



## ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

# Calling the shots

I feel that this ballot has shown us how much our country is developing in terms of participation, engagement and calling the shots.

There are a number of pointers that indicate that our society is growing as a nation. The evidence that people wanted to discuss this issue can be seen in the number of citizens that signed the petition even though this issue, to begin with, troubled two very specific interest groups, the hunters and the bird enthusiasts. However, it eventually found its way onto the national agenda and many shared their thoughts on the matter during the campaign even if the issue might not be tenuously close to home.

(The following are some thoughts, not stated in any particular order of significance).

This referendum confirmed that the place of *Alternattiva Demokratika* in the political spectrum remains weighty. They have still not managed to elect an MP and I very much doubt they ever will, but once again they have championed an issue, together with a coalition of organisations. I believe that from all three political parties, *Alternattiva Demokratika* is the one that merits the wreath for taking an unambiguous position.

Some have claimed that this referendum has placed environmental issues on the agenda. Maybe, but I'm not that convinced. This referendum, the way I see it, was not an issue sandwiched between the environmentalists (and the broad agenda they represent) versus the hunting lobby. I feel that people weren't interested in making the connection between the two; that is, the 'environment agenda' and stopping hunters shooting quail or turtle dove during spring. Nonetheless it is exciting to see a social movement re-emerge. The environmental lobby in the public acuity had practically disappeared. However, there is slim hope that this referendum might help the ecological movement to return and engage with so many micro-issues that have been left idle.

I believe that the SHout campaign was out-done by a very slick and effective 'IVA' campaign possibly supported in an unofficial way by the Labour Party. The NO front felt sporadic at times and possibly divergent. It is enough to see the post-referendum articles on the three newspapers that made up this partnership to feel there is a lack of interface between the different segments of the campaign. The ability to bring it all together seemed to have bungled. Apart from that, the campaign seemed to run out of

steam in the last straight. I feel that the fact that the YES faction started campaigning almost two weeks after the NO worked to the former's advantage. Apart from that, I think that lawyer Kathleen Grima, who fronted the YES campaign, managed to create the perfect decoy; a woman (in a commonly man's world), a lawyer and not a hunter herself. Soft spoken, very educated and in her own way looks like a very regular middle-class career woman. She managed to shroud the dark, uneducated image that hunters are associated with. I predict she will be getting calls from Dr Joseph Muscat and Dr Simon Busuttil to join their ranks. On the other hand, I believe that a couple of the 'faces' of the NO campaign did not have a lasting hold. With all due respect, but I think the SHout campaign should have 'shouted less' and fronted Mark Sultana more, a man extremely capable, passionate, rational, controlled and likeable. He would have provided the perfect head-to-head with Dr Kathleen Grima and he certainly required no chorus.

Another issue that came across is that this referendum became the urban versus rural struggle, in other words it turned into a social class issue. Once again Malta was split between the districts that are almost exclusively supportive of the hunting lobby to those that aren't. The interesting issue that keeps surfacing is that most of the regions that support the hunting lobby are red zones whilst the blue zones are quite antagonistic. Dr Simon Busuttil took a disengaged role whilst Dr Muscat was more up-front on the issue making his position repeatedly clear that he will be voting IVA. I believe that the cue Muscat gave to his followers and the claim that work that was done behind the scenes by the Labour Party might have tilted the balance.

The editorial position that *The Malta Independent*, *The Times of Malta* and *MaltaToday* took doesn't seem to have had the foreseeable effect. This could be because they were preaching to their readers, most of which were already converted. I wonder if newspapers will take on board other issues that might require equally important collective engagement.

I think that the fifth estate has had its share of importance. Social media has become a crucial component in every campaign that takes place in this country. Social media has integrated our personal lives,

“

**The interesting issue that keeps surfacing is that most of the regions that support the hunting lobby are red zones whilst the blue zones are quite antagonistic**

”

beliefs, aspirations with the debates and discussions that come to pass. Social media, namely Facebook and Twitter, have inspired a great deal of commentary during the referendum debate because it gave the opportunity for many people to voice their thoughts. What is interesting is that a great deal of arguing has created an encounter and people have changed positions because of such discussions happening on this platform. There is no doubt that Twitter and Facebook are now fully immersed in the political and social debate.

The polls, I believe, in a way, were the downfall of the SHout campaign. It gave them a false sense of reassurance that people were receptive to their message. However, it was clear that the undecided component was not taken cognisance of and this obviously swung towards the YES. It would be even more worrying if the NO camp knew that the blue districts were more reluctant to go out to vote and not enough was done to address that matter.

I believe that a large number of people voted YES because they felt that their own hobbies, ranging from the *festa* to pyrotechnics, from fishing to going round with their pony in the village square would be threatened if this referendum goes through. I think that SHout should have contested this issue more vigorously and forcefully. There was an element of sympathy vote in this

referendum that went in the direction of the hunting lobby at the eleventh hour.

I still can't fathom the vicious statements that are being directed at the opposing camps. I personally voted NO but the intolerance from the anti-hunting lobby is miserable. I think treating people as if they were morons or hypnotised into voting YES is ridiculous and I wouldn't expect it from people I highly regard. I think that individuals have a mind of their own and if anything, criticism might need to be targeted at the way the SHout campaign unfolded. The disrespect and impudence coming from the NO camp is seemingly taking over the obnoxious attitude and behaviour the hunter lobby is so well-known for. I think that a campaign happens for a reason. Now calling people 'sheep', 'goats', 'barbarians', 'stupid', 'delirious' and 'confused' amongst others is sad to put it mildly. If people, even in small proportions preferred YES it means that they were either already convinced on the issues at stake or else the SHout campaign did not do enough to plead their case.

Another thought comes to mind – what if, 16 and 17 year olds were allowed to participate in this referendum?

In my opinion this referendum all in all showed us that the public sphere still emerges as a strong mechanism that is keen to debate and critique and is not simply satisfied with representation. We are witnessing communities that want a responsive involvement and not simply remain 'spectatorial'. Political parties are starting to realise that the rigid structure, hierarchical set-up, ideological content and targeting macro-issues is not good enough. I believe that this referendum has helped parties realise that politics has to be done differently. People have become reticent of traditional forms of party politics. Political ideologies don't stand ground anymore and people prefer to focus on immediate concerns that impact their personal lives. The more time passes, the clearer it is that there exists a growing divide between politicians and the needs of the community. More people feel that they do not need the middle 'wo/man' (the politician) to help them make up their mind because they have the fortitude to make their own choices.

Naturally as these reflections are done with the benefit of hindsight.

Dr Andrew Azzopardi  
Senior Lecturer, Department of  
Youth and Community Studies  
Faculty for Social Wellbeing,  
University of Malta &  
Broadcaster – Ghandi xi Nghid  
[www.andrewazzopardi.org](http://www.andrewazzopardi.org)