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EXPECTATIONS • ACHIEVEMENTS • DISAPPOINTMENTS • THE FUTURE

Malta Transformed by Multi-level Governance: More Than Just an Outcome of Europeanisation

by Godfrey Baldacchino



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Abstract

Malta has been transformed in many ways with and by EU Membership. This paper goes beyond the more obvious impacts of 'Europeanisation' and instead reviews the implications of an explosion of multi-level governance on doing politics in Malta. While for most of its recent political history, there has been a clawing back of power by the central government – as when the Gozo Civic Council (1960-1973), an early foray into regional government, was “unceremoniously dissolved” in 1973 – this trend was reversed with the setting up of local councils as from 1994, an advisory Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD) in 2001, and then EU membership in 2004. These events have created a profligacy of decision-making tiers and multiplied the tensions that exist between different levels of governance in this small archipelago state. Malta has never experienced such pluralism before. In fact, since 1966, only two political parties have been represented in the national legislature and, therefore, there has been no division of powers between the executive and the national parliament. This paper reviews the implications of these developments on two hot political issues in 2014: the International Investor Programme (IIP) proposed by the Labour Government in its 2014 Budget; and the location of a Liquid Natural Gas (LNG)-storage vessel inside Marsaxlokk harbour.

Keywords: democratisation; europeanisation; individual investment scheme; liquid natural gas tanker; Malta; multi-level governance; state; total politics

Malta transformed by multi-level governance: more than just an outcome of Europeanisation

by Godfrey Baldacchino

Introduction

The concept of multi-level governance (MLG) gives expression to the idea that there are many interacting authority structures at work in the emergent global political economy. It is an approach in political science and public administration theory that has emerged from studies on European integration, and particularly from the various structures that were introduced by and in the EU via the Maastricht Treaty (1992).¹ Multi-level governance refers to the deep and messy entanglement between various domestic, local, regional and international levels of authority. MLG is a dynamic three-dimensional concept that blurs and renders problematic three analytical distinctions that have hitherto been central to

¹ L. Hooghe and G. Marks (2003), 'Unravelling the central state, but how? Types of multi-level governance', *American Political Science Review*, 97(2), 233-243.

the conventional understanding of the contemporary European state: (1) that between centre and periphery, (2) that between state and society, and (3) that between the domestic and the international.²

This chapter highlights the radical changes that have taken place in Malta since the period 1974-1994, when a *de facto* absolutist form of government was in power, in spite of the *de iure* framework of institutional democracy. Two case studies drawn from recent events – the International Investor Programme (IIP) proposed by the Labour Government in its 2014 Budget; and the location of a Liquid Natural Gas (LNG)-storage vessel inside Marsaxlokk harbour – are proposed and deployed to illustrate the increasing complexity of doing politics in Malta.

Doing politics in Malta

Doing federal politics was one of Malta's obviously new experiences since joining the European Union. The notion of pooled sovereignty meant that, in spite of its small size, Malta was expected and encouraged to participate in the many decision-making and consultative organs of the European Union. Amongst the most notable is the European Parliament (EP), where Malta now has six representatives, the best *per capita*

² S. Piattoni (2009), 'Multi-level governance: a historical and conceptual analysis', *European Integration*, 31(2), 163-180.

representation within the whole of the EU-28 (one representative per 70,000 residents). Malta also has five representatives on ECOSOC, the EU's European Economic and Social Committee.

Maltese elections to the EP, held in 2004, 2009 and 2014, take on the guise of partisan contests, with the typical party rivalry that has come to characterise national (both general and local) elections. Such an intense and frenzied bipartisanship – whereby “politics has become a corrosive zero-sum contest characterised by factional loyalty that reaches a veritable frenzy just before elections”³ – is, however, a relatively recent historical phenomenon. It is only since 1966 that Malta has had only two political parties – the Labour Party (*Partit Laburista*, PL) and the Nationalist Party (*Partit Nazzjonalista*, PN), – winning *all* the seats in the national legislature, and therefore with the winning political party forming a majority government (albeit, on various times, with the slimmest, one-seat majority) without the need of securing any alliance or coalition.⁴ This is totally unprecedented in Europe today. Malta is, in fact, the *only* EU member state with a government formed by just one single political party, and enjoying a very strong

majority of seats in Parliament: the current Labour Government, elected in March 2013, has 39 out of 69 seats. Various other smaller parties have contested each general election but none has managed (so far) to elect even one single representative to Parliament. Malta has “one of the purest two-party systems in the world”.⁵

This exceptional situation has many ramifications. Amongst them, there is the absence of any obligation by that political party securing a majority of votes and seeking to govern to negotiate with other parties to secure a working parliamentary majority. It has also meant that politics in Malta has been total and ubiquitous: the winning party grabs everything; the opposition ends up with nothing: an “in and out politics”.⁶ The transfers of power after elections where the incumbent government loses out are rare, but dramatic experiences in the democratic yet quite absolute handover of power. There have only been five such events since political independence was secured in 1964: in June 1971, May 1987, October 1996, September 1998 and March 2013.

Another consequence is that the two political parties assume ethno-national qualities. They,

³ J. Boissevain (1993), *Saints and fireworks: Religion and politics in rural Malta*, Valletta, Malta: Progress Press, p. 150

⁴ For an excellent on-line database of Malta election statistics, visit: <http://www.um.edu.mt/projects/maltaelections>

⁵ M. Cini (2002), ‘A divided nation: polarization and the two-party system in Malta’, *South European Society & Politics*, 7(1), 6-23.

⁶ J. Richards (1982), ‘Politics in small independent communities: conflict or consensus?’, *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 20(2), 155-171.

their programmes and their supporters, have acted as clans, advancing their own interpretation of history, their own sense of justice and fairness, often within a socio-political context where those who are not with you must be against you (and one in which I have struggled to maintain my own integrity). I have provocatively dared to describe Malta as a 'nationless state', given the high degree of partisan affiliation and mobilisation that has prevailed, resulting in a limited corpus of nationally-agreed historically significant events, individuals and other symbolic paraphernalia.⁷ This is so to the extent that, rather than risk alienating a considerable section of the populace, Malta has had not one but five national days since 1988.⁸

The existence of 'total politics' was all the more stark and extreme before 1994, the year when local councils were introduced in the Maltese Islands, introducing a municipal level of government for the first time in local history. In spite of an initial pledge to decentralise, democratise and depoliticise local councils, the practice has shown otherwise, with the PL and PN now officially fielding candidates for municipal elections in

⁷ G. Baldacchino (2002), 'A nationless state? Malta, national identity and the EU', *West European Politics*, 25(4), 191-206.

⁸ The Editor (2009), 'Should Malta have one national day?', *MaltaToday*, Sunday March 29 2009, at <http://archive.maltatoday.com.mt/2009/03/29/t14.html>

all localities (the PL doing so after a few years supporting 'independent candidates'). Over 99% of those now elected to one of the hundreds of seats spread out over 68 local councils (54 in Malta and 14 in Gozo) are officially endorsed by the PL or PN. There is *only one* elected independent councillor.⁹ The only other political party to have had any of its candidates elected to a local council is the *Alternattiva Demokratika* (Democratic Alternative) party, currently with two seats. In this way, local councils have ended up consolidating the iron grip of local politics by the two main political parties, rather than offering a level of governance that could escape or avoid their ubiquity.¹⁰

We should not be surprised that even with local councils in place for the past two decades, the central government remains the responsible authority for practically all services except local parks and museums; playing fields and open spaces; refuse collection; adult education; child care services; and the surfacing of local roads and, even in these policy areas, the central government (and nationally elected

⁹ The Editor (2012), 'Labour takes umbrage at new independent mayor, accuses PN of being 'anti-democratic'', *MaltaToday*, Tuesday 7 August 2012, at <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/20120807#.U8vLMLGamdw>

¹⁰ See, for instance: Baldacchino, G. (2006), 'Hands off local governance', *The Times of Malta*, Wednesday January 25 2006, at <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20060125/opinion/hands-off-local-governance.65365>

politicians) are usually somehow involved anyway. Local councillors elected on a party ticket receive instructions from their party head office on how to vote, and so on. In this way, the local political arena has become a faithful reflection of the national one: and some 32 politicians elected to Parliament since 1996 have cut their teeth in local council politics.¹¹

There had not been *any* local government in Malta since the brief, thirteen-year stint of the Gozo Civic Council. Disregarded by the central government and thus rendered ineffective, it was wound up in 1973, and with hardly any popular or institutional appeals for its continuation. Otherwise, the only sort of local authority was the Catholic Church, effectively in charge of local affairs with the connivance of the colonial administrator under British rule. Thus, localities such as cities, towns, villages and hamlets had no secular identity; they operated as parishes, with the parish priest as the *de facto* mayor. This explains why many local councils simply took on the same boundaries as their parish when they were set up in 1994.

Long periods of colonial rule had also acculturated the Maltese to operate within a political structure where local colonial

authorities were often mouthpieces for remote and distant policy makers, most recently in London. When the United Kingdom reviewed its foreign policy role after the Suez Crisis debacle in 1956, and decided that Malta was 'surplus' to its scaled down military interests, there were violent protests in Malta, the government resigned and the constitution was abrogated; but the decision in London was not revoked or amended. What had been a movement spearheaded by the Malta Labour Party seeking Malta's full integration with(in) the United Kingdom became a drive for full political independence under the helm of a Nationalist Government, a status secured in 1964. With this change, suddenly, policy makers were now local. They were known, identifiable and accountable. The new Maltese sovereign state was 'soft', because decision makers were known; even too well-known.¹² And, given an electoral system where a representative to a unicameral Parliament could be elected with about 3,000 votes, the game was set for a dynamic whereby voter and candidate made it their business to get to know each other; one offering loyalty and support at the ballot box in exchange for 'favours' received ... even if many of those favours were rights. A "spoils system" reminiscent of feudalism was set in place, in some respects carried over from the

¹¹ The Editor (2014), *Local Councils as Pathway to Parliament*, at http://www.um.edu.mt/data/assets/excel_doc/0009/207387/tr-newpath.xls

¹² See G. Myrdal (1968), *Asian drama: An inquiry into the poverty of nations*, New York: Twentieth Century Fund; G. Hyden (1983), *No shortcuts to progress: African development management in perspective*, London: Heinemann.

time of the benign colonial administration, with politicians becoming gatekeepers of most public (and some private) goods:¹³ be that employment, access to state contracts, and petty things like having a light bulb installed on the street outside your house or buying a colour television set.¹⁴ Not everyone will know each other in Malta, but everyone will know someone who does; the country operates with a dense psycho-social atmosphere, where most are just one degree of separation from anyone else.¹⁵ Politics is not run by the media in Malta but remains very much a personal, and intimate, affair. No wonder voter turnout, especially at general elections, remains phenomenally high.¹⁶

When the titular head of the state of Malta – until then Queen Elizabeth II – was changed in December 1974, and a Maltese became head of state in the context of a new republican constitution, the transformation to an

exclusively local central government was well nigh complete. The period 1974-1994 witnessed an all-powerful machinery of government run by an all-powerful political party in absolute power, and the state had a monopoly on local radio and television broadcasts (until 1991), albeit in a democratic institutional framework where, however, *omertà* (collusion through silence and inaction) and the fear of retaliation was rife.¹⁷ Dom Mintoff was Malta's Prime Minister uninterruptedly for 10 out of those 20 ominous years. A 'big man' politician, Mintoff would easily belong to that rare class of "larger-than-life politicians cum father-figures and folk heroes who exercise almost total control over decision making in a jurisdiction for many years, while the formal institutions of democracy struggled to persist."¹⁸ For almost six out of those years, Mintoff led a government that had a "spurious majority":¹⁹ a 50%+ majority of seats in Parliament when

¹³ See, for instance: P. E. Buker (2005), 'The executive administrative style in Prince Edward Island: managerial and spoils politics', in M. Howlett, L. Bernier and K. Brownsey (eds.), *Executive styles in Canada: cabinet structures and leadership practices in Canadian government*, Toronto ON: University of Toronto Press, pp. 111-131.

¹⁴ I procured my own first colour television set in this way in 1987, just before the general election. It was paid for, but still required 'political assent'. The company assembling colour TV sets in Malta at that time (Magruvision) was state owned.

¹⁵ See J. A. Barnes (1954), *Class and committees in a Norwegian island parish*. New York: Plenum Press.

¹⁶ W. Hirczy (1995), 'Explaining near-universal turnout: the case of Malta', *European Journal of Political Research*, 27(2), 255-272.

¹⁷ Boissevain, J. (2010), 'Tourists, developers and civil society: on the commodification of Malta's landscapes', in J. Scott and T. Selwyn (eds.), *Thinking through tourism*, Oxford: Berg, pp. 93-116, p. 100.

¹⁸ G. Baldacchino (2012), 'Islands and despots', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 50(1), 103-120, p. 109;

J. V. Micallef (1979), 'Mediterranean maverick: Malta's uncertain future', *The Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 69(275), 238-251;

W. H. Wriggins (1975), 'To the highest bidder: Malta, Britain and NATO', *The Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 65(258), 167-185.

¹⁹ A. Siaroff (2003), 'Spurious majorities, electoral systems and electoral system change', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 41(2), 143-160.

the opposition party had a 50%+ majority of votes, leading to a parliamentary boycott and a crisis of legitimacy that risked descending into civil war.

A proliferation of multi-level governance

The situation in Malta today is very different from what prevailed in 1974-1994. And it would be naïve and simplistic to merely blame or attribute it to 'Europeanisation'. Admittedly, accession to the EU is responsible for Malta's foray into trans-national, federal politics. But other developments can perhaps be traced to Malta's own indigenous evolution into a more mature, pluralist and democratic jurisdiction.

With the additional layers and levels of government and governance, the political establishment has been engaged in a political terrain that is increasingly more cluttered and complex. In some departments, the party political class has managed to maintain, and even extend, its effective hegemony, as with the near total control over local council politics. In some others, the added layer merely provided an additional (supra-national) platform for the promulgation of party politics, as perhaps participation in Brussels politics implies. But other initiatives are beyond and outside the remit of the state. Some civil society empowerment has been effectively co-opted and curtailed, as with the setting up of the advisory Malta Council for

Economic and Social Development (MCESD) and its 'civil society committee'. But for those bodies operating completely beyond the state, cooptation into the body politic has been elusive.

A testing ground for the newly-found mettle of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) was the Portomaso project in St Julian's in the late 1990s. Back then, the developers proposed the replacement of the existing Hilton hotel with a suite of buildings including a new 400-room hotel, apartments, offices, a yacht marina and a 21-floor tower block. Meanwhile, a 17th century historic wall would be destroyed, green areas removed, public space privatised, rare marine species threatened and traditional fishing practices jeopardised.²⁰ The development was duly approved by the then Planning Authority, clearly supported by both the PN and PL and their appointees.²¹ The project was approved; it also set a precedent for various other high-rise mega-villages that now characterise various parts of the Maltese landscape.²² The

²⁰ See, for instance E. Billiard (2014), 'The privatisation of public spaces and the decline of urban connectivity in Paceville', *Omertaa: Journal of Applied Anthropology*, 606-610, at <http://www.omertaa.org/archive/omertaa0069.pdf>

²¹ J. Boissevain (2004), 'Hotels, tuna pens, and civil society: contesting the foreshore in Malta', in J. Boissevain and T. Selwyn (eds.), *Contesting the foreshore: Tourism, society and politics on the coast*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 233-260.

²² M. Briguglio (2011), 'The problem with Portomaso', *The Times of Malta*, Friday September 30, 2011, at

entire area (consisting of public land) was leased by the state to the developers for just 191,000 Maltese Liri (almost €500,000 in today's currency) until 2014, and would be eventually sold to the developers for 800,000 Maltese Liri (about €2m) in 2006. Nevertheless, there were considerable objections from NGOs such as *Moviment għall-Ambjent* (the Movement for the Environment), the Society for the Study and Conservation of Nature, Graffiti, *Alternattiva Demokratika*, from residents and from individual experts, including the Planning Authority's own Environmental Management Unit. The protests included a high-profile hunger strike in 1997 by two, then young activists, which was concluded only with the direct intervention of the Parliamentary Ombudsman. The latter's intervention "... proved crucial in subsequent changes to the law, obliging government to seek Parliament's consent before passing public land to private interests".²³ This was a lesson as to how soft power could confront big government, even when the two political parties appeared in self-interested collusion. Indeed, various other development proposals were nipped in the bud with similar assemblages, involving

<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2011/0930/opinion/The-problem-with-Portomaso.387035>

²³ J. Debono (2013), 'New Portomaso lagoon: how Tumas got its permit on appeal', *MaltaToday*, Thursday 21 November 2013, at <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/31686/new-portomaso-lagoon-how-tumas-got-its-permit-on-appeal-20131121#.U8hgZ7Gamdw>

NGO actions and media campaigns, signing of petitions, lobbying local politicians, and the occasional charismatic priest: as with the case of the *Munxar*, St Thomas Bay project in 1995, subsequently withdrawn by the developers.²⁴

Case studies

Let me now turn to two other examples to explore, in some more detail, how multi-level initiatives and interests, within and beyond national government, can be, and have been, brought to bear to sway decision making and public policy in Malta. The first of these is the controversial International Investor Programme (IIP) proposed by the Labour Government in its 2014 Budget. The second case concerns the location of a Liquid Natural Gas (LNG)-storage vessel inside Marsaxlokk harbour.²⁵

Case One: Citizenship Scheme

Malta's Individual Investor Programme is now being touted as "the first programme of its kind to be recognised by the European

²⁴ Boissevain (2004), pp. 243-246.

²⁵ Of course, there are many other examples of such multi-level governance politics. One other celebrated case dealt with the opposition of many local councils to the further development of the Sant Antnin waste treatment and recycling plant in Marsaskala (my home town). Here, the local councils took the issue to the European Commission and even tried to block the allocation of EU funding to the project. In this case, local/sub-national entities flexed their (new) powers within the EU to (seek to) bypass the national government and attempt to block a local project by appealing to Brussels (e.g. The Malta Independent, 2010). This could well be the topic of a different research paper.

Commission”.²⁶ But this status is the outcome of a fairly intense and drawn out debate that implicated the European Commission.

Maltese citizenship by investment can now be granted under a legal amendment passed late in 2013. The programme provides for “affluent persons of impeccable standing and repute” to be naturalised and to receive Maltese citizenship on the basis of a contribution to and investment in Malta of at least €650,000 (plus €25,000 each for any spouse or minor). Such naturalised citizenship is for life and can be passed on to future generations by descent. So far, this scheme closely resembles those put in place by various other countries, and mainly small island states like Malta – including the Economic Citizenship Programme of Dominica²⁷; or the one in St Kitts and Nevis, which has been in place since 1984 and claims to be the world’s oldest citizenship scheme.²⁸ The main difference, of course, is that, just

like the Cyprus Investment Scheme,²⁹ Maltese citizenship now also implies EU citizenship: and that is, let’s face it, perhaps the main attraction of this IIP. A Maltese passport would give applicants full voting rights on the archipelago and also the right to travel and settle freely within the European Union.

The IIP idea was floated for the first time in the Labour Government’s 2013 budget speech. Criticism was immediate, starting with the PN Opposition and *Alternattiva Demokratika* and spilling over into all the media outlets. Concerns were raised about whether the scheme would damage or cheapen Malta’s international reputation, including that of being a reliable offshore finance centre; whether the scheme would indiscriminately entice shady characters to gain citizenship;³⁰ whether the EU’s strict immigration and security laws would be compromised; whether beneficiaries of the IIP would have their identity protected; and whether citizenship could be granted without a clear residency requirement.

The more heightened drama was reserved for the EU; and here the Maltese Government was exposed to a supra-national layer of

²⁶ The Editor (2014), *Introduction to the Individual Investor Programme*, at <http://iip.gov.mt/>

²⁷ Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica (2014), *How do I apply for Economic Citizenship of the Commonwealth of Dominica?*, at <http://www.dominica.gov.dm/services/how-do-i-apply-for-economic-citizenship-of-the-commonwealth-of-dominica>

²⁸ Coldwell Banker St Kitts and Nevis (2014), *Complete overview of St Kitts and Nevis citizenship schemes*, at <http://www.coldwellbankerst Kittsnevis.com/page-complete%2Boverview%2Bof%2Bst%2Bkitts%2Band%2Bnevis%2Bcitizenship%2Bscheme%2Bwith%2Bcomplete%2Bbenefits-19.html>

²⁹ Henley & Partners (2014), *Cyprus Residency by Investment*, at <https://www.henleyglobal.com/residence-cyprus-residence/>

³⁰ M. G. Vella (2013), *Non-voting in Malta: Beyond tradition, mobilisation and partisan alignment*, Unpublished PhD dissertation. Msida, Malta: University of Malta.

political pressure. On 16 January 2014, the European Parliament adopted a non-binding resolution criticizing the IIP legislation. The resolution was supported by all major political groups and adopted by an overwhelming majority of 560 votes (including the 2 Maltese MEPs elected from the PN ranks), with 22 parliamentarians voting against (including the 4 Maltese MEPs elected from the PL fold), with 44 abstentions.³¹ The resolution, and the debate that preceded it, flagged many concerns, but above all iterated the need for the “mutual trust” and loyal cooperation on which the EU is built, meaning the Maltese Government cannot unilaterally craft legislation that has clear implications on the other member states of the EU, and on the EU itself. Some dialogue and negotiation is necessary, even if citizenship issues are indeed ultimately within the full prerogative of national governments. That dialogue and negotiation did eventually take place. While the Maltese Government stuck to the scheme and eventually brandished the EU’s

³¹ R. Bauböck (2014), *European Parliament condemns EU citizenship for sale*, at <http://eudo-citizenship.eu/news/citizenship-news/1034-european-parliament-debates-eu-citizenship-for-sale>;
European Parliament (2014), European Parliament resolution of 16 January 2014 on EU citizenship for sale, 2013/2995(RSP), at <http://eudo-citizenship.eu/images/docs/EP-Malta-news%2016%20January%202014.pdf>;
Citizenship for sale, live streaming of debate on EP Resolution on 16 January 2014, at [mms://vodwms.europarl.europa.eu/wmv/nas/nas_vod01/vod0801/2014/wm/VODChapter_20140115_17491000_19085300_-75f83b99143961aee26-3fe7.wmv?wmcache=0](https://vodwms.europarl.europa.eu/wmv/nas/nas_vod01/vod0801/2014/wm/VODChapter_20140115_17491000_19085300_-75f83b99143961aee26-3fe7.wmv?wmcache=0)

endorsement as one of its selling points, it did so only after accepting to carry out various amendments to the scheme, including introducing a one-year residency requirement and removing the anonymity clause.³² Clearly, the days when the Maltese Government could proceed unilaterally, even on such matters that fall clearly within its national purview, as citizenship does, are over. Maltese politicians, whether in power or in opposition, are learning, through the IIP saga and similar experiences, how best to make the added layer of European decision making to work in their own interests.

Case Two: Marsaxlokk and LPG storage

The second illustrative case to present in this chapter is that of the location of a Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) storage vessel inside Marsaxlokk harbour. In this case, apart from the anticipated PL-PN showdown, the concerns were more localised, and involved various local players, including local councils, in the country’s south-east.

Marsaxlokk Harbour is a classic example of land use conflict in a small island jurisdiction. The bay is the largest in the south-east and is the location of what is portrayed as Malta’s only traditional fishing village, attracting a

³² M. Dalli (2014), ‘Malta, EC reach agreement on citizenship, Reding welcomes breakthrough’, *MaltaToday*, Wednesday 29 January 2014, at <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/printversion/36017/#.U8kwILGamdw>

steady stream of tourist day trippers to its open-air market and fish restaurants. Close by is the seaside town of Birżebbuġa with its Pretty Bay, a popular summer residence locale, apart from being a growing all-year-round community in its own right. The area has, however, been gradually taking on a more 'industrial' look: the Malta Freeport set up operations there in the late 1980s, a project that involved considerable land reclamation. There are also fuel and liquid gas storage and bottling facilities at Bengħajsa. Aquaculture occupies part of the bay. But the major infrastructure in the area has been the Delimara Power Station, whose location generated considerable debate in the early 1990s.³³

The plan to store liquid petroleum gas (LPG) for the Delimara power station in a ship permanently berthed in Marsaxlokk Bay alongside a new jetty has been described as "arguably the biggest political controversy of the day".³⁴ The current power station has been running on heavy fuel oil (HFO), and its conversion to cleaner natural gas enjoys wide

³³ B. Spiteri (2011), 'Towards sustainable management of land and sea uses within the Marsaxlokk Bay area', in A. Micallef (ed.), MCRR3-2010 Conference Proceedings, *Journal of Coastal Research*, Special Issue, 61, 242–247.

³⁴ J. Cordina (2014), 'ISurvey: Passport scheme remains major concern; not so LNG tanker in Marsaxlokk', *The Malta Independent*, Tuesday 11 March 2014, at <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2014-03-11/news/isurvey-passport-scheme-remains-major-concern-not-so-lng-tankerin-marsaxlokk-4216258561/>

popularity. The conversion is also meant to provide a better security of energy supply, cleaner air, diversification of the energy mix, a reduction in the national energy corporation's generation costs and an ensuing reduction in energy tariffs. Expert reports were commissioned by all sides, and came up (predictably) with different risk and hazard scenarios. The national Fishers' Cooperative, environmental watchdog *Din L-Art Helwa* and *Alternattiva Demokratika* all criticised the decision and have instead suggested a ship anchored outside harbour as a safer arrangement, as has the PN Opposition.³⁵ No maritime impact assessment was carried out and a comprehensive risk assessment remains pending. Nevertheless, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) approved the project at a gruelling, eight-hour sitting on March 24 2014.³⁶

The interesting feature of this issue in relation to the question of governance is that concerning the local councils. The two local councils in the immediate area, Marsaxlokk and Birżebbuġa, as well as the council of Marsaskala, an adjoining locality, all have healthy Labour Party majorities: 6 PL

³⁵ M. De Marco (2014), 'Safety first at Marsaxlokk', *The Times of Malta*, Friday March 21 2014, at <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2014/0321/opinion/Safety-first-at-Marsaxlokk.511495>

³⁶ K. Sansone (2014), 'MEPA approves power station, gas storage facility permits', *The Times of Malta*, Monday March 24 2014, at <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2014/0324/local/mepa-approves-power-station-gas-storage-facility-permits.511954>

councillors and 1 PN councillor in Birżebbuġa; 4 PL councillors and 1 PN councillor in Marsaxlokk; and 6 PL councillors and 3 PN councillors in Marsaskala.³⁷ They all nonetheless expressed concern with the offshore but in-bay storage facility and its health and safety issues; here they were respecting the concerns of their residents (and voters), a “vast majority” of whom wanted to see the gas storage infrastructure located outside Marsaxlokk harbour.³⁸ This development is quite exceptional in Maltese politics, and the Labour Government has found itself in an awkward situation, unable to assume that sympathetic local councils would simply fall in line with its plans. Therefore, while unwilling to appear weak in the face of the demands of the PN opposition, the PL government, including the prime minister, made overtures to the respective local councils, offering honourable concessions that would enable them to support the conversion plans. These included guarantees that the LPG storage vessel would be removed as soon as a longer-term solution – a gas pipeline from Sicily, built with EU funds would be in place,³⁹ an option that had indeed

³⁷ The Editor (2014), *Local Councils as Pathway to Parliament*, at http://www.um.edu.mt/data/assets/excel_doc/0009/207387/tr-newpath.xls

³⁸ J. Debono (2014), ‘Residents prefer offshore terminal: Delimara gas plant EIA’, *MaltaToday*, Monday 6 January 2014, at <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/printversion/32872/#.U8p1krGamdw>

³⁹ The Editor (2014), ‘Muscat tells Marsaxlokk residents LNG tanker is not permanent’,

been also proposed by the Marsaxlokk local council.⁴⁰ The three councils eventually fell in line and supported the government’s interim plans but, in the process, the councils had secured direct interest from and consultation with national-level politicians who could not afford to neglect their views and concerns.⁴¹


Conclusion: What is past is prologue

Malta has come a long way. The levels of governance have been expanding in recent decades; the number of players involved in lobbying decision-makers is increasing; a unilateral stance by government increasingly unlikely. At the time of writing (July 2014), 50 years after gaining independence, 40 years after ditching the monarchical constitution, 20 years after having introduced local councils,

MaltaToday, Wednesday 14 May 2014, at http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/europe_2014/39005/muscat_tells_marsaxlokk_residents_lng_tanker_is_not_permanent#.U8ptd7Gamdw

⁴⁰ The Editor (2014), ‘Marsaxlokk council says change from HFO to gas ‘positive’’, *The Malta Independent*, Saturday 22 March 2014, at <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2014-03-22/news/mxlokk-council-says-change-from-hfo-to-gas-positive-4343169025/>

⁴¹ The Editor (2014), ‘Il-power station il-ġdida: Il-Gvern għandu jiddiskuti mas-Sindki tan-naħa t’isfel ta’ Malta dwar it-tanker tal-ħażna tal-gass’ [The new power station: Government should discuss the LPG tanker issue with the local councils of the region], *MaltaRightNow*, Saturday 8 February 2014, at <http://herbert.maltarightnow.com/Default.asp?module=news&at=Il-Gvern+g%26%23295%3Bandu+jiddiskuti+mas-Sindki+tan-na%26%23295%3Ba+t%27isfel+ta%27+Malta+dwa+r+it-tanker+tal-%26%23295%3Ba%26%23380%3Bna+tal-gass&t=a&aid=99854175&cid=19>



and 10 years after having acceded to the EU, the situation in Malta is one where absolutist government is well nigh impossible – to the government’s chagrin, and in spite of healthy parliamentary majority by the incumbent (Labour) government.⁴² Even the largely ceremonial office of the President of the Republic is now engaged in some interesting ‘social policy’ work.⁴³

evolution away from ‘total politics’ is another condition that has generated its own momentum.

Indeed, if the trend towards multi-focal power and multi-level governance continues in Malta, then perhaps this hitherto unassailable position of the ruling political party in a mono-cameral Parliament – and which makes short shrift of any ‘division of powers’ between the executive and the legislative – may be the last to fall victim to this wave of sweeping change. We are already witnessing some early signs of political decoupling or de-alignment with less people voting in general elections, and more voters willing to switch allegiance from one party to another in such elections, to the consternation of the two main political parties.⁴⁴ Europeanisation is definitely part of this transformative trend – dare we call it democratisation? But Malta’s welcome

⁴² D. Fenech (2013), ‘The 2013 Maltese General Election: unplugging the blockage’, *West European Politics*, 36(5), 1088-1094.

⁴³ The Editor (2014), ‘New President to have consultative role on social policy matters’, *The Times of Malta*, Tuesday 1 April 2014, at <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/2014/0401/local/new-president-to-have-consultative-role-on-social-policy-matters.513111>

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Vella, op. cit.

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