most irreconcilable spheres and this was intimately connected to education. Hull (1993, p.3) argues that, "As Europeans with a civic history older than that of the English themselves, the Maltese would not passively accept the same sort of colonial rule that had been inflicted upon the less advanced peoples of Africa or the Pacific...." Such awareness is quite evident in the dedication made by Antonio Dalli in a book published in 1896: "*Lil poplu Malti li meta l'inglisi chienu salvaggi chien gia' 'msieheb mac-civiltà ta Ruma il chittieb joffri*" [Dedicated to the Maltese people who already formed part of Roman civilisation when the English were still savages] (1896, p.3). The local upper and professional classes, who in their majority were cultured Italophiles, based the strength of their conviction on Malta's past history. They maintained that when Malta was already part of the civilised classical world, Britain was still in its stone age.

These Maltese considered themselves culturally superior due to the geographical and cultural proximity of Malta to the Italian peninsula whose culture was adopted by the inhabitants as the culture of Malta. Hull remarks that if the culture were purely Maltese it would have been assimilated or eradicated by the British as had been done in Ireland and Cornwall. However, Maltese culture was “indistinguishable from that of an Italian cultural sphere heading towards political unity and enjoying a certain international prestige” (1993, p.3).

Thus, from 1800 onwards there existed in Malta a strange situation where the conqueror had to wrestle with the conquered to establish a cultural supremacy. Friggieri (1988) argues that, “Colonial domination implied a psychological submission and the adoption of a peaceful attitude when faced with officialdom.” (p.288) Some of the inhabitants found this too difficult to accept. “The Maltese profoundly embedded in a centuries-old Christian culture which greatly encouraged collective passivity and resignation, could hardly become instantly conscious of a different mode of being, and much less of a predisposition diametrically opposed to the one adopted since time immemorial” (pp.288-9). Therefore, anything English was considered by some Maltese as an attempt at Anglicisation, a move towards cultural invasion of what they considered sacred. The British could not understand why they should feel strangers within their ‘own’ property. It was difficult for an Englishman to communicate through his language with those who were supposed to be a subject people. Many of those who counted did not accept his language. The language question was born with the birth of Malta into the British Empire and this created a cultural clash that was to haunt Maltese life for more than a century. It was evident from the start that it was going to be hard to convince the upper echelons of Maltese society that English was a more beneficial language to use than Italian. The British felt that a remedy had to be found to this situation. A despatch by Lord Bathurst to Thomas Maitland, first Governor of Malta, in 1813, concluded that, “The attention of His Majesty's Government is turned to the means of effecting a gradual advancement in the condition and information of the People, and of identifying their Affection and Interests with the British Connection. With this in view, I recommend to your constant attention the Diffusion of the English Language among the Inhabitants, and the promotion of every method by which the English may be brought to supersede the Italian Tongue” (Laferla, 1938, p.82-3).

With the passing of time affairs began to get more and more out of tune. The British realised that their hold over a fortress colony could never be complete and secure till they had merged the Islands' culture into their own. Imperial politics could not give way to other considerations. As the empirical conservative Edmund Burke (1729-1797) argued, it was not the business of the state to create morality, "... justice is a luxury, stability and order are necessities..." (Grigson & Harvard Gibbs-Smith, 1954, p.299). The colonisers deemed it essential to put the Maltese in line with British interests. Such a political objective could most efficiently be reached through the education of the people.

The 1836 educational reforms

In 1835 Malta got its first Constitution, which in reality changed little if any the political atmosphere dominating the colony at that time. This instrument of government did not allow any elective element in the Council that was to administer the Maltese islands. The Governor kept much of the control he had enjoyed up till that time and thus little power sharing was allowed. It is no wonder that "Maltese politicians deprecated and depreciated this body politic to the extreme" (Cremona, 1994, p.5).

In such an atmosphere of political disillusionment, a Royal Commission of Inquiry was appointed in 1836. A principal aim of this Commission (to whose credit goes the granting of the liberty of the press to Malta in 1839) was to upgrade the Maltese educational establishment and set up a modern schooling system. Regarding the teaching medium used by Maltese teachers in schools, the Commissioners, John Austin and George Cornwall Lewis, perhaps contrary to British interests, did not suggest any change. They argued that, "From this general use of the Italian language in Malta, from its use as the language of trade throughout the Mediterranean, and from the near neighbourhood of Malta to Italy and Sicily, it follows that the Italian language is far more useful to a Maltese than any other language, excepting his native tongue..." (Hull, 1993, p.15).

On the other hand, the Commissioners offered suggestions to improve opportunities for those who aspired for a teaching career. Austin and Lewis recommended, “that the Government shall establish and support in Malta and Gozo such an additional number of elementary schools as, combined with the three which it supports already, might instruct the whole of the population in elementary knowledge” (Royal Commission of Enquiry, 1839, p.42). The Commission did not deem the teaching of English as a priority but recommend that where it was to be taught the teacher was to be properly qualified and “preferably from England” (p.49). On the other hand, it was suggested that a suitably qualified teacher brought from Italy should teach “the elements of geometry and algebra, and of practical applications of them in ordinary business” (p.50). These recommendations proved quite disappointing to the local imperialists (Hull, 1993, p.16) as the *status quo* was kept in the language of schools, no doubt, to the relief of the existing teaching staff. This was a great satisfaction to the Maltese Italophiles who shared the feelings of Sir Agostino Portelli who held that, “A few individuals have the ambition, and strongly wish to preserve in keeping the natives in slavery, and subjecting them even to the usages of the English. ... Every absurd idea of forcing the inhabitants to change their system, or their educational language, which is the Italian, as used in their tribunals should be particularly abstained from.”¹

Such persistent opposition to changes in Maltese education involved not only the professional and higher classes but also the Roman Catholic Church, an institution that opposed the development of education for the masses with even greater fervour. It was common policy for the local Church in the 1830s to oppose much of what the British attempted in the field of schooling. In a despatch to Governor Bouverie, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Glenelg, expressed his deep regret “...to learn that the Clergy are opposed to popular education as being introduced by a popular Government.” On the other hand, the Government's hands were tied. Glenelg reminded the Governor, “...that it is the duty of the Government to abstain, as it has hitherto abstained from all interference with the Religion of the People.”² Glenelg further reaffirmed that it was the will of London “that you recommend proper measures for erecting and maintaining Schools in order to the training up of youth to

¹ Libr., 388, Memorie di Sir Agostino Portelli 1836, ff.9-10/109r-v.

² Desp from S.S., Vol.33, 1838, Glenelg to Bouverie, No.306, 24.x.1838.

reading, and to a necessary knowledge of the principles of the Christian Religion....” The Governor was warned that he should do nothing that interfered with the Religion of Malta unless the Home Government approved it.³

The intervention in education by the Maltese Catholic Church was to burden teachers for a long time. They had to guard against any school policy or practice, which the Church considered to be anti-Catholic. If any such situation was suspected, the teachers’ choice could become one between their livelihood and their soul. This was the instance of Emmanuela Azzopardi, a teacher in Mr. Watson’s private school. Due to some prayers said jointly by the Protestant and Catholic pupils, in 1850, she resigned her post, “*volendo pienamente ubbidire agli ordini di autorità superiori...*” [so as to obey unconditionally the orders of higher authority]. Azzopardi thus gave up all monetary profits and any career advancement. Later on she found employment in the Government schools. (Pullicino, 1871, p.4).

The consequences of state non-intervention in educational reform due to local religious considerations, was accompanied by continuous protests by the adversaries of the Catholic Church in Malta. Some of the staunchest critics were members of the Protestant Churches in the Island. One of their newspapers, *The Phosphorus* (belonging to the Methodists), published in 1838 the following criticism: “The two great and radical causes of the social degradation of the Maltese nation are, their poverty and ignorance:-...and their ignorance which chiefly results from an uninstructed and bigoted priesthood.”⁴ *The Malta Times*, claimed that clerics were to blame for a defective education. In one of its articles, it claimed: “...We have ... to record our extreme displeasure that in a country like Malta, full of clergymen, ... there are not to be found scarcely half a dozen priests who earnestly apply themselves to the instruction of the people.” The paper argued that the Governors could not be held responsible for the inadequate policies in education. On the contrary, they should be praised for they “...have struggled against the prejudices of the people, and clergy, more particularly and have established schools in spite of them.”⁵ In a later year, a letter in the same paper signed by ‘An On Looker’ repeated the same accusations. The

³ Ibid., No.312, 20.xi.1838.

⁴ *The Phosphorus*, No.2, 13.xi.1838, p.6.

⁵ *The Malta Times*, No.196, 5.i.1843, pp.2-3.

correspondent argued that, "... I admit readily that the Government at times have not been sufficiently energetic in promoting the cause of education ... but all their most strenuous efforts would necessarily have proved unavailing without the cordial co-operation of the body of the Ecclesiastics - which co-operation, for obvious reasons, they were never willing to accord and it is there that the shoe pinches"⁶ The 'obvious reasons' concerned the continued antagonism of the local Church to anything English. This attitude affected negatively Maltese education and particularly teachers. The policy of upholding Roman Catholic wishes would be sustained and foreign teachers would generally be appointed in Government schools only if they were Catholics. Also as a norm teachers were only sent to train abroad in English Roman Catholic teacher colleges.

This pro-Roman Catholic policy in education can be illustrated through the example of a certain Madame Clara Todd. This British lady from Caernarfon had originally been engaged by Savona, while Director of Public Instruction, to teach French for a small number of hours in a Maltese Government School for girls. She would have replaced a female teacher who had been pensioned off due to old age.⁷ However, with the passing of the months, this decision was reversed. Savona's reason for such a *volte-face*, as quoted by the contacting agent, was that "In every case, the only answer that I can give is that I can never put in my department individuals who are not Roman Catholics, because of the ecclesiastical authorities."⁸ This decision and such an answer unleashed in Todd an anti-Catholic commotion that indicated the crude religious antagonism existing between Roman Catholics and Protestants at the time. Clara Todd angered at Savona's denial at ever having engaged her argued, "We know that the Roman Catholic religion allows untruths under certain circumstances. ... I think that his confessor hearing from him that I was engaged has forbidden it and advised the Jesuitical kind of letter; - this would be the "autorité ecclesiastique" to which he refers...."⁹

⁶ Ibid., No.164, 7.iv.1846, p.3.

⁷ Desp. from S.S. Vol.83, 1886, Herbert to Off. Admin. the Govt. of Malta, No74, 10.xi.1886. Copy of letter, P. Cutajar & Co. to Clara Todd, 19.iv.1886.

⁸ Ibid. Copy of letter, P. Cutajar & Co. to Clara Todd, 15.x.1886.

⁹ Ibid. Copy of letter, Clara Todd to Stanhope, 4.xi.1886.

Though opposition to the Church's dominance over education was quite voluble from certain quarters, on the other hand there were others who quite enthusiastically supported the Church's involvement in the education of the people. One such exponent was Charles Casolani, a medical doctor. He held that the best education could be attained only if the clergy took it under their direct control. With regards to primary schools Casolani argued that, "...I do not believe Government could do better than place them under the immediate care of the parish priest, as in England..." He then proposed 'The School for Classical and Scientific Education and for Training of Schoolmasters', which was "...to be placed under the charge of the Archbishop..." (Casolani, 1867, p.8). When, from the 1880s Maltese teachers began to be sent abroad, these went to English training colleges under the supervision of the Catholic Church.

The nineteenth century witnesses an ongoing contrast between State and Church over their different policies on education. This gave cause to newspapers such as *Il Mediterraneo* to enquire, "But, what have the English done since their supremacy in the island! Elementary instruction has been entirely forgotten, and intermedial has had an equal fate, and the higher branches of knowledge have had but a nominal existence."¹⁰ Some British subjects expressed their preoccupation about schooling in Malta. George Percy Badger, in a letter to the editor of *The Malta Times* in 1841 complained that education was so backward that the ratio of children attending school at the time was, "less than two children under public instruction to many hundred persons. What a sad picture for an island under British rule for upwards of forty years!"¹¹ The situation of education in Malta could change little with so much antagonism, as each side subjectively grasped onto its own interests. Teacher and teaching in the Islands could find little respite to improve and solidify. The ground over which educators threaded in that particular period was too insecure and disputed. As yet, notwithstanding all this political intrigue, matters were still under control. The small number of schools and teachers continued their work without bothering too much about such disputes. Indeed, the Government itself appointed a succession of clerics to the directorship of education perhaps to keep at bay the opposition of the local Church to education as much as possible. Amongst others there were Mgr. F. S.

¹⁰ *Il Mediterraneo*, No.2, 8.viii.1838, p.7.

¹¹ *The Malta Times*, No.56, 10.i.1841, p.222.

Caruana and Rev. T. O'Malley who were Rectors of the University with jurisdiction over all other educational establishments. There were also Can. F. Panzavecchia and Mgr. Dr. P. Pullicino as Directors of Elementary Instruction. Pullicino was to be a most important nineteenth century appointee in the field of education in Malta. Chosen in 1850, nobody could describe him as a staunch supporter of the English language. He rarely used this language to communicate, as evidenced by his circulars, speeches and publications. Indeed, he had to be officially requested to concur with the practice already adopted by all the other Heads of Department and use English when corresponding with the Chief Secretary to Government's Office. He reluctantly complied with this request.¹² For a long time teachers were not particularly pressured to use English as a medium of instruction in their schools and things generally continued thus up till 1878.

This is not to say that the pro-Italian lobby through its periodicals and newspapers did not sustain a consistent stream of accusations against the British administration and its supporters. Such efforts kept the politically motivated language question in Malta alive and active. Whichever language would lead to higher stability in everyday life invariably affected the sphere of education. The monthly *La Rivista* used the education issue to criticise the Government arguing that "*La storia della nostra Istruzione offre un quadro, che, a guardarlo dal suo vero punto di vista presenta in miniatura la scena intiera d'un governo freddament dispotico e radicalmente sinecurista.*"¹³ [The history of our Instruction offers us a picture that, if viewed from its proper angle presents in miniature the whole panorama of a Government coldly despotic and radically sinecurist]. *Il Mediterraneo* shared a similar opinion when it argued that; "A despotic government possesses itself of the education of the people, in order to instil into their minds those false principles upon which it is founded. A free government which is strong, because it is just, always obtains greater advantages by leaving education without restraint, than by attempting to regulate it."¹⁴ However, as Young argues, one may assume, "that 'education' is a label with political and ideological connotations" (1976, p.134). All decisions are weighted with political bias

¹² CSG 01/9671/1856, Houlton to Pullicino, supported by Governor Reid.

¹³ *La Rivista*, No.4, 1.xi.1846, p.99.

¹⁴ *Il Mediterraneo*, No.520, 12.vii.1848, p.9.

and colonial education policies were decidedly loaded in favour of British needs and intentions.

The argument underpinning the continuous criticism against the colonial Government concerned its persistent interference with local life and culture especially regarding the Italian language. The life of the colony was also dominated by the continuous political strife, which not even the granting of the Constitution of 1849 was able to ease. The Maltese were given a Council of Government that did indeed introduce an elected body. Yet these eight members were in the minority when compared with the nine official members and the Governor. Thus the aspirations of the Maltese were still very much unsatisfied. It was only in 1864, through the intervention of Cardwell, Secretary of State for the Colonies, that a partial remedy found (Cremona, 1994, pp. 8-9). On the other hand the official members were all in Government service and thus could be used by the Governor to check any undesired move in the Council by the opposition. This is indeed what was done when Governor Le Marchant, for example, stipulated that the official members in the Council were to vote *en bloc* no matter how trivial the matter was (Pirota, 1996, p.231). The Maltese were constantly on their guard and rarely trusted the British in their dealings concerning local affairs.

Much of what the colonial authorities attempted to do within the educational field was considered by the opposition as a threat to the established usages and customs of Malta. *L'Avvenire* in 1850 picked on a teacher to point out such preoccupations. Though two months had passed from the pensioning off of the teacher of Italian in the Lyceum due to old age, a permanent replacement was still pending. *L'Avvenire* noted that the outgoing Sig. Cristoforo was not replaced by another Italian language teacher but by Sig. Carbonaro, a teacher of the elements of Latin (who had accepted the post voluntarily in conjunction with that of teacher of Latin). The paper argued that this situation was quite serious as by its actions the Government had suppressed from the Lyceum the teaching of the language of the country, the language through which the sciences were studied and commercial transactions carried out, in a word, the language through which all the affairs of the country were settled.¹⁵

¹⁵ *L'Avvenire*, No.20, 13.iv.1850, p.154. The paper may not have been aware that Carbonaro had been appointed provisionally and after he himself had accepted to teach Italian simultaneously with the teaching of Latin (CSG 04/19, 30.ix.1844, p.85).

The Anglophiles, on the other hand, did not hold any higher satisfaction. In 1865 *The Malta Observer* criticised the seventh Report on education issued by Can. P. Pullicino. The paper's comment expressly noted with disbelief the backwardness of Maltese schools in the study and teaching of the English language. It stressed that, "When the qualifications of the majority of the teachers are duly taken into consideration, as well as the limited time devoted to the instruction of English, one cannot but be convinced of the absurdity of the Chief Director's statement, that by the time his pupils have learned to read well, they are 'able to understand and fully explain what they read'."¹⁶ It was evident that teachers were increasingly becoming the focus of attention for the champions of the English language. Two years later this same paper was still trying to convince the people that English was the essential language to learn. It appealed to the Government to encourage the study of that language in the primary schools. It explained to its readers to what lengths the British Government was going to fortify the Island, "so that all idea of a cession of Malta to the Italians may be banished." *The Malta Observer* ended with what was to become the educational objective of the Anglophiles in the near future: "Let us then do our best to fortify the minds of the loyal people of Malta in English language and spirit and see that properly qualified and suitable teachers be appointed in charge of the rising generations of this country."¹⁷ This observation would have far reaching effects on teachers in Malta. It implied that the teacher corps in the Government schools would be used to make Malta British in the true colonial sense. "The land held as a colony must have no real political independence from the 'mother country'" (Robertson, 1993, p.84). Teachers would become the instruments through which the destiny of Malta as a colony would be fulfilled.

By 1870, the political scene in Malta began to change, and in the process this affected drastically the sphere of local education. This date saw the definite formation of the *riformisti* group in the Council of Government. The members affiliated to this political formation were obsessed with one basic purpose, that of making English the main language of Malta and thus consolidate its teaching in schools. The opposing group, the pro-Italian party, or *anti-riformisti* - as the name clearly indicates - saw this

¹⁶ The Malta Observer, No.559, 23.ii.1865, n.p

¹⁷ Ibid., No.760, 28.i.1867, n.p

as a challenge to the *status quo*. Most worrying for the *anti-riformisti* was the attempt towards the Anglicisation of the Maltese Islands from the roots through the education of small children. This preoccupation would put teachers under the continuous scrutiny of the *anti-riformisti*.

The language of the common people was also dragged into the debate. The *riformisti* suggested that English and Maltese should be taught in schools in preference to Italian. However, as Camilleri (1978) points out, “The teaching of Maltese in schools was only a side issue, introduced obliquely in the political controversy” (p.1). Though there were some who favoured the use of the vernacular as a medium through which Italian or English could be learnt, very few, if any, gave the native tongue any importance in education. The Chief Director of Primary Schools, Pullicino, was in no way moved by his friend and colleague Dr. Sciortino, when the latter suggested this aspect in the Council of Government. For Pullicino, “To spend time in learning Maltese, which was not a written language would stand in the way of pupils learning Italian and English.”¹⁸ It is not that the Maltese language was completely absent in the Elementary Schools, but its presence was reduced more or less to the reading lesson. In the *Regolamenti delle Scuole* (1871) it was stated that the teaching done in the schools had as its foundation the reading of Maltese, Italian and English (p.3). Yet, according to the same *Regolamenti*, the Masters and Mistresses in charge of the schools were only obliged to give lessons in the Italian and English languages to the student-teachers under their care (p. 38).

Maltese children and teachers were now theoretically faced with the teaching of three different languages as opposed to the traditional one. As Frendo (1975) argues, “Nineteenth-century Maltese society is probably a unique example of the case in which trilingualism became a battleground in the successful quest for a national identity” (p.22). The school timetable as designed by Pullicino in 1854, had little space for English (Keenan, 1880, p.6) and none at all for Maltese. In boys’ schools English reading was only done for three-quarters of an hour daily in the Third and Fourth Classes and girls did just half an hour daily in the two higher classes. The attempt to set up a new educational programme, in which English and Maltese would

¹⁸ As reported in The Malta Times, No.2099, 13.ii.1868, n.p.

figure as prominently as Italian, caused the 'Language Question' to become a problem. Camilleri (1978) concluded that, "The 'Language Problem' became a political rather than an educational issue. For many years after it was to be the king-pin of Maltese politics" (p.1). The involvement of party politics could not be avoided, and more so when in the 1880s the *Xirka Xemġa* or the Semitic Society, a pro-government group, claimed that at the roots of every Maltese person there was a Phoenician (Frendo, 1991, p.35). How could the pro-Italian Party accept such an insult? The British colonisers were seen as interfering with the traditions of Maltese language usage, introducing the *alfabeto fonetico* of Savona's *Xirka Xemġa* in lieu of the Italianised Maltese (Hull, 1993, p.280). And all this was to be implemented through the work of the teacher corps. No wonder the Nationalists saw teachers more of a threat to the future of Malta than as educators of future generations.

Sigismondo Savona, the teacher turned politician, was a staunch campaigner for the teaching of English in schools as evidenced by his 1865 publication suggesting a gradual programme of Anglicisation (Hull, 1993, p.27). In one of his speeches Savona emphasised the need for "well trained teachers." This was imperative because these teachers "are destined to form the mind and mould the character of the rising generation" (Savona, 1865, p.14). He emphasised the need for efficient teachers. Indeed, he argued, "... an efficient College, for training both Masters and Mistresses be established in the Island, with as little delay as possible." For the teaching of English in the Lyceum and the primary schools, "English teachers should be employed...." However, if this proved too expensive, "young Maltese should be encouraged to go to England" so as to learn the language thoroughly.¹⁹

In the 1870s, with such an intense political situation, the local colonial Government was not favourably inclined towards discussing education. Indeed on one occasion, in the Council of Government, an Education Ordinance was even blocked on its first reading.²⁰ This created an understandable commotion on the part of the Elected Members in the Council.²¹ The rejection of this Bill was a clear indication of the

¹⁹ CSG 01/1547/1865, Savona to Education Commission (Storks), 20.v.1865.

²⁰ Copy of letter, S. Cachia Zammit to W.H. Gladstone, 28.ii.1872, in Desp. from S.S. Vol.69, 1872, Kimberley to Grant, No.212, 18.iii.1872.

²¹ Cf. (1873): Speeches delivered in the Council of Government of Malta on the rejection by the Official Majority of an Education Bill on its First Reading, Malta.

Governor's determination to control motions within the field of education. This also indicated how delicate teachers' position was at this time.

The situation in education had reached a point of great stress. There was general confrontation and something had to be done. With the instigation of Savona, a staunch Anglophile with influential friends in London, the Imperial Government decided to send a further Royal Commission to Malta, that of Patrick J. Keenan. More than solving anything, Keenan would create further debate and divergence in the sphere of local education, with deep implications for teachers in the process.

Keenan's mission was to examine the situation of education and suggest improvements. However his way of 'reform' was rather particular and would hit teachers directly. Keenan "...wanted the rapid Anglicisation of Maltese education through the adoption of 'English, and English only', taught through the medium of Maltese, as the language of education.... 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" (Frendo, 1991, p.9). These were drastic measures, which affected teachers at all levels. Indeed some teachers were forced to resign because of these modifications.²² Keenan's suggestions found the teaching body unprepared for the new situation. In Malta there were "... several teachers who, having been appointed many years ago ... were never trained for their work...." They could teach neither English nor other branches of the curriculum. By 1882 these teachers could begin to be pensioned off and replaced.²³ In its wake this reform also caused a shock wave among all Maltese political sectors. Savona and his friends could say that their scope of promoting the English language in the Island was very close to being satisfied. Indeed, Savona himself, showing where his sentiments lay, had argued in 1877 that there was too little history taught in Maltese schools and the lack of any History of Malta lessons was unmistakable. "The Government might offer a prize of say £20 or £25 to any Maltese who should write in English a history

²² CSG 01/6775/1880, Colonial Pensions &c., 'Costanza Gravagna' 7.x.1880, "...and as she leaves the service owing to her advanced age and her inability to perform the duties that will be required of her under the new system..."

²³ CSG 01/11300/1882, Savona to Chief Sec. to Govt., 30.iii.1882.

of Malta for the use of schools, a measure which should encourage the study of the English language as well as that of the history of Malta.”²⁴

The publication of the Keenan Report generated strong reactions. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Secretary of State for the Colonies, labelled Keenan's work as a “very able and exhaustive Report.” According to Hicks Beach, “Mr. Keenan's recommendations as to the teaching of the English language appear to me to be sound and to be conceived in the best interest of the people of Malta.”²⁵ *The Malta Times* reflecting its pro-Government views argued that, “The persistent encouragement which, until recent times, and in some respects to the present day, has been given to Italian in preference to English as the official language of the island, and an auxiliary to the vernacular, is, however, 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.”²⁶

Amongst the opponents to Keenan's suggestions there was the weekly *Il Portafoglio Maltese*. For the paper, the principal question concerned the selection of a language of communication between teachers and students. As there was still a lot to do towards the teaching of the English language, adopting this language as a means of communication in schools before it had been generally used in homes and in conversations, would be a step in the wrong direction.²⁷

With the imperialist faction clamouring for more English in schools in line with Keenan's suggestion, the Government felt prompted to implement the Commissioner's ideas²⁸ even though the reforms would only come in gradually.²⁹ By the Notice of 5 June 1880, the office of Director of Primary Schools was abolished.

²⁴ Debates of the Council of Government, Sitting No.34, 5.iv.1877, p.301.

²⁵ Desp. from S.S. Vol.77, 1880, Hicks Beach to Borton, No.293, 2.ii.1880.

²⁶ *The Malta Times*, 2nd Supplement, 7.ii.1880.

²⁷ *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, No.3582, 22iii.1880, n.p.

²⁸ Government Notice No. 36 the Government announced that it felt it desirable “with a view of giving increased facilities in expediting the transaction of public business” that members of “the educated classes” should, whenever possible communicate with “this Government” in English. Where this was not fully possible a translation had to accompany the Italian script (*The Malta Government Gazette*, No.2851, 20.iv.1880, p.127).

²⁹ The Governor was instructed by the Secretary of State allowing him to publish official communications in whatever language he thought fit as long as everybody could understand what the Government had to say. Petitioners, however, “must be left at liberty to use the language they prefer.” The Governor was authorised by the Home Government, “to instruct all Departments except the Judicial, to keep all their books and records in English” (Conf. Desp. from S.S., Hicks Beach to Borton, 7.ii.1880).

On the same day Sigismondo Savona replaced Pullicino in the new post of Director of Public Education comprising the duties as prescribed by Keenan himself (Camilleri, 1978, p.8).

Education after Keenan

In his new Office, Savona embarked on setting a pace to the reforms put forward by Keenan, not only as an educationalist but also as a politician. The former schoolmaster, now in charge of education, was a politician in the making. As a strong believer in the pro-English reforms, he endeavoured to implement them in the schools under his charge. However, at this same time there was on the political scene the pro-Italianate *par excellence* - Dr. Fortunato Mizzi. He “engaged in a relentless political duel with the hated Director of Education and, with the help of his followers, pilloried him in the Council and the Press” (Laferla, 1947, p.36). With their Director under attack, his subordinates were bound to feel the political heat. Their image suffered with those adverse to Savona’s actions. Without any justification teachers became entangled within the politics of the moment. Yet as at other times, they could rarely react publicly being curtailed by the conditions of the Estacode, which for example, prohibited employees in Government service from writing in newspapers on political matters.

It was at once evident that the State’s educational establishments and their staffs would become embroiled in the political tug-of-war that was to ensue. *The Malta Times* for instance held that such reforms should have been carried out fifty years before. This reform “was a blow such as can hardly be imagined to nearly all connected with the University and the Lyceum, professors, teachers, examiners, to all who dread innovation in any form...”³⁰

Others doubted the integrity of the assistant teachers who were now to be sent to England for further teacher training and to improve their knowledge of English. *Il Portafoglio Maltese* argued that these assistant masters and mistresses should be

³⁰ The Malta Times, 1st Supplement, 12.vi.1880, p.6.

legally bound to use what they learned for the benefit of those who sent them abroad out of public funds.³¹

Many events in the educational sphere were attributed to political motivation. In 1881, the students of the Lyceum felt they should protest against the raising of their school fees. *Amico del Popolo* reported that these were “*spinti dagli Irredentisti*” [instigated by the Irredentists] and this protest only failed because the students of the University “*più maturi ed esperti*” [more mature and experienced] did not join them.³² The British feared the irredentists³³ and thought of fighting them in the schools.³⁴ On one particular occasion in 1880 the students of the Lyceum offered flowers and speeches to honour their teachers. In heavy political overtones *Il Portafoglio Maltese* reported the occasion and after praising the students for their polite gesture it continued, “*Preghiamo inoltre i Signori Keenan e Julyan a tener ricordo di questo fatto...*” [We also ask Messrs. Keenan and Julyan to take note of this fact]. In the students’ address to the teachers of the Italian language, “*parlano con entusiasmo del caro e gentile idioma*” [they speak enthusiastically of the beloved and gentle idiom]. Conversely, addressing the teachers of English, they held that the language, “*forse potrebbe essere per loro di qualche utilità*” [will perhaps be of some use to them]. The concluding question was, “*È da credersi che gli allievi del Liceo siano tutti o Irredentisti, o annessionisti?*”³⁵ [Can it be believed that the students of the Lyceum are either all irredentists or annexists?]. The Lyceum teachers were used as a pawn to attack the British Government and its fear of irredentism. The teachers of English, who were British, bore the brunt of this attack.

The Administration took measures to push English in an advantageous position in schools. As revealed in the *Report on the Educational Institutions of Malta and Gozo*

³¹ Il Portafoglio Maltese, No.3627, 30.viii.1880, n.p.

³² Amico del Popolo, Anno II, No. 167, 3.v.1881, p. 2.

³³ The British saw the *irredentisti* (those who would want Malta to become part of Italy) as the dangerous destabilisers of Malta as a fortress colony. Sir Robert Herbert, permanent colonial secretary, noted that, “The more we anglicise the Maltese and disestablish Italian, the less possibility will there be of the Italia Irredenta party obtaining a foothold in the Island” (Herbert, min., 7.vii.1883, on Borton/Derby, 21.v.1883, 158/264, quoted in Frendo, 1991, p. 30).

³⁴ Evelyn Ashley, under-secretary of state for the colonies, stressed, “Not only Imperial interests but Imperial duty call upon us to see that the language of the Empire holds its proper - that is an advantageous - place in the course of studies in schools” (Ashley, min., 11.vii.1883, in Frendo, 1991, p.30).

³⁵ Il Portafoglio Maltese, No.3612, 8.vii.1880, n.p.

(1883), teachers were given new timetables where five and a half hours were now allotted for teaching pupils and another hour was to be dedicated to the teaching of assistant teachers and monitors. This left no space for Italian. The new programme presented the preoccupation of finding “properly qualified instructors” for the “diffusion of the English language” (p.7). Moreover, Savona reported: “The teachers have been directed to improve their knowledge of the English language, without which it would be impossible for them to continue in the service, as elementary teachers” (p.7). With this brand of statements the prospect for the older, less capable or more conservative teaching staff was rendered highly critical.

Political power became the central issue in any decision taken. The colonial Government wielded enough power to enable it to outmanoeuvre whichever motion the Elected Members introduced. It could also over-ride any attempts at insertions and alterations by Mizzi’s party. This was unbearable to the conservative Italophiles who could do little to stop the changes introduced in education. An illustration of such a situation may be gleaned from what happened on 20 May 1885. Fortunato Mizzi moved a motion to exclude all the money voted for the Educational Department from the estimates for works and buildings. In this vote were included sums necessary to lay in gas and other facilities to open night schools. Such schools were a response to a petition by 900 workmen who sought to further their studies. Mizzi’s amendment was rejected (Fraser, 1887, p.22). The Partito Nazionale felt helpless and getting fed up with such situations threatened not to pass the Education vote when this came before the Council thus causing all schools to close down (Schiavone, 1992, p.28). In their frenzy to obstruct the British the Italophiles did not seem to bother about the repercussions borne by the teachers in the process.

The political opposition to opening further schools created many problems. Fraser recounts that the petition discussed in Sitting No. 45 was defeated. It involved the sum of £26 to pay for the salaries of teachers for a night school proposed by the Government at Zabbar. The petitioners for this school had comprised 222 inhabitants, many of whom were Government employees seeking to learn English and thus improving their prospects for promotion. Fraser (showing where his bias lay) underlined what Dr. Mizzi “somewhat heartlessly” said, “*si dovrebbe pensare ad istruire scuole tecniche e non già ad insegnare l'inglese a persone con un piede nella*

tomba”(Fraser, 1887, p22) [it would be better to set up technical schools rather than teach English to persons with one foot in the grave]. Such were the extremes to which contrasts over language reached within the field of education where ultimately those most affected were of course the teachers.

The pro-Italians had become furious at what they interpreted to be the great pressures exerted by their opponents to oust Italian from the established order of things, and nothing could reconcile them. From this perspective, A. Cini (1901, p.10) described Keenan’s suggestions as “*Lo scandalo gravissimo del 1879 ossia i prodromi della libera scelta!!!*” [The scandal of maximum gravity of 1879 or rather the premonitory sign of free choice!!!]. It had become compulsory for parents to choose either English or Italian for their children. In an ironic vein Cini examined the teachers’ fortunes in this “*scandalo gravissimo*” [very grave scandal]. He argued that, as many of the teachers and professors would not be able to explain their lessons in English “*il liberale (!)*” [the liberal (!)] Royal Commissioner advised the Government to put them to rest giving them “*già s’intende, «la pensione più liberale che si potesse» !!!*” (p.11) [of course it is understood «the most liberal pension possible» (!!!)]. The Nationalists could see no other objective but to seek to destroy their ‘liberal’ adversary and they were ready to take down anyone who got in the way.

The British Home Government was aware of the volatile situation the Elected Bench was gradually creating. The Secretary of State was willing to alleviate the impending crisis in general and particularly in education by conceding something to the opposition. Secretary of State Derby stressed to the Governor that, “...a strong effort should be made to promote the study of Italian without materially interfering with the study of English as at present conducted.” Furthermore, “In the Lyceum, Italian still occupies a more favourable position than English, [however] ...Her Majesty’s Government are willing that, as a general rule, the Professors should be at liberty to choose the language in which they will communicate instruction.” Derby concluded that, “...these concessions which are the utmost that Her Majesty’s Government are prepared to make as regards the Educational System,” were a sign of good faith towards the elected members to show them that Italian would continue to be taught and demonstrate that, “Her Majesty’s Government have given due weight to the

opinions of the representatives of the people even in a question which, like the present, to a large extent affects Imperial interests.”³⁶

The British authorities in Malta were less prone to cool down the heated atmosphere in the clash of languages. The Lieutenant-Governor, Hely Hutchinson held that English should be the language of the people at all costs. To this effect, “...let those who oppose English understand that their opposition shuts them out from all hope of employment or favour from the Government. Appeal, in a word, to their personal interests. I do not care so much about the Lyceum and University. Look well after your primary schools, see that the boys and girls are taught Maltese and English and in twenty years there won't be a chance for the propagation of Italianist ideas.”³⁷

The Maltese Nationalists had sensed that the ensuing repercussions to the education reform introduced by the British would be great. They did their best in the Council to halt, stall, and obstruct anything that could promote the reformed educational system. Even though the Nationalists in the Council represented a minority of the population (those qualified to vote), yet they adopted the stance of defenders of the Maltese nation and its Italian culture. Dr. Roncali on behalf of his colleagues in Council, in December 1883, objected to passing any education votes. They demanded “...that Italian should be made the fundamental language of education, and the teaching of Maltese as a language should be abolished...” The refusal of this demand would be great as, “...the rejection of these votes would be to close the schools throughout the island, and to deprive the School teachers and other Officers of the Government employed in the education department, of their salaries....”³⁸ The teachers ended up in the middle of the quarrel and were made the object of the confrontation without any fault of their own. Besides the prospect of not getting their salaries because of the Nationalist demands, they were also to be subjected to new hardships by the Government to which they were ill-prepared. *Il Portafoglio Maltese* commented that with the educational reforms many Maltese teachers, though lacking a knowledge of English, had to obey the orders, and observe the laws promulgated by the “*Czar della Pubblica Distruzione*” [Tsar of Public Destruction] (referring to Savona) and were

³⁶ Desp. from S.S., Vol.80, 1883, Derby to Borton, No.232, 18.xii.1883.

³⁷ CO 158/265, Hely Hutchinson to Anderson, 27.x.1883, in Frendo, pp.193-4.

³⁸ Desp. from S.S., Vol.81, 1884, Derby to Borton, No.249, 3.i.1884.

forced to use the English language to explain Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Mathematics, History, and many other subjects.³⁹

The political clashes between the pro-British lobby and the pro-Italian Nationalists did not ease much with the granting of a new Constitution in 1887. The Knutsford Constitution, as it was known, gave the elected members a majority for the first time but this was not enough for the politically conscious. They clamoured for 'self-government', a request that was as yet outright inconceivable to the coloniser. This Constitution thus served more to amplify the contrast between the two alignments. The surge for dominance within Maltese society by one or the other of the political groups permeated all spheres of local life.

On their part the British did everything to promote pro-Imperial feelings and 'patriotism' in schools. In 1899 a written communication was delivered to schools about the War in South Africa being fought at that time. In it the children of Maltese and Gozitan elementary schools were praised for they had "invariably heartily responded to appeals made on behalf of the brave soldiers who are fighting so valiantly for Queen, country and liberty in South Africa." The children contributed their pennies and gave time and labour to make caps and socks. This "has been everywhere admired" and these items of dress "have been most gratefully acknowledged for and by the soldiers." The worth of the Memorial Fund whose Committee members were all teachers was acknowledged. The authorities pointed out that the children should know how "praiseworthy" this Fund and its object were "as well as the suffering our brave soldiers must necessary undergo." The use of 'our' implicated the Maltese as part of the British involvement in this war and stressed the "patriotism of the rising generation in our schools."⁴⁰ In the foreign engagements of the British Crown, along its colonial period, Malta was involved many a time in some way or other, and schools were used as a medium through which to show solidarity with the imperial 'brothers'. Teachers were to act as liaison officers for this purpose. Nineteenth century Malta was a hectic time for education. Being a fortress colony and an important station in the British Empire, Malta was regarded as a hot spot and no

³⁹ Il Portafoglio Maltese, No.3847, 12.x.1882, n.p.

⁴⁰ Note found at the Teachers' Documentation and Resource Centre (Floriana).

'nostalgic' pro-Italian feelings were allowed to interfere with the mission of the colony. The Roman Catholic Church also made it a point to monitor anything the Protestant British did or intended to do. The Church made sure that education would always remain within its domain and the British made it a point not to oppose such pretensions unnecessarily. All this affected directly Maltese teachers who were thus put in the limelight against their own choice. They were regarded as instruments in the hands of the Government and its pro-British, pro-Imperialist supporters. At the same time they suffered by becoming targets of attack and were prejudiced by the pro-Italianate Nationalists and the majority of the clergy. Each opposing party considered the teacher corps as a powerful means by which education could be passed on to the populace, and due to this, their work was continuously under suspicion. On the other hand teachers themselves had to undergo their own re-education and had to re-adjust to the new situations, which gradually evolved along the nineteenth century.

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