

## **The Local and the Global: Malta, Media and Empire in the Twentieth Century**

Chandrika Kaul  
University of St Andrews, Scotland

In recent decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in the intersections of British imperial culture, transnational communications and globalisation. This article on Malta forms part of a wider research project which explores how issues encompassing popular culture, colonial media policy, print nationalism and technological imperialism, were debated and challenged within the framework provided by the largest global and trans-imperial media institution, the Empire Press Union (EPU), which became the Commonwealth Press Union (CPU) in 1950.<sup>1</sup> The CPU folded operations in 2008 after 99 eventful years, though it continues to retain an internet presence.

It is critical to move beyond dichotomous interpretations of empire and periphery, colonial and colonised, and to try and bring debates about the communication cultures of Britain and her empire within the same analytic frame. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the rapid expansion of media globalisation and the entrenchment of a 'multimodal landscape of communication' (Gunther Kress). Indeed, it was the consequent development of transnational information communities epitomised by the growth of institutions like the E/CPU, which enabled a small colony like Malta to engage effectively on an international stage. These decades were also critical in Malta's political fortunes as she transitioned from a colonial dependency with limited self-governing powers to complete independence in 1964.

The strategic location and military role of the Maltese islands during the course of twentieth century European and world history, is too well known to require further recounting. However, what is far less researched is the development of its media and especially the communication links between the Maltese press and British global news networks. It is within this context that I want to explore the role of its English language press and the contribution of some notable figures associated with it, namely, Professor Sir Augustus Bartolo and the Hon. Mabel Strickland, O.B.E. I will argue that their actions were primarily motivated by two broad agendas: first, to help position Malta more prominently on an international stage in the context of a fast evolving media environment and shifts in the balance of political power as decolonisation gathered momentum. Second, to strengthen the appeal of their political parties, policies and personal standing within the Maltese domestic sphere. The English language press catered largely for the elites in a society where illiteracy was the norm. Circulation data is scarce but there is no denying that English was the lingua franca of the establishment and its extension as the preferred popular language of choice (instead of Italian) during the inter-war years, received a major boost by Italian fascist aggression during the Second World War. Combined with a relatively circumscribed readership, this allowed a few major English language newspapers to exercise a disproportionately seminal agenda-setting role. It is a well-accepted fact that the value of the media in the public sphere is enhanced during periods of crisis. Within Malta the role of the press was further strengthened by the political uncertainty associated with the curtailment of self-governing powers in the 1930s and the reversal to Crown colony status till the end of the Second World War. The post-war decades witnessed rising nationalism amidst challenging economic times in Malta and a swiftly transforming imperial and international context. These were also years when new press laws, ordinances and legal amendments were introduced, especially after 1929, to defend the British administration *vis-à-vis* the Fourth Estate, thus setting up an intriguing dynamic in the press-politics nexus.

### **The Empire/Commonwealth Press Union**

After the inaugural Imperial Press Conference in London during June 1909, the EPU was established to harness the influence of communication and media technologies to the cause of imperial unity, to address issues of mutual interest to the British imperial press family, and to encourage intra-imperial cultural interchange. It brought

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<sup>1</sup> Chandrika Kaul, *An Imperial Information Community: the Empire/Commonwealth Press Union, Globalisation and the Modern Media 1909-1961* (Palgrave MacMillan. London, forthcoming 2016).

together under the aegis of the British press, journalists, proprietors and news agencies from the Dominions, India, Crown colonies and protectorates. As I have discussed elsewhere, the E/CPU was remarkably successful over the course of the twentieth century in exerting influence upon successive governments within Britain and in turn impacting on colonial communication and media policy across her global empire.<sup>2</sup>

Directed from its headquarters in London, the E/CPU convened eight Imperial and Commonwealth Press Conferences between 1920 and 1961, meeting twice again in London during 1930 and 1946, twice each in Australia-New Zealand (1925, 1955) and Canada (1920, 1950), as well as once in South Africa during 1935. In 1961 the Conference was held in Asia for the first time when it was jointly hosted by the Indian and Pakistani media. This self-styled 'Parliament of the Press'<sup>3</sup> provided a substantial platform for debates over issues of press standards and responsibilities, new media technologies, intra-imperial news flows and the global communication environment, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> One of its foundational principles was an unswerving adherence to a free press and a suspicion of government regulation. Its operations were imbued with the libertarian rationale for the mass media, a view which assumed that empire and free enquiring journalists were mutually self-reinforcing.

The E/CPU had always prided itself on its inclusivity, embracing within its folds newspapers of all opinions. A striking example was India with a population of over 300 million which remained a subject colony till 1947, and was characterized by stringent press censorship and propaganda on the one hand, and, on the other, by a growing anti-empire indigenous journalistic culture. Indian participation raised challenging questions about the fundamental basis of the imperial-press nexus.<sup>5</sup> Similar concerns with government control were also voiced at the other end of the spectrum by much smaller colonies like Malta, where despite significant grant of self-government by the early 1920s, the press was subject to systematic official and ex-officio control. Thus the E/CPU provides an early example of the functioning of a transnational organisation, akin to the Commonwealth itself, with the specific remit of incorporating and articulating the varied interests of members differently situated in terms of power, resources, geography, and media context.

### **English Language Press and Politics in Malta**

Anyone attempting to study the modern Maltese press is confronted by the challenging fact that there does not, as yet, exist a historiographical tradition nor a robust conceptual framework to approach and define the field. Nor are there definitive historical narratives of the modern press and comprehensive circulation and readership data sets. Media institutions also remain under explored. In short, media history as a genre is in its infancy in Malta. It is not possible to discuss the explanatory factors for this phenomenon here, but there is little doubt that the nature of partisan politics, the stranglehold of non-secular institutions and the protracted struggles over language from the late nineteenth century, have all combined to impede a cohesive overview of the development of print. Further, the dominant theoretical paradigms of Anglo-American journalism research has excluded the case of small states like Malta from its purview, their media being judged as too idiosyncratic and limited in scope for useful comparison.<sup>6</sup> This situation also reflects the fact that whilst the Anglo-American tradition is founded around the ethic of objectivity, in Malta partisan and advocacy journalism has been the norm.

It is a striking facet of Maltese journalism history that from its inception the mainstream press has been conspicuously aligned with politicians, political parties and ideologies - secular and religious. Freedom of the press meant, to a great extent, the freedom to be politically partisan, not politically neutral. There is some justification therefore in the charge that historically the Maltese press was merely a mouthpiece for various pressure groups - political, sectarian and religious. Sammut contends that this situation has persisted into contemporary Malta where a partisan press has 'developed a new plumage and stronger wings.'<sup>7</sup> The forces of modernisation and commercialisation remain weak and even after the advent of private broadcasting in 1991,

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Chandrika Kaul, 'India, the Imperial Press Conferences and the Empire Press Union: the diplomacy of news in the politics of empire 1909-46', in C. Kaul (ed.), *Media and the British Empire* (London, 2013), 125-144; also Chandrika Kaul & D. Cryle, 'The Empire Press Union and the expansion of imperial air services 1909-1939 with special reference to Australia, New Zealand & India', *Media History*, vol. 15, no. 1, Feb. 2009, 17-30.

<sup>3</sup> This is how the first Imperial Press Conference styled itself.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of such issues see Chandrika Kaul, 'Media, India and the Raj' in Andrew S. Thompson (ed.), *Writing Imperial Histories* (Manchester, 2013), 188-215.

<sup>5</sup> See Kaul, 'India, the Imperial Press Conferences and the Empire Press Union'.

<sup>6</sup> C. Sammut, *Media and Maltese Society* (Plymouth, 2007), chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Malta became ‘the only European democracy allowing political parties to privately own radio and television stations that serve to amplify a polarized political culture.’<sup>8</sup>

There does, however, exist a biographical tradition in Malta which has encompassed the lives of seminal politicians who were also journalists, including, Sir Gerald Strickland, Mabel Strickland and Professor Augustus Bartolo.<sup>9</sup> Newspapers have also continued to be utilised as primary source for socio-political and economic research. In recent decades there have been some welcome attempts to redress the lacunae with respect to press history, though not all of this work is currently available in English. Thus, for instance, there exists the Kullana Kulturali series which has a volume by Frendo on the social history of Maltese journalism titled *Mic-Censura għall-Pluralizmu: Il-Gurnalizmu f’Malta 1798-2002*.<sup>10</sup> Frendo has also done some pioneering work on the press which is available in English, as is the unpublished MA thesis by Ungaro which offers a helpful narrative history of what he terms the ‘popular press’ from 1927-1947.<sup>11</sup> Another useful publication, *Printing in Malta 1642-1839*, covers a wide time-span devoted to early printing history, though it is not a study of the press per se.<sup>12</sup> A welcome new institutional account is Aquilina’s two volume study titled *Strickland House*.<sup>13</sup> These books spanning the years 1921-1947, deal with the launch and development of such iconic titles as the *Times of Malta* (ToM) and is particularly detailed in considering the newspaper’s role during the Second World War. Yet their main preoccupation remains the life and career of Gerald Strickland and his daughter Mabel, and thus it is as much a social and political history of Malta. Aquilina had joined the ToM as a reporter in 1964 and served as editor between 1993 and 2003, and this professional association is reflected in the style and approach of his books. Significantly, his insights are based on access to correspondence and private papers of the Strickland family and the ToM archives before their destruction by the great fire in 1979. For the general researcher, this absence of a press archive is compounded by the fact that private collections that could shed further light on the history of Allied newspapers and especially Mabel’s career, remain inaccessible due to long standing legal disputes relating to her estate.<sup>14</sup>

After the Treaty of Paris and with the grant in 1838 of the right to print a newspaper in Malta, the main English language publications reflected the successful imposition of a British blueprint of advocacy and control, an approach that bears striking resemblance to imperial efforts elsewhere in the subject empire like India.<sup>15</sup> In the twentieth century, this press was modelled on its Fleet Street counterpart with respect to objectives, typography and layout. Strickland sought the advice of British press barons like Lords Iliffe and Beaverbrook before launching the daily ToM. The leading newspapers maintained London correspondents and relied on Reuters, the telegraph agency of the empire, for regular news of the outside world.<sup>16</sup> Frendo claims that by end of the nineteenth century, most ‘national’ newspapers (including in Maltese and Italian) were family owned and run.<sup>17</sup> Ungaro cites 24 English and Anglo-Maltese newspapers, of varying frequency, circulating between 1927- 47.<sup>18</sup> Of all periodicals published in these decades, 40% were in English.<sup>19</sup> The main dailies were priced at between 1d and 1.5d in the inter-war years and about 16-20 pages in length. These dailies varied between featuring news or advertisements on their cover: the ToM always featured foreign news on its front page whilst the *Daily Malta Chronicle* had international news in its inner pages. Advertisements - classifieds and full page - were also strewn throughout their pages, as were photographs and illustrations. Proprietors routinely advertised in Britain to recruit new staff. Journalism training was largely absent in Malta before the Second World War (and limited prior to Independence) and illiteracy remained high. Even after the War, ‘about one-third of the gainfully occupied population was

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> A. Koster (ed.), Harrison Smith, *Lord Strickland* (Amsterdam, 1983); Joan Alexander, *Mabel Strickland* (Malta, 1996); J. Calleja, *Augustus Bartolo 1883-1937: Gurnalist, politiku, imhalled* (Malta, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> H. Frendo, *Mic-Censura għall-Pluralizmu: Il-Gurnalizmu f’Malta 1798-2002* (Malta, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> See H. Frendo, *Maltese Journalism 1838-1992: A historical Overview* (Malta, 1994); John Ungaro, ‘The Role of the Popular Press in Maltese Society and Politics 1927-1947’ (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Malta, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> W. Zammit, *Printing in Malta 1642-1839* (Malta, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> V. Aquilina, *Strickland House*, Book One (2010) & Book Two (Malta, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Alexander mentions this as a major concern during her research in the 1990s. The situation has continued till the present as confirmed by Aquilina via email correspondence with the author in 2015.

<sup>15</sup> See Chandrika Kaul, *Reporting the Raj, The British press and India* (Manchester, 2003); Chandrika Kaul, *Communications, Media and the Imperial Experience, Britain and India in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Other agencies like the American Associated Press were also used.

<sup>17</sup> H. Frendo, ‘The press and the media in Malta’, *Entire*, 2004, abstract, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ungaro, *The Role of the Popular Press*, Appendix F.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

illiterate.<sup>20</sup> Amongst the press we find an interesting mix of the ad hoc and the professional. Often Maltese journalists learnt their craft on the job, as it were. Thus Mabel employed John Xerri (or Scerri) in 1935, first as her chauffeur and a few years later as a staff photographer on the ToM.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, John Bugeja had previously worked as a correspondent for the *New York Times* in Italy and Jack Jenkins, who became editor-in-chief of the Sunday edition of the paper during the 1940s, was a journalist from London. These writers also served as Malta/Mediterranean correspondents for London dailies like *The Times* and for Reuters. Joseph Bartolo of the *Daily Malta Chronicle* and Winifred Cutajar Beck, news editor on the ToM, both worked as representatives for Reuters. Amongst the prominent English publications of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries included the *Malta Penny Magazine*, the *Malta Chronicle and Imperial Services Gazette* and later the *Daily Malta Chronicle* (which changed sub-titles on a few occasions), *John Bull Malta*, the ToM, the *Sunday Times of Malta*, *Bulletin*, *Malta Herald*, *Mercurius*, *Malta Times* and *Mid-day [News] Views*. Also printed in Malta were government publications like the *Malta Blue Book* and the *Malta Government Gazette*.

Lord Strickland once remarked that ‘to influence politics one must have a share in the control of the press.’<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that many prominent proprietors and editors were also politicians, holding office as British appointees or elected members of Malta’s legislature, the Catholic Church or labour unions. Maltese politics during the twentieth century was ‘notoriously acrimonious and vituperative’.<sup>23</sup> For the elites, the press served as a vehicle to articulate their political ambitions or grievances, to demonstrate support for British foreign policy, to help fight partisan battles within the domestic sphere and to legitimise their self-appointed role as trustees of the Maltese public welfare. However, this does not imply that such newspapers were mere propaganda sheets. A careful perusal of their pages reveals news reports and editorials that offered balanced, informed comment on a range of Maltese, British and imperial developments, with extensive space often devoted to momentous events from around the world. During the 1930s-40s, Malta’s proximity to major theatres of conflict like the Abyssinian crisis and the Second World War, further raised the profile of her English language press, as did her consistent support for the Allied cause, and for withstanding relentless Italian and Nazi bombardment and propaganda. An image of the George Cross, the highest civilian honour awarded for gallantry to the entire populace of Malta on 15 April 1942, was proudly displayed next to the crest of the ToM on the front page and served as a poignant reminder of this association.

### **Malta and the Empire/Commonwealth Press Union**

Maltese English language journalists took a spirited role in the E/CPU from its inception. The early protagonist was the joint editor-proprietor of the *Daily Malta Chronicle*, Professor Sir Augustus Bartolo. Bartolo’s family had established the paper in the 1880s and prior to the appearance of the daily ToM, the *Daily Malta Chronicle* was justifiably proud of being the highest circulating English daily: the Malta Blue Book for 1927 stated its circulation as 5,000. The paper was sold for 1.5d till 1936, thereafter being reduced to 1d in part, undoubtedly, to compete with the ToM. It usually had 12 pages rising to twenty on Saturdays.<sup>24</sup> Bartolo also held high political office as Minister for Education, Emigration and Labour. He led the Maltese Constitutional Party, was Deputy to the Maltese Premier and leader of the Senate. He also held honorary membership of several British associations including the Royal Historical Society, was a barrister and Law graduate from Malta University and a widely published author. Bartolo was only an observer at the first Imperial Press conference, but participated as a delegate at all the three subsequent conferences between 1920-30. (There was no Maltese representation at the 1935 Conference.) Eventually Bartolo’s party was amalgamated into Strickland’s to form the Constitutional Party and the *Daily Malta Chronicle* also did not survive the pressures of the Second World War folding operations abruptly in 1940. Aquilina claims that this was precipitated by Strickland’s ‘obsession to kill’ his rival’s paper and characterised by his ‘stormy relationship’ with Bartolo.<sup>25</sup> Inevitably participation in the E/CPU passed from Bartolo to journalists from Strickland’s Allied Newspaper Ltd, representing the ToM, *Il Berqa* and the *Sunday Times of Malta*, including his daughter Mabel (1946, 1950, 1955) and George Sammut, editor of the *Sunday Times of Malta* (1961). These delegates were initially accorded associate status, progressing to full membership (with one seat) during the inter-war years. Some like Mabel, also served on the Council of the E/CPU, which was the executive decision-making arm of the organisation.

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<sup>20</sup> Cited in Aquilina, *Strickland House*, Book Two, 350.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander, *Mabel*, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in A. Koster (ed.), Harrison Smith, *Lord Strickland* (Amsterdam, 1983), 444.

<sup>23</sup> D. Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy* (London, 1995), 112.

<sup>24</sup> Ungaro, *The Role of the Popular Press*, 64.

<sup>25</sup> Book blurb of Aquilina, *Strickland House*, Book Two.

All Maltese representatives undertook their role with due diligence, journeying vast distances to attend conferences, taking an active part in policy debates, meeting prominent British and imperial politicians, businessmen and communication entrepreneurs. The CPU finally came to Malta in 1970, as part of the study tour following its press conference in London. Mabel played host to the visiting delegates at her home, Villa Parisio in Lija, and helped organise their three day tour of the islands. In 1971, she was awarded one of the highest honours in British journalism, the 'Astor Award', by the CPU. The award was established to recognise the contribution through the press to either "Commonwealth understanding or to the freedom of information." The citation proclaimed that Mabel had been:

fearless in upholding the precepts of the Press. She has displayed boundless energy in knitting together the common interests and the common purpose of the Press, not only of smaller countries such as her own but those of the larger Commonwealth nations. ...she has campaigned staunchly for compassionate understanding of national problems, for Press freedom, and for the training and recognition of journalists.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Local and the Global: The Stricklands**

If there was one person who epitomised the critical link between the local and the global as framed in this article, it was Mabel Strickland (1899-1988), Malta's only newspaper baroness. Mabel belonged to an aristocratic Anglo-Maltese world and the twin passions of journalism and politics were in her blood. Her father, Sir Gerald Strickland (1861-1940), first Baron Strickland and Count della Catena, was of Anglo-Maltese descent, and a substantial landowner in both northern England and Malta. He held several high profile Governorships including in Australia, was elected Conservative MP for Lancaster with a seat in the House of Commons (1924), raised to the peerage in 1928 and became the fourth Prime Minister of Malta (1927-32). Sir Gerald was a vigorous imperialist and saw Malta in the wider context of the world-wide British empire family, yet, simultaneously striving for increased self-governance in his tiny island-state. These apparently contradictory sentiments, permeated his politics as well as his journalism, indeed, it would be difficult to separate the two. During the 1920s, he founded *Progress* (later called *Il-Progress*), the first Maltese language evening newspaper. According to Aquilina, the 'quality' of Maltese newspapers was 'generally very poor and the tone of most of them, including those published by Strickland, was quite often virulent and scurrilous.'<sup>27</sup> Circulation was usually small and amounted to a few thousand copies per issue at this juncture, with very few papers making a profit. In 1922 Strickland also began publishing a weekly English language supplement to *Progress* called the ToM. The ToM prospered rapidly and became a daily in August 1935, averaging sales of around 2-3,000 in its first few years, though profit margins were miniscule due largely to the heavy investment in infrastructure, but also to the slow growth of literacy and readership. Its inaugural editorial stated unequivocally: 'Our outlook is imperialist.'<sup>28</sup> Strickland strove tirelessly to make Malta more British and his anti-Italian and anti-nationalist stance lead to great acrimony in his political life, a situation exacerbated, according to Cannadine, by his intolerance, vindictiveness and over-weening ambition.<sup>29</sup>

Sir Gerald's pro-empire ethos was embraced by Mabel, the third of his five daughters, who took over his journalistic mantle rather more successfully than his political one. Mabel's drive to consolidate links with the British press received added boost with her father's second marriage to Margaret Hulton, daughter of Edward Hulton, the British press baron and founder-proprietor of several newspapers including the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* and the *Daily Dispatch*. Hulton was also involved with the EPU's organising committee. Margaret used her substantial personal wealth to fund the establishment and underwrite the progress of her husband's newspaper empire, as she did the upkeep of his landed estates in England.<sup>30</sup> Mabel also remained financially beholden to her step mother for several years.

During her lifetime, Mabel became the single most powerful publisher in Malta. She was managing director of Allied Malta Newspapers Ltd, chief proprietor and concurrent editor of the ToM (1935-50) and the *Sunday Times of Malta* (1935-56). She often undertook roving correspondent duties, for instance, in 1945 she

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in *CPU Quarterly Journal*, June 1971, CPU press London, 1971, ICS 121/2/4, Senate House Library, University of London, hereafter ICS.

<sup>27</sup> Aquilina, *Strickland House*, Book One, 166.

<sup>28</sup> ToM, 7 Aug 1935.

<sup>29</sup> Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy*, 127; Aquilina, *Strickland House*, Books One and Two.

<sup>30</sup> See Cannadine, 109-129; Aquilina, *Strickland House*, Books One and Two.

acted as a war correspondent covering the Nuremberg trials on behalf of her own papers as well as for Reuters and in 1948 she covered the Winter Olympics from St. Moritz. One of her career highlights came during the siege of Malta (1940-43), when she kept her printing presses running without a pause, despite heavy destruction of plant and machinery. Looking back at this climactic period from the vantage point of the Silver Jubilee of the ToM, Mabel contended that it was the heat of that struggle which had enabled it to morph into a national institution. The ToM, 'originally a party paper, became a national newspaper, supporting the government of the day unless the principles of loyalty to God, Queen and Country were involved.'<sup>31</sup> In this life-and-death struggle, her newspapers played a heroic part: 'I was privileged to lead a determined team of dedicated men and women forming a gallant staff who never acknowledged either fear or fatigue and later, as the siege tightened, all suffered hunger.'<sup>32</sup> Similarly, toasting the Lord Mayor of London after the war, Mabel declared that the 'example of high courage' set by London during the Blitz had been inspirational for the Maltese, and the food and clothes parcels from the Lord Mayor's fund were life-saving. She singled out the BBC for praise in continuing its broadcasts despite heavy bombardment.<sup>33</sup>

In late 1941, Mabel was invited to deliver a lecture to the British Institute, London, on 'The Functions of the Press', an opportunity she utilised to expound upon a range of topics including the concept of the freedom of the press; a potted history of printing in the West; developments in the British press from the sixteenth century onwards; censorship in war-torn Europe and the contemporary state of the Maltese press. During the War she saw the role of the Maltese newspapers much like their British counterpart: 'They report the glory of victory and the grandeur of defeat; they mirror and unify the nation's determination to achieve Victory.'<sup>34</sup> Whilst acknowledging that the press as an industry was dependent on commercial success, she nevertheless contended that its primary 'vocation' was as 'the People's University, supplying untainted information to millions.'<sup>35</sup> Despite the occasional fallibility of journalists, the press 'provides its public with the living news of the day, views and entertainment, and in so doing records, as it occurs, history about people, places and events.'<sup>36</sup> The role of the editor was all-encompassing but 'he expresses the composite individuality of a vast and complex and delicately poised organisation.'<sup>37</sup> Mabel argued that a free press and parliament, were the cornerstones of democracy.

The Gangsters of Europe subjugated their press, killed and perverted truth, as a first step to waging total war. Throughout the British Empire the development of the Press went hand in hand with the development and maintenance of British constitutional liberties. They have strengthened and preserved each other.<sup>38</sup>

Whilst this statement may well have been an accurate reflection of developments within the Dominions, it ignored the reality of press control in the subject empire such as India. Nevertheless, it does reveal Mabel's firm aversion to the war time developments which impinged directly upon Malta as a result of Italian Fascism. She contrasted the 'diverse expression of opinion in the Press of the Democracies, as against the slavish adulation and false values recorded in the controlled Press of the Dictators'.<sup>39</sup> Mussolini and Hitler, she argued, 'by means of persecution, murder and the concentration camp', had ensured that in their countries there would be 'no Miltons and no Macaulays, to champion the freedom of the Press.'<sup>40</sup> She concluded by offering a sweeping commendation of the British press: 'Under the Union Jack the Press can safeguard its hard won position as the guardian of democratic liberty, by being true to its peculiar mission as the unassailable and independent vehicle of public opinion...'.<sup>41</sup>

In general, Mabel attributed the secret of her own success to delegation and was deeply involved with a variety of British institutions such as Chatham House, International Press Institute and the Royal Empire Society. She also dabbled in Maltese politics, though it is fair to say that in terms of achievement, this aspect of her career was far less successful. She served in her father's Constitutional Party which itself underwent several transformations during the inter-war years, eventually taking over the leadership of a revamped new party, the

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<sup>31</sup> 'Cavalcade', by Mabel Strickland, ToM, 6 Aug 1960.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Cited in H. E. Turner, *The Sixth Imperial Press Conference* (London, 1946), 151.

<sup>34</sup> M. Strickland, *The Functions of the Press* (27 November 1941), [published by Progress Press, Malta, 1977], 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Progressive Constitutional Party in 1953, but it remained small in scope. Her policies included unyielding support of the Anglo-Maltese connection, especially in the face of European dictatorships as well as narrow sectarian nationalism within Malta, though she remained an avowed Catholic and supporter of the established Church. Mabel's unflinching loyalty to Britain was conjoined with her deep affection for Malta and her obituary in the ToM acknowledged how, 'Throughout her life she worked so that Malta and Britain should live together and that Malta should have an honoured place in the Commonwealth.'<sup>42</sup> After the War, Mabel was briefly involved with attempts at closer integration with Britain on the Northern Irish model, but concerns over the potential repercussions of such a move on the Catholic Church made her withdraw her support. Her ideal for Malta was internal self-government within the Commonwealth, retaining the British combination of democratic traditions with its imperial ethos. The ToM defined this ideological stance succinctly in 1937:

Maltese Imperialists are anxious to remain in the Commonwealth not merely for sentimental reasons, or because of fanaticism or propaganda, but because of the promptings of Common Sense that teach how an extraordinarily high standard of living, freedom and safety is provided under Democracy.<sup>43</sup>

Mabel unceasingly championed Malta overseas and came widely to be identified with Malta itself – the CPU went so far as to claim that 'Mabel is Malta'.<sup>44</sup> A CPU interviewer, charmed by this 'extraordinary woman' wrote:

When you meet her, as I did, you begin to realise how she came to be on first-name terms with the island's 320,000 people, as well as with perhaps, several thousand more around the world to whom Mabel is Malta.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, the *Daily Telegraph* (London) expounded in 1945: 'She is an institution. It has been said that Malta is ruled by three people – the Governor, the Archbishop, and Miss Strickland.'<sup>46</sup> Both statements attest to the great strength of her personality. Yet, as a politician, her position was intrinsically weakened by the fact that she was a woman in a deeply patriarchal cultural milieu, compounded by her inability to speak Maltese. This latter became 'more and more serious with the gradual growth of a national identity. It meant even to the pro-English Maltese she became too much the symbol of the old colonial mentality.'<sup>47</sup> Her pro-British and anti-Italian stance, vindicated to a degree by the denouement of the war, nevertheless served to alienate various entrenched interest groups. She only took up Maltese citizenship at Independence.

Finally, I would like to suggest that Mabel was a rare example of a Maltese internationalist, an accolade made even rarer by the fact that she was a woman. Her great range of familial, media and political contacts gave her an entrée into most of the influential circles across the British world, including the British monarchy. Mabel first came to know Princess (later Queen) Elizabeth and Prince Philip, when they were stationed in Malta during 1949 and this association continued happily for the rest of her life. Her press career and involvement with the E/CPU provided her with another unique opportunity to fulfil ambitions in this regard, as did her engagement with wider imperial interests *per se*. This is epitomised by the close bond she shared with the Mountbattens. Mabel's mother, Lady Edeline, was close to Princess Victoria of Battenburg, Louis Mountbatten's mother, and he came to play a major role in Mabel's life. She was his confidante and ally and hosted the Mountbattens' frequent stop-overs during the 1940s and later when Louis became Viceroy of India in 1947. Mountbatten was also based in Malta in 1952 upon taking charge of the Mediterranean Fleet.

This claim of internationalism extended to the media institutions Mabel directed with unflagging enthusiasm and is revealed through a content analysis of her newspapers, especially her flagship ToM, which in its coverage, editorial comment and outlook, was intensely engaged with world affairs – for example, its longstanding attention to India - and far from being parochial. Thus, the very first number of the ToM on 7 August 1935, featured a front page story on the appointment of the new Indian Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow. As such the paper compared favourably with the best of Fleet Street during these years. Mabel's internationalism also extended to a life-long interest in Australia and to issues such as Maltese emigration within the empire. When addressing

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<sup>42</sup> Obituary, ToM, 30 Nov 1988.

<sup>43</sup> ToM, 3 Jan 1937.

<sup>44</sup> Front cover, *CPU Quarterly*, Sept 1969, ICS 121/2/4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 22 Feb 1945.

<sup>47</sup> A. Koster, *Prelates and Politicians in Malta* (Amsterdam, 1984), 133.

the Canadian Women's Press Club during the Imperial press conference in 1950, she compared the great discrepancy in population and size between Canada and Malta. The latter with a population of 3,000 to the square mile, necessitated that one in three was forced to emigrate and Canada, with its vast land mass and natural resources could provide an ideal home for them.<sup>48</sup> She expressed similar sentiments with respect to Australia during the subsequent conference held there in 1955. The Australian press claimed Mabel as their own referring to her as "Our Mate Mabel".<sup>49</sup> She also continued to be deeply concerned about Malta's 'future role in the world' even after retiring from active politics, and 'firmly believe[d] the future of Malta is interdependence in the Commonwealth and Europe – as is Britain's'.<sup>50</sup>

### **Maltese press perspectives and the E/CPU, 1920-1955**

Analysing the engagement of Bartolo and Mabel with the E/CPU will enable us to highlight some of the key issues engaging the Maltese press during these years. As a consequence it will serve to demonstrate how they utilised the transnational platform provided by the E/CPU to help address pressing concerns and achieve a more visible international profile. Further it will also enable an assessment to be made about the nature of press coverage within Malta and related issues like official attempts at controlling the media, press laws, and the general access to news and imperial information.

### **Bartolo and the EPU**

Professor Bartolo, a born and bred Maltese was, like the Stricklands, a devoted Anglophile, a fact demonstrated early in his association with the EPU when he was an active participant in their Coronation related celebrations in London during 1911.<sup>51</sup> His *Malta Daily Chronicle* stressed 'our long-trying and unalterable affection for the British throne',<sup>52</sup> and featured a special 'Malta's Hymn of Coronation' addressed to the Maltese Governor and sung in the Palace square to mark the occasion.<sup>53</sup> Bartolo attended the second quinquennial press conference convened in Canada in 1920 and was described in the Official history of its proceedings as 'the versatile Maltese and ardent British patriot'.<sup>54</sup> During its deliberations he reiterated how he was

deeply sensible of the honour of finding our Press among the Press of the Empire. Though we have a small Press, we have taken the Press of the Empire as our pattern, and we shall try more and more to shape ourselves according to their high standard.<sup>55</sup>

Emphasising his credentials as an imperial subject, Bartolo compared Canada and Malta arguing that both were conjoined to Britain not by force but willingly. In the case of Malta, 'the love of the Maltese people' had motivated them to 'refuse[d] their independence and our content to be a part of the Empire and to receive her protection'.<sup>56</sup> Simultaneously he also emphasized his Maltese credentials by stressing how, 'Of all the priceless jewels that make up the crown of the Empire, there was none more valuable than this little jewel nestling in the blue Mediterranean Ocean'.<sup>57</sup>

In other discussions during this conference Bartolo's interventions revealed his predilections as an educator when he argued for the further improvement of inter-imperial understanding through the unification of 'the curricula of universities' across the Empire.<sup>58</sup> He stressed how this harmonization of education standards could be supplemented by the interchange of lecturers and students. Bartolo also advocated the standardization of both commercial and naturalization laws within the empire.<sup>59</sup> He suggested that admission to 'imperial citizenship' should be 'more or less uniform' and restrictions on inter-imperial trade should also be lifted. He claimed to want to 'strengthen the bonds of Empire', which after the First World War was no longer 'a mere aspiration' but had

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<sup>48</sup> Cited in H.E. Turner, *The Seventh Imperial Press Conference* (London, 1950), 123.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in ToM, 30 Nov 1988, 32.

<sup>50</sup> *CPU Quarterly*, Sept 1969, ICS 121/2/4.

<sup>51</sup> See *EPU Monthly Circular*, June 1911, ICS 121/2/1.

<sup>52</sup> *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 7 June 1911.

<sup>53</sup> *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 22 June 1911.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Donald, *The Imperial Press Conference in Canada* (London, 1920), 62.

<sup>55</sup> Bartolo cited in Donald, *Imperial Press Conference in Canada*, 262.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Bartolo cited in Donald, *Imperial Press Conference in Canada*, 216.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.



become ‘an accepted fact’.<sup>60</sup> However, administrators had failed to implement changes within the complex imperial infrastructure to take account of these developments. According to Bartolo, in Malta British imperial interests did not ‘clash with nationalism, but goes hand in hand with it. They are mutually complementary.’<sup>61</sup> To the sounds of cheers and applause he proclaimed:

There never can be a great imperialist unless he is a great nationalist. I do not know a citizen of the Empire who does not love his people, and who does not point with feelings of pride to his language, his creed, and his country. That is why I take a place, however humble, in the ranks of those who are not afraid of the phrase “British Empire”.<sup>62</sup>

The British empire stood as the ‘greatest and noblest example’ of that ‘great heritage of liberty and justice.’<sup>63</sup> However, sacrifices needed to be made to strengthen the great imperial family. In Malta ‘the sense of nationality’ was ‘very strong’, but an ‘exaggerated sense of national individuality’ should not be allowed to impede imperial unity.<sup>64</sup> These sentiments neatly summarize Bartolo’s political position as a representative of the British Crown as well as a Maltese politician battling against pro-Italian and nationalist sentiment. Within the EPU family too, despite universal approval for such rousing sentiments, there was less unanimity in practise. Dominion representatives in particular were bound by their legal conventions on sensitive issues like universal imperial citizenship did not find universal favour.

Five years later saw Bartolo travel to the opposite end of the far-flung empire to participate in the next conference convened in the Antipodes. Participating in discussions about wireless telegraph charges and imperial communications, he contended that there were real problems about the proper and full dissemination of news across the Dominions and empire and contended that Malta ‘suffers unconsciously from misrepresentation and from lack of knowledge’.<sup>65</sup> At this juncture, civilian air travel was beginning to take off quite literally. Bartolo took a leading part in championing Malta’s unique geographical position and expressed confidence about the future role that the island nation could play in inter-empire air communication. Malta was ‘an essential stopping point’ en route to Africa and hence the British Air Ministry had built a large aerodrome there.<sup>66</sup> He also supported measures to introduce more rigorous copyright in news, informing the EPU about how his newspaper suffered on account of the fact that whilst it paid for a regular Reuters service, others ‘simply copy our cables and publish them later.’<sup>67</sup> On the question of free trade, he argued that Malta deserved a degree of protection to aid its economic development.<sup>68</sup> Bartolo also made the case for Maltese migration within the empire without discrimination, as he had done at the previous conference in Canada, claiming that it was less an issue about numbers and more a question of morality.<sup>69</sup> Discrimination would injure the spirit of imperial unity especially given the contribution of the Maltese who had been ‘standing up at great sacrifice to uphold British interests, British ideas, and we will find ourselves severely handicapped if Maltese are excluded from any part of the Empire.’<sup>70</sup>

When the conference convened next in London during 1930, Bartolo continued to advocate the causes raised over the previous decade. It was very challenging to attract the attention of the world’s press and as a journalist he was aware of a general lack of sustained interest about Malta amongst the British population. Bartolo was aggrieved that Malta had not been given what he considered its due recognition within the deliberations of the EPU: ‘I appeal to you to give my little island a little more attention than you have been wont to devote to it.’<sup>71</sup> In an attempt to inspire his fellow journalists about Malta’s role in the ‘greatest war in history’ prior to 1914, i.e. the Napoleonic campaign,<sup>72</sup> Bartolo was able to demonstrate his academic expertise. His oratorical skills and ability to draw upon historical precedents added a gravitas to his perorations making them noteworthy in the

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Bartolo cited in Donald, *Imperial Press Conference in Canada*, 242.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Bartolo cited in H.E. Turner, *The Imperial Press Conference in Australia 1925* (London, 1925), 65.

<sup>66</sup> Bartolo cited in Turner, *Imperial Press Conference in Australia 1925*, 89.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 134

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-50.

<sup>71</sup> Bartolo cited in H.E. Turner, *The Fourth Imperial Press Conference* (London, 1930), 63.

<sup>72</sup> Bartolo cited in Turner, *Fourth Imperial Press Conference*, 63.

annals of EPU proceedings. Napoleon had designated Malta as the ‘pivot and centre of a world empire’, he argued, and the fact that Malta had been ‘the first, even before she was actually British, to fight side by side with England’ against Napoleon should not be forgotten.<sup>73</sup> Even during the Great War, Malta had contributed far in excess of her resources and had ‘protected the main artery’ of the Empire.<sup>74</sup> It was largely in recognition of this support that Malta was granted significant self-government in the early 1920s, making her position akin neither to a Dominion nor strictly a Crown colony. This was precisely why Bartolo wanted

the help of British public opinion, the driving force of British politics, the maker and unmaker of ministries and, therefore, the central authority on which we are dependent in all matters that extend beyond the sphere of local concerns. In these matters England is our guardian and the custodian of our constitution...<sup>75</sup>

Bartolo was constrained in what he could utter given his position as a Minister of the Crown as well as a catholic member of a catholic government, and skilfully used the EPU platform instead to appeal to the ‘British and Imperial Press to support us.’<sup>76</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the marvels of modern communication were to the fore again and Bartolo was delighted when invited to speak on behalf of the Conference delegates to Senator Marconi using radio telephony. The visiting press delegates used the wireless beam station in Somerset to converse with Marconi aboard his yacht moored off Genoa.<sup>77</sup> Similarly aviation was a continuing preoccupation and Bartolo expressed his frustration at being unable to develop this dimension of the Maltese economy since they were not ‘entirely free agents’. The best sites on their islands had been earmarked for use by the Royal Air Force and they remained bound by the decisions of the Secretary of State for Air. The Maltese government had also approached Imperial Airways to request inclusion within their air routes but without success.<sup>78</sup>

As I have contended earlier, these E/CPU forays were also exploited to consolidate party positions in the domestic sphere and make political capital. This is brought out graphically in the contrasting reactions of the Maltese press. Thus the *Malta Chronicle and Imperial Services Gazette* (Bartolo’s newspaper), published detailed reports from every conference he attended, highlighted the key issues that he championed, printed verbatim copy of his speeches and covered his activities outwith its formal proceedings. For instance, reporting on Bartolo’s speech at the London conference in 1930, the writer remarked:

We print the full report the better to show the vigorous case made by Sir Augustus for the inclusion of Malta as a vital link in the Imperial air system. The activities of Sir A. Bartolo in this respect, as in others, afford ample proof of the absurdity of the allegations made in Malta by narrow-minded and selfish politicians about the “imperialistic” principles which actuate the members of the Government headed by Lord Strickland. Imperialism is an extremely valuable policy from the point of view of Maltese national progress – as valuable as so-called “Nationalism” is detrimental.<sup>79</sup>

Commenting on another ‘stirring’ speech made by Bartolo on the ‘Empire Press and Malta’, the paper argued: ‘Without any journalistic bias whatever, we can safely assert that the gathering of Empire Press representatives constitutes a Conference of as much significance and promise as any gathering and statesmen could be. The Press of the Empire represents an all-powerful force in Empire development – or retrogression. Hence Sir Augustus Bartolo’s address to the Conference on the subject dearest to his heart, and to ours – Malta – is an outstanding achievement in the interest of our little country.’<sup>80</sup>

On the other hand, the reaction of *John Bull*, Malta, to Bartolo’s return from the conference in Australia conveys a different perspective and is worth quoting at length. Under the headline - ‘The Hero Returns’, an editorial claimed how:

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>77</sup> See the long reports reproduced in the *Malta Chronicle and Imperial Services Gazette*, 10 July 1930.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Sir A. Bartolo on Imperial Air Services’, *Malta Chronicle and Imperial Services Gazette*, 3 July 1930.

<sup>80</sup> ‘The Empire Press and Malta’, *Malta Chronicle and Imperial Services Gazette*, 25 July 1930.

His return was made the opportunity for a display of Constitutional party prowess. The demonstration was a dismal failure because it was political and lacked support. There can be few Maltese who are not proud of Bartolo's performance - he went for abroad and rubbed shoulders with roaring lions of the powerful British Press and he also roared in turn. He did us all a service by bringing home to the Australians the truth about Malta. He toured Australia as a journalist, but his return to Malta was accepted by his partisans as the return of the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. No wonder, then, that the demonstration failed. Bartolo the journalist should profit by his latest trip abroad and order his affairs at home on the lines of his attitude in Australia. But there he was the champion of the Maltese, fighting the good fight on our behalf. Here we know him as the editor of a journal which does dis-service to the Maltese. Let Bartolo remain consistent with himself and preserve the good name of his people in their home-land. He has made a bad beginning by returning home under the auspices of a "demonstration" in his honour.<sup>81</sup>

The demonstration to greet Bartolo arranged on the Strada Reale involved, according to the paper, only a handful of supporters, a short motorcade and 'feeble attempts' at singing "For he is a Jolly Good Fellow", a response that had angered some pro-nationalist and pro-Italian spectators who shouted 'Abasso gl'Italiani' and 'Abasso i Nazionalisti'.<sup>82</sup> This editorial in the *John Bull* underlines the nature of sectarian and party politics in Malta and the role of the press as a partisan player. It supports my contention that the involvement in the E/CPU was utilised to serve the domestic political agenda of these politician-editors at the same time as raising the international profile of the Maltese press.

### **Mabel Strickland & the E/CPU: 'the microcosm of Malta' vs 'the wider world'**

This juxtaposition offers a useful entrée into the distinct worlds of journalism that Mabel sought to inhabit. For her the freedom of the press both as an ideal and as practical reality was a consistent preoccupation. As noted before, she was convinced that so long as the press faithfully reported and guided the public, it would remain a great force for stability and mutual understanding. An editorial in the ToM summed up this ethos of a free press as the 'freedom to exercise judgement and not liberty to exercise those destructive gifts of distortion and abuse such as certain pressmen in the past placed at the disposal of unscrupulous politicians.'<sup>83</sup> This issue formed a seminal segment of the deliberations of the EPU conference in London during 1946 soon after the end of the War and was to remain a prominent subject on the agenda of the subsequent meeting in Canada in 1950 wherein the decision was taken to change their nomenclature from Empire to Commonwealth Press Union.<sup>84</sup> Mabel was Malta's sole delegate on both occasions as well as in 1955 when the conference was convened in Australia/New Zealand.

During the conference in 1946, the ToM had a special report of the proceedings where the principle of the Freedom of the Press was discussed by Mabel, amongst others, who reflected upon the position of the smaller British colonies. In Malta there was 'the tendency of Information Officers to issue Government policy directives and expect these to be printed without abbreviation or comment. In many parts of the Colonial Empire the same attitude to the newspapers was found among Government officials.'<sup>85</sup> The paper also quoted Mabel's appeal to the British government: ' "I do think the Colonial Office would be well advised to establish the freedom of the Press throughout the Colonial Empire." ' Several smaller dependencies like Fiji and Bermuda, also echoed Mabel's sentiments about what they considered undue pressure on local editors and the difficulties of resisting the efforts of the Public Relations Officers especially where access to sources of news and comment was limited. In Malta, Mabel contended that the PRO 'think that the Press ought to print everything the Government hands out.'<sup>86</sup> The radio was also officially controlled and the government had loudspeakers constructed at public squares to broadcast their messages. She appealed to the Colonial Office 'to realise that there should be a little less pressure on local editors.'<sup>87</sup> Governors did not have 'an absolute right to insist on every word they send out being printed verbatim.'<sup>88</sup> She vociferously defended the right of journalists to be 'free to publish or not to publish Government

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<sup>81</sup> *John Bull* Malta, 16 Jan 1926.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> 'A Free Press', ToM, 28 June 1946, 6.

<sup>84</sup> See Chandrika Kaul, 'Media, India and the Raj' in Andrew S. Thompson (ed.), *Writing Imperial Histories* (Manchester, 2013), 188-215.

<sup>85</sup> ToM, 17 June 1946.

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Turner, *Sixth Imperial Press Conference*, 51.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

announcements.<sup>89</sup> She continued to defend this position at the 1955 conference where she noted how no MP liked having his speech abbreviated, but considered it unfair to insist that newspapers publish everything they uttered. Mabel cited a recent case of the Maltese Parliament refusing a Government demand that a ToM reporter should be brought before the bar of Parliament for omitting 'one word quite accidentally'.<sup>90</sup> The absence of press archives makes it very challenging to definitively cite the precise details of such references alluded to in Mabel's speeches. However, as I have argued, the linking of general discussions at the conferences with the realities of the press-politics nexus within Malta, made the engagement of Maltese journalists with the EPU both relevant and important. This is brought out graphically during 1946 when the EPU conference coincided with the attempts of the Maltese government to pass an amendment to the Press Law.

During the summer of 1950, the ToM again focussed on the links between what the E/CPU were debating in Canada and what was being discussed within Malta, noting how the subject of press freedoms aroused world-wide interest. Its editorial cited the appointment of a commission in Malta to discuss these issues in the light of a potential amendment to the press law, thus adroitly linking the global with the local. The ToM acknowledged that the vast variety of interests encompassed by the global British empire had seminal implications on the practical implementation of press freedoms and the nature of censorship. The editorial contended that there were 'special circumstances' to be considered as regards the degree of freedom which could be enjoyed in different parts of the empire, 'ranging from the measure of literacy or illiteracy of a primitive people such as is found in the African territories, to the accepted responsibilities of journalists in areas where defence and security are of high importance, such as in Malta.'<sup>91</sup> The paper felt that a useful purpose would be served if the conference could devise a charter on the freedom of the press which would be applicable to all 'dependent and semi-dependent territories', but acknowledged that practical considerations would inevitably make modifications essential. Malta was 'prepared to modify or alter its own law on how newspaper editors shall exercise freedom and how far that freedom can be extended without license. That the current law is open to improvement is generally agreed. Where difference exists is in the opinion on how that improvement should or would be effected.'<sup>92</sup> Further, the ToM felt that political attacks on opponents utilising the media – through press, pamphlets and poster campaigns - could and did routinely plumb new depths especially during elections in Malta.

It takes a courageous man or woman to embark on a political career and no one denies the right of these public spirited citizens to the redress accorded by the laws of libel and slander. Nor should anyone resist a suggestion that newspaper editors should make a deposit of guarantee that they are able to pay heavy damages if the Courts pass sentence on people who may have wilfully ruined the reputations of their fellowmen by the printed word.<sup>93</sup>

This editorial clearly reflected Mabel's own experience of running for office during these years and a rally of support from the press helped shore up her position. She also made her views transparent during interventions in EPU conference debates during 1946 and 1950. She held firm to these convictions throughout her editorial career and her institutional heritage and legacy remained her newspapers which enshrined her beliefs – political and journalistic. Thus the ideals that she brought to bear in her E/CPU discussions successfully managed to coalesce the local agenda with a global and imperial one. Her idea of inter-dependence rather than independence when it came to the British connection was evident throughout her life, journalism and politics.

The nature and form of press freedom on the one hand, and the practise of political and official control on the other, formed a cornerstone of the discussions within the press conference and dominated the agenda of the E/CPU. Mabel's substantial interventions in this connection highlight Maltese concerns and deserve analysis. In 1950 when the Conference met in Ottawa (and later toured several Canadian provinces), Mabel spoke on the topic of Colonial Press Laws explaining how the Colonial delegation had requested that she lead off on this subject 'because it so happens that in Malta there is one of the severest press laws in the Colonial Empire.'<sup>94</sup> It was, she explained, 'passed under responsible government, greatly strengthened under a subsequent Crown Colony regime in the days of emergency preceding the war, and used under a later responsible government when no emergency existed. This law is a legacy of power meant to deal with emergency.'<sup>95</sup> She took cognisance of the fact that there

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Cited in Sir Henry Turner, *The Eighth Commonwealth Press Conference* (London, 1955), 61.

<sup>91</sup> 'Press Freedom', ToM, 17 June 1950.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Cited in H.E. Turner, *The Seventh Imperial Press Conference* (London, 1950), 33.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

existed several crown colonies around the world in different developmental stages and their laws would consequently vary a great deal. She claimed that the press law which was invoked just the year before in Malta, had existed during the war and was essentially an emergency measure. It gave 'the government or the governor the power to suppress a newspaper.'<sup>96</sup> This law also gave persons in public life immunity from character assassinations, a fact that became more significant given that the law of gross libel was relatively weak in Malta as it could only award small monetary fines, unlike in Britain where there existed much greater protection 'against the practice of moral murder.'<sup>97</sup> Yet, Mabel could also see the other side of the case and contended that such legislation had some merit and must not be entirely abrogated. 'The island of Malta is a defence point, and the Communists exist there as they do in other places, with the power to abuse and attack government, authority and individuals, unless unscrupulous licence is legally curbed.'<sup>98</sup>

The perceived dangers from Communism was widespread during these post-war years as the Cold war threatened the political status quo in the West. The problem revolved around the methods that foreign powers might use against defenceless people who may or may not have access to the courts or money to prosecute, and helped explain the backdrop against which the Maltese press law was enacted.<sup>99</sup> She concluded that 'there is a lot to be said on both sides in this question. I do think it must be agreed that there has to be some power to protect backward people, and those in closely populated areas against abuse or lies or agitation by communist agents, blackmailers and agitators.'<sup>100</sup> In Malta she wanted,

the Malta press law very greatly altered, but not entirely abrogated. Truth flashes around the world faster than ever before and there are no standards for dealing with it except truth and a sense of proportion and decency.<sup>101</sup>

She accepted that the problem arose mainly when propaganda was masqueraded as truth as happened 'when news comes out of countries engaged in 'cold war'. Press laws are necessary to check this form of attack.'<sup>102</sup> In England, she noted how freedom of the press had been attained after a long struggle and in Malta it was granted only after 1838, 'because the granting of freedom is a great part of the continuity of British traditions. Malta still has a free press despite the press law, but it is dangerous to have it too free, and be able to indulge in license.'<sup>103</sup> She concluded:

We must have freedom in the Colonial Empire and Commonwealth, but it must have relation to different stages of legal, cultural and political development in the various parts of the Empire.<sup>104</sup>

In reaffirming the role of the EPU, Mabel argued:

We do feel we have a distinct security in the Empire Press Union and its Council. We do need protection against governors and, it may be, governments, in regard to possible abuse of press laws.<sup>105</sup>

She was especially concerned at their potential abuse in peace times. 'We feel that in such matters we would like to be able to fall back on the understanding and sympathy of an organised body of considered opinion in London.'<sup>106</sup> Another debate on the theme of self-regulation versus external regulation, took place against the backdrop of the establishment of the Royal Commission on the Press in Britain during 1947 and the demands for similar organisations to be set up from other former constituent parts of the empire like India and Pakistan. In this connection, Mabel maintained:

You cannot make people, or the press, moral by act of Parliament or by any press council. To have people of the country trust the press, the press must submit to appraisal by the people. .... Naturally

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

bureaucracy does not like criticism and is unduly sensitive to it. But members of Parliament get elected very often, quite successfully, without the help of the press. Why should they be so sensitive to criticism from the press?<sup>107</sup>

The case for the E/CPU providing significant support - practical and ideological - to the Maltese press, was made eloquently by Mabel during the 1955 conference proceedings. Member countries were encouraged to take problematic cases to the Council for guidance and support and Mabel noted how, 'There had been effective support from the Union in a recent flagrant breach of the freedom of the press by the Government of Malta. The public in Malta', she claimed, 'had suddenly realised, on reading the Union's resolution, that it was a really weighty opinion and that they had not elected a government in order to have a dictatorship. That had shown the importance of the Union.'<sup>108</sup> It was critical for Mabel that the press was united since 'it was only through united strength that they could preserve freedom, free minds for free men. This was particularly difficult in small communities with young governments. When a Government was first elected it did not like criticism.'<sup>109</sup> She claimed that one of the main concerns in Malta was 'the undermining of public confidence' made more apparent by a recent press law which enabled the Government to demand publication of any statement it liked. In response, Mabel pointed out that the ToM had devised a system whereby if they disagreed or felt any such statement was far from the truth, 'they printed the truth alongside it.'<sup>110</sup> Without access to editorial and personal correspondence and newspaper archives, it is very challenging for historians to reconstruct the specific links between such claims and corresponding events in the history of the Maltese press-politics nexus. Nevertheless, what this discourse serves to emphasize is the argument I have made throughout this paper about the significance attributed by Mabel to the E/CPU as an ally in her stance against encroachments on press freedom in Malta as well as a platform from which to raise her general concerns about the role and responsibilities of the Fourth Estate.

### **Concluding remarks**

The E/CPU provided Maltese journalists with both an international stage and an institutional context within which to raise fundamental questions about press freedom and the responsibilities of a free press as well as to critique the culture of secular and religious control at home. It directed the spotlight of the global media upon this small locality in the Mediterranean and highlighted uncomfortable realities for its governing elites. This process, in turn, helped raise the international profile of Maltese editors and the newspapers associated with them. It enabled Maltese E/CPU representatives to emphasize her unique position and continuing relevance as a superhighway in the international communication network. These delegates were also able to articulate demands for increased support from the imperial press community to assist in the further development of their media and with issues of specific concern to Malta, such as greater and cheaper access to global information and the professional training of journalists.

*Acknowledgements: The author would like to acknowledge with thanks the assistance of Professor John Chircop in facilitating research in Malta and Andy C. Eccles for help with computing issues.*

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>108</sup> Cited in Turner, *Eighth Commonwealth Press Conference*, 16.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.