



THINK BIG: Can Malta produce a Nobel Laureate?

Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino

Iceland (population: 320,000) is proud of writer Halldor Laxness; the even smaller Faroe Islands (pop: 50,000) celebrates its physician and scientist Niels Ryberg Finsen.

The combined population of these countries is smaller than Malta's, yet they have each managed to secure Nobel Laureates: Laxness in Literature in 1955; Finsen in Medicine in 1903. Small size may be a handicap, but—as the Iceland and Faroe examples attest—it is not an insurmountable obstacle. Small size should not prove to be a cheap excuse. So the question is: can Malta produce a Nobel Laureate?

Thinking big can be a powerful motivator. Grand ideas can push publics, enterprises, and governments to achieve the unthinkable. Believe in the



apps4Parliament: Making parliamentary data more accessible

Dr Joel Azzopardi and Dr Charlie Abela

The Maltese people are known for being generous, hospitable, and passionate. They jump into any argument, mind, body, and soul... especially when it's about politics. The tripartite political scene, which recently evolved into a quadripartite one, captivates the Maltese population's interest to the point where its following is quasi-religious. On occasion, parliament sees politicians confront each other, debate, and in the end, legislate. In the process, a huge amount of information is generated. To put things into perspective, during every parliamentary session, backbench politicians and those of the opposing parties pose questions to ministers and parliamentary secretaries to scrutinise the government's work. In this current legislature alone, almost 30,000 Parliamentary Questions (PQs) have already been made. The

problem lies not only with its bulk, but also with its indiscernible format.

How so? EU legislation requires this information to be made accessible for citizens' consumption. This opens up governments' work to scrutiny and increases accountability. But while the Maltese parliament does provide access to collections of documents through different media, including its online portal and the recently launched TV station, the data's format and its sheer size makes it impossible for it to be used effectively. In an effort to make parliamentary data more open, Dr Charlie Abela and Dr Joel Azzopardi from the Department of Artificial Intelligence (Faculty of ICT, University of Malta) are working with the Office of the Speaker on a project called apps4Parliament.

apps4Parliament seeks to create a number of apps which can in turn make collections of parliamentary data more open, searchable, and accessible. The

impossible, advised the historian Max Weber, and then the possible might just become true. Landing a man on the moon before the end of the decade inspired the US Space Programme in the 1960s. The Live Aid Concerts in 1985 delivered £150 million in famine relief. And the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) Initiative has equipped 2.5 million children, and counting, across the world.

Malta needs 'think big' projects to galvanise the nation. Securing a Nobel Laureate could be one. Developing an underground subway system (and linking Malta to Gozo in the process) could be another. Such projects need not be mutually exclusive. Their trademark would be their ability to engage public opinion, foster national pride, and raise the game

to the next level. Naturally, people will continue to talk about politics, the weather, the traffic, the guy or gal next door... but also about these grand accomplishments. Of course, these projects will be controversial; they will have as many sympathisers as dissenters and critics. So? What's new?



That is how it should be.

Securing our political independence was one such dream for the 1960s. Bringing an end to our fortress economy was another aspiration for the 1970s. Joining the European Union was a third. Valletta Capital of Culture for 2018 may be a fourth and is an active project. What's cooking in the Kitchen of Big and Bold Ideas for Malta for the next few years?

We need to think ahead. Apathy is dangerous, and we need big ideas to keep it at bay.

By the way, St Lucia (population: 150,000) has not one, but two Nobel Laureates: Arthur Lewis for Economics in 1979 and Derek Walcott (born in 1930, still alive at the time of writing) for Literature in 1992. **T**



first app created as part of this project is called PQViz. The app exploits the PQ data by capitalising on the interaction between Members of Parliament (MPs) from different parties and presents an interesting,

interactive visualisation through which users can more intuitively understand questions like: who asked whom about what, who asked the most PQs, and who answered them.

Through the apps4Parliament project, the general public will be able to analyse parliamentary processes, monitor MPs' and committees' activities, and seek accountability. It is intended to help people understand how parliament works, clarifying law-making logic and involving them in the parliamentary process. The face of political culture is in for a change, and accessibility is going to play a major role. **T**