

Servitor et Praefectus

His Excellency George Vella, President of Malta

Following months of gentle coercion to accept the role of President of the Republic, in the last weeks approaching 4 April, when a new Head of State is usually installed, and following certain negotiations to elicit political commitments on issues on which I have entrenched positions, I finally accepted to embrace this responsibility. I realised the fact that taking on a five-year commitment at 77 was not easy. Four years earlier I had a triple cardiac bypass, which thankfully left me with no disability whatsoever. I felt I still had a lot to contribute to my country and the more I thought about it, the more committed I felt.¹

In the days preceding the official installation, I was further encouraged by being informed that Members of Parliament from the Opposition side were also willing to back my nomination. This made me concentrate on the message I wanted to convey in my inauguration ceremony. The speech I prepared somehow flowed out with my thoughts and eventually portrayed all I had ever wished to do, but for obvious reasons beyond my control could not accomplish.

In retrospect, I realised that what I spoke about and promised in that speech was all against a blank background, assuming that nothing that

¹This article was written in 2021.

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was not foreseen in the speech could actually happen and distort, delay or completely deviate my plans. Nothing could have been further from what actually happened. I never imagined that I would pass through trying times that would test all my capabilities and practically consume the largest part of my attention and energy for months on end.

I could dwell at length on the first challenge which I had to face with mounting pressure, especially by civil society and other political forces, concerning whether the Prime Minister should resign or not in the light of developments connected with the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia and the alleged connections with the people in power. I could also equally expand and go into rather complicated reasoning to explain the conundrum I had to face eventually when the party in Opposition wanted to change its Leader of the Opposition in the House of Representatives. Both these episodes presented unprecedented challenges and had my undivided attention for months on end.

I am not going to expand on these episodes as these had political, legal and academic aspects, that I am sure will attract the attention of many a student or academic who would pick up these episodes as very interesting topics for a dissertation. Under those circumstances, I had to act. I had to take decisions. I had to evaluate expert advice given, that is not always all going in the same direction. I had to put an end to each of these problems and somehow move on.

This is what made the difference between these episodes and the other larger challenge we all had to face together as a nation... the COVID-19 pandemic. We could somehow control and present opinions for the legal political issues, but we could not control this viral infection, about which little or nothing was known when it hit us. The COVID-19 pandemic changed our lives and also provided us with an opportunity to realise the fragility of our societies, our economies, our trade connections, and to re-evaluate our priorities in life.

A virus, unseen to the unaided eye literally brought the whole world practically to a standstill. It is true that looking at the positive side of it, one has to admit it gave us an opportunity to see how loving and caring we can be as a society. It gave us the chance to re-evaluate certain professions, especially the caring professions which we normally used to take for granted. It made us spur on scientific knowledge to produce the soonest possible and effective vaccine. It made us realise that by reducing our polluting transport systems and our uncontrolled consumption, because of the restrictions we had to

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impose on ourselves, we gave the environment the breathing space to respond positively, ending with less pollution from toxic gases and airborne particulate matter.

The scariest part was seeing the havoc the pandemic was causing in Northern Italy. Images of army trucks loaded with innumerable coffins, being driven to be buried outside inhabited areas, still haunt me every now and then. All that time no one knew what would happen to our country and whether we would be in time to have the necessary human and material resources to combat this modern plague. Numbers were impressive. Knowledge was still scattered, and opinions on treatment ranged from the ridiculous to the reassuring ones that were scientifically based. It is no secret that in such circumstances, one's first concerns are about one's health and that of the immediate family and friends.

We all know that it was evident from the beginning that the most vulnerable were elderly people, possibly with added pathologies, which are frequently found in old age. I remember keeping myself informed about what the health authorities were doing and the ways in which they launched and sustained information campaigns which earned the trust of the general population and managed to have the people comply with instructions and directives given.

As days rolled by, we all experienced a certain accumulation of panic in the families of elderly people who were counting the minutes for their dear ones to be vaccinated. My biggest concern was what would happen were the virus to attack fragile, vulnerable, elderly patients in long term residential homes. When this happened, I spent quite some time trying to allay the fears of relatives who were by then in a panic and phoning anybody for help. Many patients from my past general practice were by now elderly and institutionalised. I could understand their relatives phoning me, as their previous general practitioner, ardently asking me to do something for them. I tried to help by calming these individuals and by reassuring them that the situation was under control. This was a fact and the health authorities proved their efficiency.

Apart from the medical aspect, the pandemic also had a disastrous effect on the workings of the Office of the President. We took all the measures advised by the health authorities and hoped for the best. However, we experienced a large number of cancellations, postponements and changes in our normal calendar of events. What was not urgent could be postponed. What could be done 'online' or

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‘virtually,’ we proceeded with in that format. Surprisingly, we quickly adapted to virtual work ‘practices.’ Incoming and outgoing visits were cancelled. So were the many courtesy visits the Office of the President receives in normal times.

The mask, the visor, and partitions between desks became the norm. Hand sanitizing, measuring temperature and adequate ventilation in offices became mandatory. Despite all these precautions, we sadly experienced the demise of one of our Palace staff members due to Covid-related complications. All of this did disturb the normal functioning of the Office of the President of course. Slowly and gradually, after one and a half years, we were inching our way back to normality, with gradual easing of protective measures, in a population which by now is mostly vaccinated and experiencing very low numbers of daily new cases and very low hospitalisations. The prospects of going back to pre-Covid conditions are encouraging, even though, as President, I still worry about whether what we passed through would have long-term effects even after COVID-19 abates.

I have in mind two particular issues. One is the impact the disturbance of school attendance at all levels could have on the socio-academic performance of our students. The second is the fact that during Covid, all sectors of the Maltese population experienced some sort of mental health issue for different reasons – loss of jobs, loss of family members, fear of the unknown, disturbed routines, and others. Will this eventually show up as some symptom or syndrome in a post-Covid world?

With Covid being eventually completely controlled, or as is most likely, becoming chronic and we learning how to live with it, gives us the opportunity to reorganise ourselves and harness our energies and thoughts to deliver that which is of utmost importance in a modern civilised society, a better quality of life, enjoyed in full respect of one’s rights and the rights of others, buoyed by a sense of security and stability, leading to prospects of prosperity and advancement in society. Utopia does not exist. Even though throughout the ages many speculated, wrote, and dreamt about it. Nearer our times, there were those who promised to deliver some sort of egalitarian state where nobody lacked anything, ending up in a situation where everybody lacked everything, most of all freedom. Freedom is people’s most basic yearning. It was denied to those that were deemed inferior, by way of skin colour, education, ethnicity or religion. Many thought they could

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grant freedom or withhold it according to their whims, their financial status, and beliefs of ethnic or racial superiority.

This was before the Enlightenment and the teachings of philosophers like Rousseau, but even today and much nearer to our times, all these years later, and after all those international declarations about human rights, we are still witnessing all around us flagrant abuses and deprivation of the freedoms any self-respecting human being yearns for and expects to enjoy by right. On the other edge of the spectrum, we are also witnessing the development of a liberal mentality that is moving towards more and more 'freedoms,' more liberties and less and less restraints, at times defying long-established norms of behaviours and social interactions. The digital revolution and the onset of social media accelerated and abetted such a mentality. We are witnessing a complete revolution in communication and the free flow of ideas. It requires a good dose of education and political maturity to find the right balance and accept the fact that one's liberty stops where it infringes on the rights of others... or so it should be. However, many do not even subscribe to this 'limitation' and claim the right to 'insult.'

Defining justice or what is just is not easy. That being said, we have to do our best to uphold justice under all circumstances if we want to live in a harmonious egalitarian community or country. Justice cannot exist in a vacuum. It has to be applied to be felt and be enjoyed by everyone. This is done through laws legislated through parliament. But is this enough? Having laws without them being implemented takes us nowhere. This is where, in modern society, the role of those who apply the law comes to the fore.

The legislative body promulgates laws. It is the police and the judiciary that apply these laws. This is what is understood by the rule of law. It implies compliance by the people and implementation by the judicial authorities and the law enforcement agencies. Application of the rule of law not only brings harmony and egalitarianism, it also promotes mutual respect and respect towards the authorities that be, as well as fosters tolerance or better still acceptance. One basic tenet of democracy is the separation of powers, most importantly that of the executive from the judiciary.

Recently, legislation was passed to achieve even more separation of powers, by changing the constitution to remove the appointment of the judiciary from the executive and place it in the hands of the President, advised by a specially set up committee whose composition

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is spelled out in a recent Constitutional amendment. Further changes in the Constitution made the tenure of office of members of the judiciary more secure, thus assuring more independence of action and more security in making judgements.

As President, I am proud that I gave my contribution, through the discussions I chaired in the Committee on Constitutional Reform, to see these changes in our laws materialise. Many harp on the notion that the President is the guardian of the Constitution. In theory it is true, and many also cite instances where, in spite of there being no written provisions on certain issues, the President's 'moral authority' should be exercised. The Constitution is quite clear and categorical about what powers the President has, and how and when they can be applied. The President's moral authority, rather in applying any constitutional measures, comes in mostly in timely pronouncements that can have a bearing on ongoing issues.

Rule of law and stability cannot be imposed forcibly. They are a way of living in a democracy to which one gets accustomed and which one expects as by right. Of itself, this is not enough because one does not expect respect for the rule of law or for stability if there is not a harmonious, transparent administration looking after the needs of all sections of society in order to avoid societal tensions and, at worse, civil strife.

This brings me to the much-talked about need for national unity that I also referred to in my inaugural speech. By 'unity' I mean specifically the 'bridging' of differences. Many people unfortunately misunderstand this concept and think that the ultimate objective is to make us all think similarly and agree on all issues, vote for the same party, and support the same football team or patron saint. We can be united while remaining diverse, holding different opinions and respecting each other's differences.

The unity I envisage is in the recognition and application of the same norms of respect and tolerance in spite of our differences. Searching for this national unity makes us respectful to each other, accept different opinions, and be proud of what makes us a nation and a sovereign state. If need be we will agree to disagree, politely. We will engage in discussion where it is persuasion and not coercion that convinces. Where facts are sacrosanct and opinions are free.

I am very worried because we seem to have lost respect for each other. We no longer tolerate divergent opinions. We do not mind using

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derogatory and offensive language on social media to attack others. We seem to have lost trust in each other. We have even lost trust in the institutions. We think everyone is corrupt, suspicious, or untrustworthy. We doubt everyone's integrity, everyone's honesty and everyone's competence. This is very unhealthy. Instead of pointing fingers at others, let us try to figure out how we can contribute to make things better. As President, I feel the responsibility to offer Maltese society a tool to help us all achieve a less polarised and more united society.

As a follow-up to the National Conference on National Unity which I held last year, shortly afterwards I launched a Foundation for National Unity, a permanent non-profit organisation which, through discussion, concrete actions, education, promotion of values, research and analysis of statistical data, investment in youth education, and community-based activities, amongst others, strives to promote concrete actions that could hopefully diminish the differences amongst us and help us develop a real sense of national unity in a healthy democratic society.

I feel that discussions should start on topics on which there is already a fair amount of consensus amongst us. Debating and discussing such topics will show us that there are many issues which unite us and about which it is not that difficult to come together. The environment is one such topic and a very important one at that. I am sure none of us needs any convincing that, as far as the environment is concerned, we have to put our house in order. The signs are all around us for everyone to see. We have been hearing continuously about the degradation of our environment and that of the whole planet. This has been going on for years now.

Today, I doubt whether there are still sceptics that are not impressed by the scientific data about rising global temperatures, climate change, the pollution of the oceans, atmospheric pollution, and the effects of all these on the weather, the flora and the fauna as well as on melting polar caps, desertification, water shortage, crop failure, and the threats of rising sea levels especially on low lying islands and coasts.

The target dates we are setting for ourselves, on the advice of scientific experts, to reduce CO₂ emissions and lessen the levels of methane and nitrous oxide from the atmosphere are not ages away from now. Target dates like 2030 and 2050 are within the lifespan of a large percentage of our population. Definitely, these will fall within the expected lifespan of our children, who will have to face the consequences were we to fail to reach the objectives that we, as

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the world community, are binding ourselves to reach in order to avoid the disastrous, if not cataclysmic, consequences computer models are predicting. This issue is not a national one, in so far as we are part of the community of planet earth. We are definitely not amongst the major polluters, but even so we share the same atmosphere and we will suffer the consequences of the non-compliance of other possibly bigger countries around the world.

The issue has political, economic, financial and social aspects. There are already concerns that the maximum allowable rise in global temperature of 2°C, agreed upon in Paris in 2015 during COP2, will not be possible as we have already exceeded 1.5°C in spite of all the measures that have been taken up to now.

World authorities are warning that if we want to have any chance of staying within the 2°C limit, as from now we have to stop all use of oil, coal, and gas in all their forms to produce energy. We need to make people more aware of where we stand. We need to educate, to inform, to implement legislation. I have to acknowledge the fact that over these last years we have been successful in passing on the message to our children in schools, making them more aware about what we should do to contribute towards making our environment more sustainable.

There are still, of course, those who, either through ignorance or out of sheer spite, continue to pollute and refuse to cooperate with the authorities. Disciplinary measures and strict enforcement of environmental laws would thus need to be adopted to bring such culprits in line with the law. However, education at all levels is the best way to create awareness of what we could expect if we ignore the warning signs of climate change and a deterioration in the environment. I am sure this topic would find its place on the list of subjects to be discussed by the Foundation for National Unity.

On the other side of the spectrum, a topic which elicits heated debate every time it is on the agenda and about which many have their own entrenched positions is the issue of migration. Here, we have the paradoxical situation wherein, when the Maltese are asked to contribute towards the missions for tragedies abroad or to help foreigners in humanitarian situations, they are the most generous of contributors, but when it comes to the issue of migration they act differently. The phenomenon of migration has been with us for a large number of years. Throughout the years we even received migrants from Bolshevik Russia, following the 1917 Revolution, we received

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migrants following earthquakes in Europe, we received migrants from Iraq. These were limited episodes, with limited numbers.

Regular migration proper from the North of Africa, across the Mediterranean, started in the early years of the twenty-first century and peaked in the last 10 years. As a front-line country, Malta together with Italy bore the brunt of ever-increasing numbers and more frequent trips on anything that could float and carry migrants toward Europe. Ever since we became members of the European Union in 2004, we always saw this phenomenon as one that had to be dealt with on a European scale with Europe-wide policies, and not only by the front-line EU countries themselves.

I am sure the large majority of Maltese would gladly offer humanitarian assistance were the numbers controlled and the episodes few and far between. What alarms the public is the fact that no one can predict when these arrivals will stop or what numbers of migrants we will have to face in the future. We are all conscious of the size of our country and of the carrying capacity of our resources. We are aware that contrary to other places like Lampedusa, we have no hinterland and that a few thousands arriving on a regular basis will saturate our facilities and strain our possibilities to offer effective help.

I believe that this is a phenomenon that needs the undivided attention of the EU and is a case 'par excellence' where the much talked about principle of 'solidarity' should be applied to the benefit of one and all. A lot has been done already by the EU to try to diminish the number of arriving migrants. What needs to be done is within the EU itself, namely to bring Member States to agree to distribute amongst themselves those migrants that qualify for refugee status or for international humanitarian protection so they will not accumulate on and remain in the front-line EU Member States in which most of them would have arrived in the first place. It is sad to note that, in spite of repeated attempts, negotiations, and nicely worded reports, the situation has not changed, meaning there is no consensus on proportional distribution of refugees amongst EU Member States once they would have achieved refugee status.

Recently I posed the question as to why is it that we have to wait for consensus among the 27 Member States, which we know is impossible to achieve, and not decide to have a coalition of EU Member States who are willing to participate and who agree to distribute migrants between themselves... a coalition of the willing, if one wants to call

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it so. Migration is a phenomenon that is not going to go away. If anything, with deteriorating environmental conditions on the African continent, the situation could even get worse. We have to think outside the box to find viable solutions. This issue is a very delicate one, from whichever perspective one looks at it.

Are we to accept the situation without complaint and take in anybody who decides to cross over to Europe and enter our search and rescue region, territorial waters, or arrive on our shores? Have we not the right to keep harping on about this issue with the EU to show more solidarity with front-line states? This is definitely a humanitarian issue, but it carries with it demographic, social, and economic aspects as well.

There should be no hesitation whatsoever where saving lives in peril is a must. That is our duty and we should stand up to be counted. However, anything that we do as a country and even more so as an EU Member State to deter people from deciding to cross over or be used by human traffickers, and to develop more solidarity between EU Member States, we should do with insistence and with determination. This is an issue which should not become a partisan one. This is an issue imposing itself upon the whole country.

What we should guard ourselves against is the emergence amongst us of right-wing movements and populist movements that target the migrants themselves and not the issue of migration. Even more importantly, we should guard ourselves against racism and all sorts of racial hatred, xenophobia, ostracism and inhumane treatment if not outright inhuman practices. This would be a subject that will definitely merit discussion in the Foundation. I do not envisage any closure or national agreement on the subject as long as circumstances do not change, but I do hope that by listening to each other and bringing the conflicting political perspectives together, one could clarify further that as a country we have to work together to correct and improve the phenomenon of migration, without antagonising the migrants themselves. These migrants are themselves the victims of a range of factors that coalesce to force them to move in search of a better quality of life away from persecution, war, poverty and other life-threatening situations.

I have touched on two subjects that will definitely feature in any future discussion on national unity. Speaking of bridging differences of opinion and coming to some point of accepted balance quickly

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brings to mind an issue we have already started facing, about which I am afraid there are no and will never be any half measures. I am referring to the issue of abortion. In this case, one is either in favour, that is 'pro-choice,' or 'pro-life.' One is either in favour or against the procedure. However, even in such an issue, we should not preclude informed, civilised debate, not so much to convince those who already have a strongly informed opinion, as to bring out all valid scientific and legal arguments on which to base one's future legislation and forming of opinions.

I have my well-founded doubts that many pro-choice people, especially the young, do not fully understand the implications of their choice. It is easy to repeat the slogans in favour of the freedom of a woman to act according to her decision and not reflect deeply enough on the fact that, in simpler plain language, a decision in favour of abortion means the killing of a developing human being in the uterus. My pro-life stance stands on the very simple question which should make each and every one reflect on the act itself as the killing of a nascent life: 'Where does the right to kill a foetus/baby in utero come from? Who gives one the right to do so? Where does that power come from?'

This is not only a moral issue, but even more an ethical issue. 'Thou shalt not kill' has been a tenet of civilised society centuries before it was also included in the precepts of any organised religion. We have to be true to ourselves and admit that there is always a sensation of guilt attached to every act of abortion, whether we admit it or not, whether we try to suppress it or not.

This does not mean that we should trivialise the at times extreme psychological issues many face when there is an unwanted pregnancy. We should empathise with these people rather than condemn them. We should offer all the help possible rather than ignore their plight. It has to be admitted that in many circumstances, it is not an easy situation. However, be that as it may, killing the baby is not the solution.

I realise that the discussion on a national level will be intense and possibly prolonged. We should, however, be aware of vested interests in introducing abortion even by foreign organisations that have money to invest. Furthermore, we must shed the mentality that since abortion is available all over Europe, why not in Malta too? This is definitely a *non sequitur*. Not all that is accepted in Europe is the paradigm of what is good and proper. I still believe strongly that we should have our

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informed, democratic debate on the subject, but in deciding, we need to be true to ourselves and our innate feelings, and not be influenced by what is common practice in Europe.

All along I have been affirming my pro-life stance simply on the ground of ethics and moral convictions. I never made the argument in favour of life from either a Christian, let alone Catholic standpoint. It goes well beyond that. It so happens that this stand fits squarely with the teachings of the Catholic Church and it is obvious that any campaign between pro-lifers and the pro-choice will see the Catholic Church as being deeply involved. On this particular issue, I have no difficulty in being on the same platform with His Grace Archbishop Scicluna. We have distinct roles in society, but as expected, we often find ourselves physically in the same place, talking the same language. There are of course issues on which we have different opinions, but these would be issues that are not directly tied to the roles we fulfil in the structural set up of our society.

I follow closely the pronouncements of the Archbishop on practically all occasions and have to say that I appreciate his knowledge and his reflections as well as the cautious and diplomatic way in which he expresses them. His homilies are well studied and prepared, and are themselves a fount of knowledge. Up to now, the collaboration that there has been between previous Presidents of the Republic and previous Archbishops has borne fruit and we have been enjoying the best of Church and State relations for many years. The best way of preserving this collaboration and cooperation is by having each side respecting the fact that Church and State have to work together whilst being conscious of their different missions and responsibilities towards the citizens.

I have noted that, on certain occasions, His Grace finds it difficult to hide his emotions, and on more than one occasion, a tear or two that welled up in the corner of his eyes did not escape me. This makes him all too human. One of the occasions on which it was clear that he was very emotional was precisely during the High Mass which he celebrated at St John's Co-Cathedral on the day of my inauguration to the Presidency.

A few days or weeks earlier, a strange and funny incident happened when, during Mass, His Grace realised that the ampulla which normally contains wine had been filled with whiskey. Someone had inadvertently switched the bottle usually containing wine for its Scottish distant cousin.

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Walking up St John's aisle together with my wife, carrying the offerings to the altar in those austere surroundings on that unique occasion, I half toyed with the idea as to whether I should ease the tension by assuring His Grace that what I bore was wine and not whiskey.

However, the occasion was too solemn to yield to such frivolity. So, I decided on bearing a blank face and refraining from any comments. On handing the water and wine ampullae to His Grace, he leaned forwards and, with an impish smile on his face, asked me point blank: 'Are you sure this is wine and not whiskey?' We both smiled and felt more relaxed. When Mass was over and His Grace walked away, he looked perfectly sober and had a steady gait.