

# Gozo: The first and only Electoral District to keep its Identity

JOSEPH XERRI

## Introduction

The first constitution to include an elective element, was that granted by the British by Letters Patent of the 11th May 1849. This Constitution proclaimed that “*there shall be within our said Island of Malta and its Dependencies a Body Politic to be called and known by the name of The Council of Government of Malta. And We do hereby grant and ordain that the said Council of Government shall consist and be composed of eighteen persons ..... The Governor .... be one of the members.... and that nine other Members of the said Council shall always be persons to be nominated or designated by Us, and that the remaining eight members of the said Council shall always be persons holding their place therein by virtue of elections to be for that purpose made by the Inhabitants of Malta and its Dependencies...*” (Malta Government Gazette No. 1665, 23 June 1849: 35)

These Letters Patent empowered the Governor that by Proclamation “*shall also be determined how the said Island and its dependencies shall for the purposes aforesaid be divided in Electoral Districts*” (Ibid: 36).

In his proclamation (Ibid: 43-9) the Governor empowered those in charge of the elections to “*form the Islands into electoral districts and make out a list (of electors) for each district*” (Ibid: 45) Malta and Gozo were divided into thirteen districts, but this division was specifically made just for registering voters and not to return individual members of the Council. According to the same proclamation it was stated clearly that electors in the Island of Malta were to elect seven members, while the eighth member was to be elected from Gozo and Comino. (Ibid: 45-6) Thus Gozo indirectly gained the right to be represented as a distinct district in the Council of Government, a right which was not given to the other districts.

For vote distributing and collection purposes, Malta was divided in seven sections: Valletta: St Paul’s Parish; Valletta: Porto Salvo parish; Floriana; Senglea, Cospicua, Vittoriosa and the Campagna (the

countryside). These were then divided in districts for vote registration purposes. For example Valletta: St Paul’s Parish Section was divided in six districts.

## The 1849 Constitution

Under the 1849 Constitution, the franchise was limited to males of the age of 21 years or upwards who were well versed in either English or Italian and who got a certain amount of income or paid rent from/for property.

To qualify for voting one had to be male between the ages of 21 and 60; residing in the Maltese Islands, who had in his own name or in trust of him at least 100 scudi (Lm8.34c) in lands or tenements or had a yearly income of the same value from lands or tenements; or held or occupied a dwelling of the yearly value or rent of, at least, 50 skudi or was a partner in a commercial establishment who had the above qualifications. The person eligible to vote had also to be well versed in the English or Italian Language and of good character or reputation

These qualifications limited the number of voters to a very small proportion of the Maltese population. Actually out of a population of about 123,500 only 3,767 were eligible to vote. In reality, the number of voters was less than this due to plural voting, that is the same elector, if he had property qualifications in both Malta and Gozo, could cast his vote both in the Malta district and the Gozo district. The property clause had a big impact on the Gozo district as the majority of electors – 183 out of 312 – who were qualified to vote in this district actually resided in the Island of Malta. Of course this indicates that a lot of the property in Gozo belonged to residents of the main Island and to a certain extent the level of education of the Gozitans.

When voting “*each voter at Malta may insert on his ticket not more than four names, and the seven persons who shall receive the greatest number of votes shall be deemed elected,*” (Op cit: 46-7) while in Gozo electors were asked to vote for one candidate. The vote was non transferable. The elector

had to write the name/s of the candidate/s he wanted to vote for. The vote was not secret as secrecy was introduced in 1861 (Ordinance No 1 of 1861 – Malta Government Gazette, No. 2097. 13th December 1861: 319).

Those residing in Malta did not even have to bother to cross to Gozo to vote, as policemen on election day carried the ballot boxes to the electors houses to collect the votes, although a ballot box was always available at certain police stations, in the case of Gozo, at the Victoria Police Station, and in other Police stations in Malta. Ordinance No IX of 1865 decreed that when elections were held in the Gozo district only, the ballot boxes at the Police Station were limited to those in Victoria, Gozo, Valletta and Mdina.

The first elections were held between the 16th and 20th August 1849. 88 percent of the eligible voters (3,315 out of 3,767) cast their vote. Dr Adrian Dingli with 117 votes was elected as the first elected member for Gozo in the Council of Government of Malta. Dingli made a name for himself as Crown Advocate, and became a renowned legislator. He was appointed Chief Justice and in 1860 was decorated with Knighthood.



Sir Adrian Dingli - First Council Member to represent the Gozo District.

### The 1887 “Knutsford” Constitution

The electoral division set by the 1849 Constitution, was kept for almost forty years. In 1887, a new Constitution, the “Knutsford” Constitution, was granted to the Maltese Islands. The 1887 Constitution was granted by Letters Patent of 12th December 1887. The Council of Government was made up of the Governor and 20 members: 6 were official

members, while 14 were elected. However only 10 of these were to be elected by general electors as the other four were to represent (one each) the clergy, the nobility, the University graduates and the merchants (members of the *Borsa di Commercio*).

The vote qualifications were more or less those set by letters Patent of the 2nd March 1883 which had done away with the literacy clause thus allowing illiterate males to vote but kept the property clause. (Letters Patent: The Malta Government Gazette, No 2987: 19th March 1883: 44-6.) All male British subjects of 21 years or over, who either paid at least six pounds rent per annum or who received a yearly income of at least the same amount from immovable property, had the right to vote. The 1887 Letter Patents made a slight amendment to this as the income could be also be derived in the name of the wife. This meant that while females were not qualified to vote, their income could help their husbands to become electors. This raised the number of electors from 2,400 to 10,637.

The 1887 Letters Patent just established that nine of the elected members were to be returned by electors in the Island of Malta, and one from Gozo. However subsequent letters patent – those of the 19th March 1888 (the first election under the new Constitution having just been held a few days previously from the 1st to the 3rd March 1888), stated that “*The Island of Malta and its Dependencies shall be divided into ten electoral districts for the purpose of the election of the members of the Council of Government by the general electors....*” (Malta Government Gazette, No. 3247, 2nd April 1888: 125-6).

According to the schedule annexed to the same Letters Patent the districts were formed as follows:

1. East Valletta: all of the City of Valletta east of the centre of Strada Forni
2. West Valletta: all of the city of Valletta west of the centre of Strada Forni, together with Sliema and St. Julian’s
3. Floriana together with Hamrun, Pieta’ and Msida
4. Cospicua together with Zabbar
5. Vittoriosa and Senglea
6. Notabile together with Rabato, Dingli, Siggiewi, Mosta and Mellieħa
7. Birkirkara together with Balzan, Lija, Attard, Naxxar and Ghargħur
8. Qormi together with Zebbug, Luqa and Mqabba

9. Zejtun together with Tarxien, Paola, Ghaxaq, Gudja, Kirkop, Zurrieq, Safi and Qrendi
10. Gozo together with Comino.

Each of these districts had to return one councillor. The first elections after this division in districts were held between the 24th and 25th September 1889. The number of electors stood at 9,777 out of whom only 3,383 voted (34.6%). Once again plural voting was allowed. Technically the same person could vote 10 times as a person possessing the required property in two or more districts, could vote in each of these districts. In addition he could also vote for the special members of the Council if he was a clergyman, a University graduate, a member of the nobility or a member of the *Borsa di Commercio*. This time the elections in Gozo were contested by Dr Salvatore Castaldi and Michel' Angelo Maria Mizzi. The latter was returned obtaining 287 votes. In the previous election, the first held under the 1887 Constitution, elections were not held in Gozo as the only candidate to present himself was Dr Fortunato Mizzi LL.D, who was of course declared elected. Dr Mizzi at that time led *il Partito Nazionale*

These electoral districts were kept for the next five general elections, the last one being held in 1900. Elections were held in 1892, 1895, 1898, 1899 and 1900. In 1899 the electors were not asked to vote as only one candidate in each district contested the election, and all candidates were declared elected. The same happened in 1900, with the exception of the eighth district where the elected candidate was returned with 107 votes.

### **The 1903 “Chamberlain” Constitution**

At the turn of the century, the local political scene was dominated by the language question as “*the Government persisted in its policy of free choice of language in elementary schools, (while) the elected members persisted in their policy of rejecting supplies for education.*” (Cremona, 1994: 21) This led to the closure of schools and when in 1903 the elected members, in spite of being threatened with the withdrawal of the Constitution (Malta Government Gazette, 22nd June 1903: 621-2), insisted on refusing the education votes, the 1887 Constitution was revoked and the “Chamberlain” Constitution was proclaimed (Ibid: 619-21). The new Council of Government was made up of the Governor, the Lt Governor and 17 members, only eight of whom were to be elected.

This change in the number of elected council members resulted in a reduction in the number of districts from ten to eight. This affected the Malta districts but the Gozo district retained its original form, except for a change of name: the eighth district. (Ibid: 628).

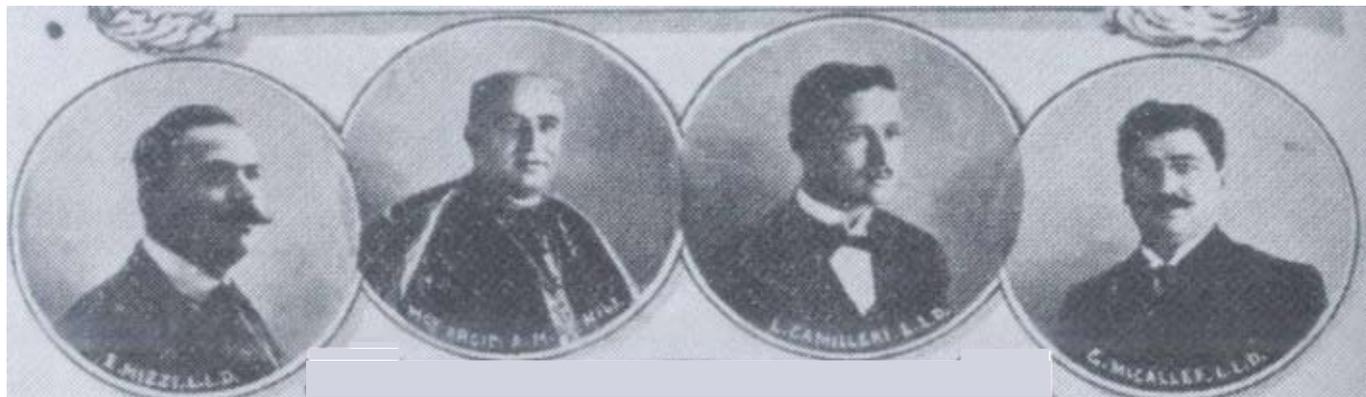
The first election under the new Constitution was held in January 1904 when the number of voters stood at 7,991. However voting did not take place as only one candidate in each district contested the elections. Dr Fortunato Mizzi was once again returned from Gozo. (Mizzi retired from active politics in 1889 but consented to an appeal by the Gozitan electorate (Anon: *L-Istorja tal-Partit Nazzjonalista*, 1972), and contested again in the elections as from 1898 when once again he was elected to represent Gozo). This sort of action was resorted to by Maltese politicians in a number of elections held between 1903 and 1917 as a protest against the oppressive form of the Constitution. Ten elections were held under this Constitution. In the majority of cases, all the candidates or some of them were returned to the Council unopposed and immediately resigned as a protest against the Constitution. In the case of Gozo, voting took place in 1909, 1912, 1915 and 1917. Dr Emerico Mizzi was elected in the 1917 election.

In 1914 World War One broke out, and although the Maltese Islands were not directly involved in the conflict, Malta played an important part as a port with thousands of troops passing through. It also served as the “nurse of the Mediterranean” with hundreds of wounded servicemen brought over to Malta. A total of 27 hospitals were set up with a total of 25,000 beds.

### **The “Amery-Milner” Constitution**

World War One over (1918), Maltese politicians intensified their protests against the Constitution, and with the intervention of Dr Filippo Sciberras, l'Assemblea Nazionale was set up, with the specific aim of requesting a liberal Constitution for the Maltese Islands. This, the “Amery-Milner” Constitution, was actually granted in 1921 (Malta Government Gazette, 4th May 1921).

Under this Constitution the administration of local affairs was entrusted, with some reservations, in the hands of the Maltese Government. This Government was to be made up of a Senate and



The first members of Parliament to represent the Gozo District led by Dr E. Mizzi (first from left) who later (1950) became Prime Minister.

a Legislative Assembly. The Senate was to be made up of 10 special members representing certain bodies (two representatives of each of the following bodies: The Clergy nominated by the Archbishop, the Nobility, Graduates, Chamber of Commerce, Trade Union Council elected by the respective special members), and seven members elected by general electors. The Legislative Assembly was constituted of 32 members.

In the case of the Senate, Malta and Gozo were divided into two districts, while in that of the Legislative Assembly these were once again divided into eight divisions with each district electing four deputies. For the Senate elections, Gozo formed part of the Second District. The Districts were as follows:

1. Valletta, Cospicua, Senglea, Vittoriosa, Floriana, Sliema, St Julians, Pieta', Msida and Hamrun.
2. Mdina and the rest of the villages in Malta, Gozo and Comino.

However it retained its identity in the case of the Legislative Assembly, as together with Comino it formed the Eighth District.

Meanwhile the number of electors had grown considerably as the vote was granted to all males of 21 years or over who could either read and write (of course in English or Italian) or who had the required property. Those males who had an income, in their or their wife's name, of not less than five pounds per annum from immovable property or from other capital, or who paid not less than 5 pounds in rent annually qualified to vote. The Proportional Representation System by the transferable single vote (the system which we still use today) was introduced as from the first elections held in 1921.

Actually the number of electors for the Legislative Assembly for the Eighth District was 3114 of whom

2800 voted in the first elections which were held on the 18th and 19th October 1921. All the members returned came from the same party: the *Partito Democratico Nazionale*. The Partito Democratico Nazionale led by Dr Emerico Mizzi contested the Gozo district only. The election of all the members in one district by the same party is an all time record.

### **The 1939 "MacDonald" Constitution**

Gozo lost its identity as a district in 1939 when a new constitution, (granted by Letters Patent of the 14th February 1939), the "MacDonald" Constitution, was granted to Malta. This Constitution was a retrograde step in Malta's Constitutional Development as once again a Council of Government was set up. This was made up of 20 members under the presidency of the Governor. Only ten of the members were to be elected five from each of the two districts. Gozo formed part of the Second District (Ordinance No XIX of 1939, Malta Government Gazette, (Suppl) XLVIII, 1st April 1939: 464). The Second District consisted of: Attard, Balzan, Birkirkara, Dingli, Għargħur, Gżira, Hamrun, Lija, Marsa, Mdina, Mellieħa, Mgarr, Naxxar, Pieta', Rabat, Sliema, St Julians, St Paul's Bay, St Vennera, Gozo and Comino.

### **The 1947 "MacMichael" Constitution.**

Gozo once again became a district on its own under the 1947 "MacMichael" Constitution. This followed more or less the lines of the 1921 Constitution (The Malta Government Gazette, 10th September 1947: 962-78). However it did away with the bicameral system as the Senate was abolished. The number of deputies was raised from 32 to 40. In virtue of Section 11 of the same Constitution, the number of districts was again set at eight, with each district now

returning five deputies instead of four. Gozo along with Comino was retained as the Eight District. (The Malta Government Gazette, 10th September 1947: 979).

The 1947 Constitution did away with the education, sex and property qualification, as all males and females who were 21 years old or more could vote. Actually a Bill extending suffrage to females was introduced in the Council of Government on the 2nd January 1947 (Malta Government Gazette, 3rd January 1947: 7). Plural voting had been abolished in 1939. (It is interesting to note that in Britain this was totally abolished in 1948). Thus due to the granting of universal suffrage, the number of eligible electors in the Gozo district increased considerably, from 3,693 in 1921 to 13,400 in 1947 (Report on the Working of the Electoral Registry for the Year 1947-48 in Reports on the Working of the Government departments 1947-48: 229). This was made up of 6311 males and 7089 females.

The first elections under the new Constitution were held between the 26th and the 28th October 1947. In the Gozo District the voters turn out was quite high as 10,527 out of 13,400 (78.56%) electors cast their vote. The major parties failed to elect any deputies from Gozo, as three of the members returned were from the Gozo Party, while the other two belonged to the Jones Party. As in the case of the 1921 election this was a record, as it was the only time in post 1921 electoral history that the major political parties did not manage to elect deputies from the Gozo District.

### **The 1961 “Blood” Constitution**

The next major change in district formation came about in 1962 with the granting of the “Blood” Constitution. This was granted by the Malta (Constitution) Order in Council (1961) on the 24th October 1961. This time the number of members of the Legislative Assembly was raised to 50, while the number of districts was increased by two.

Gozo still kept its identity as a district, the only change being that it was now called the Tenth Electoral District. The number of voters compared to 1947 had increased by over a thousand – from 13,400 to 14,612. This was not due to any change in the franchise but to the post war increase in population.

In the first elections held under this Constitution (17th to 19th February 1962), 92.11 per cent (13,459 out of 14,612) of the Gozo electorate cast its vote returning three Nationalist candidates and two members of the Nationalist Democratic Party.

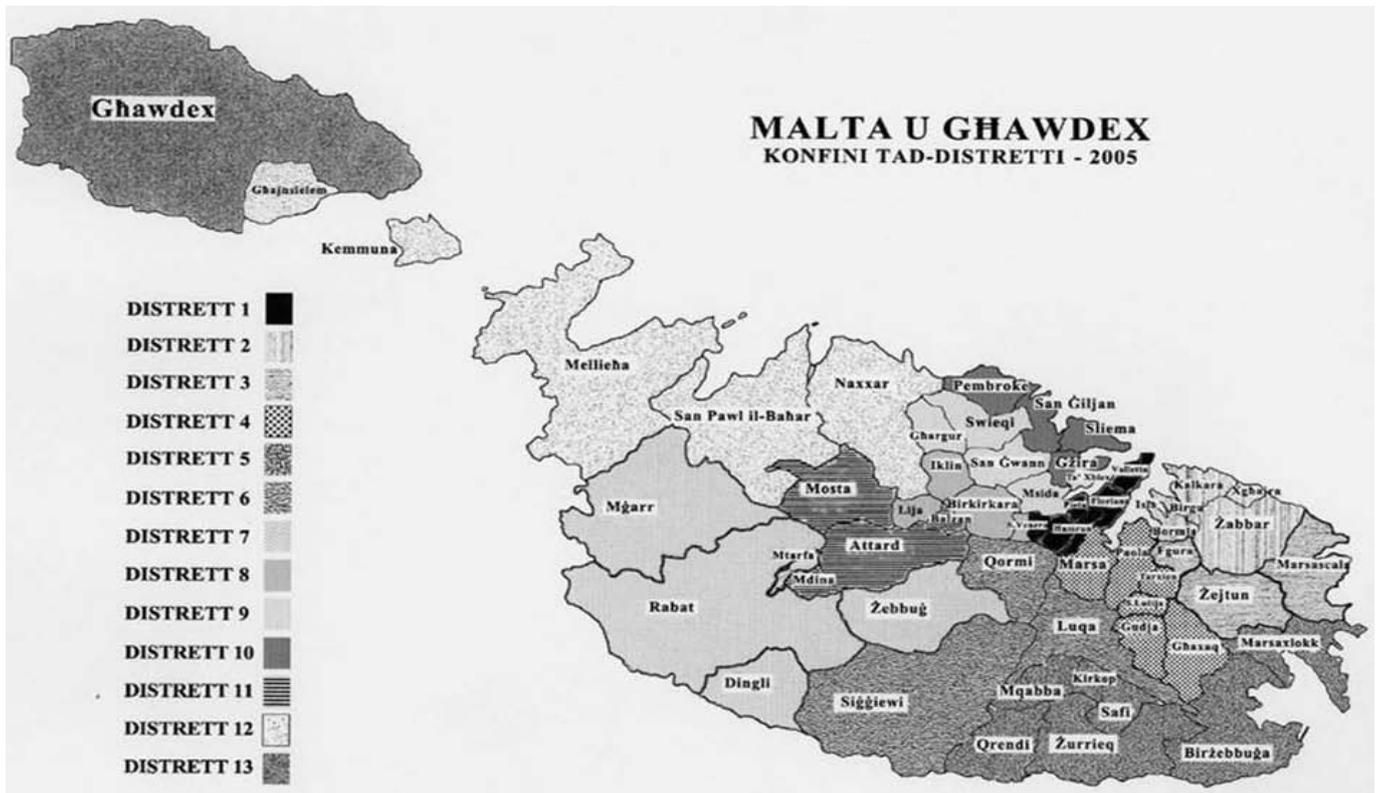
Due to the increase in the number of electors in certain districts, the Government, by Act XXVI of 1970, increased the number of members of Parliament by five; however the number of districts was kept at ten. This meant that some districts were to elect six instead of five members. Gozo was not effected by this change. An additional member was allocated to the Second, Third, Seventh, Eight and Ninth Districts.

### **The 1974 Republic Constitution**

The 1974 Republic Constitution brought about important reforms in the electoral system amongst which, the regular revision of the electoral boundaries by the electoral commission. This Commission was actually set up by the Independence Constitution. The number of electors in each of the districts had to be reasonably equal. Article 62 (4) of the Constitution stated that the number of voters in each district, when divided by the number of members elected from the same district, would be as reasonable as possible, equal to the national quota which is derived from the number of registered electors for the whole Islands divided by the number of members to be returned to Parliament.

In accordance with this article, the Electoral Commission in February 1976 changed the electoral boundaries raising the number of districts from ten to thirteen. Once again the only change to the Gozo District was a change in the name, Gozo and Comino now becoming the Thirteenth District. The number of electors rose once again mainly to the lowering of the voting age to eighteen in 1974 and now reached 17,282 (Constitution of the Republic of Malta, Section 58: 48).

The number of electors in Gozo continued to rise reaching 23,632 in the 2003 election. By April 2005 the number of electors in the Thirteenth District reached a total of 25,388 when the national media for each district according to Article 61(4) of the Constitution was 23,564. Thus the deviation in the case of the Gozo District was +7.74, when the + or – deviation allowed by the Constitution is five percent. As a result the Electoral Commission in



Malta's electoral district boundaries as they were drawn in July of 2005. The Electoral Commission suggested that part of Gozo (Għajnsielem) and Comino form part of the 12th District. However Gozo retained its electoral identity through a constitutional amendment in 2007.

2005 suggested that part of Gozo, (Għajnsielem) and Comino – a total of 2020 electors) would form part of the Twelfth District.

However Gozo retained its electoral identity as an amendment to the Constitution providing “*that the Island of Gozo and the islands of the Maltese Archipelago other than the Island of Malta shall together be treated as one electoral division and may not be divided between two or more electoral divisions.*” (ACT No. XXI of 2007 : AN ACT to further amend the Constitution) was on the 26th September 2007 unanimously approved by parliament.

**References**

The Malta Government Gazettes: 23 June 1849, 13th December 1861; 19th March 1883; 2nd April 1888; 22nd June 1903; 4th May 1921; 10th September 1947; 3rd Jan 1947 Malta Government Gazette (Suppl) XLVIII, 1st April 1939

Cremona, J.J. (1994) *The Maltese Constitution and Constitutional History since 1813*

Anon, (1972): *L-Istorja tal-Partit Nazzjonalista*

Constitution of the Republic of Malta

Rapport mill-Kummissjoni Elettorali għall-finijiet ta’ l-Artiklu 61 tal-Kostituzzjoni ta’ Malta (2005)

**Appendix**

**The Gozo District Elections Results between 1921 and 2003**

Year	Electors	Voted	% Voting	District
1921	3,693	2,791	75.58	8th
1924	3,326	2,954	88.82	8th
1927	4,054	3,167	78.12	8th
1932	4,708	4,318	91.72	8th
1939	23,863	17,897	75.00	2nd*
1945	35,196	14,410	40.94	2nd**
1947	13,400	10,527	78.56	8th
1950	12,931	10,585	81.86	8th
1951	13,644	11,095	81.32	8th
1953	13,061	11,292	86.46	8th
1955	13,414	11,649	86.84	8th
1962	14,612	13,549	92.11	10th
1966	16,928	12,481	89.61	10th
1971	14,783	13,619	92.13	10th
1976	17,282	15,967	92.39	13th
1981	18,705	17,160	91.74	13th
1987	18,575	17,404	93.70	13th
1992	19,645	18,628	94.82	13th
1996	21,164	19,934	94.19	13th
1992	21,822	20,329	93.16	13th
2003	23,632	22,484	95.14	13th

\* 1939: Voters for Gozo District 4,764  
 \*\* 1945: Voters for Gozo District 6,254

Joseph A Xerri M.Ed is a researcher in local political and educational history.