

THE UPCOMING MALTESE GENERAL ELECTION PRIDE & PREJUDICE

Media has recently reported that the forthcoming Maltese election will most probably be held this year. One does not need to be an expert in history to foresee that the temperament of the government during the pre-election period will change, becoming more 'sanguine', aiming to please the greatest number of people in the shortest time possible. This will also be the case with the opposition's attitude, where one will see it gradually relinquishing its somewhat navel-gazing 'melancholic' and at times, 'choleric' attitude to embrace a similar attitude.

We always seem to experience two paradigm shifts around each election period. Apart from payments of long-standing dues by the government to private contractors and unsolicited invitations to lavish buffets by candidates, the election period always invariably coincides with collective agreement renewals. During the pre-election period, we see various unions at loggerheads with the government to improve the benefits of their union members. The most lucrative collective agreements are always spearheaded by those unions who enjoy the greatest lobbying power since they hone on the ever-present threat of industrial action. So be it!

The second paradigm shift which we experience during the pre-election period is the most creative juggling of development boundaries and building heights. ODZ approvals for relatively small construction works take place on a monthly basis all year round. However, it is only during the few months [or days] prior to the election that a 4 tumolo ODZ field, worth Euro200,000 and facing a built-up area, can become worth Euro 4,000,000, following such a development boundary tweak.

However, at this stage let us concentrate on the health sector. If I were to make a calculated guess of the pre-election war of words between the two main political parties, I would mention that, on one hand the government will boast that:

- ✔ the bleak situation of increasingly out-of-stock medication which was a monkey on the back of the Health Minister for more than a decade has been effectively solved.
- ✔ generally speaking, the waiting lists for operations have continued to decrease.
- ✔ following the 2017 budget, diabetic patients in possession of the schedule V card [yellow card] have started benefiting *again* from



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free dental care, subsidies on reading glasses and free access to antibiotics. This has effectively addressed the unjust and abrupt removal of such benefits by the previous administration.

On the other hand, the opposition will most probably intensify its criticism of the following issues:

- ❓ the electoral pledge relating to the free delivery medicines to patients' homes is still stuck in the pilot phase [which started in April 2016].
- ❓ the public-private partnership relating to Karen Grech Hospital, St Luke's Hospital and Gozo General Hospital between the Maltese government and Vitalis Global Healthcare has been envisaged to cost the government a whopping €55 million annually for medical services that are currently offered through the national health service.
- ❓ the agreement which was announced in 2015 between the Ministry of Health and the Queen Mary University of London, for the opening of a medical school in Gozo foresaw the opening of a campus of the Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry. Initially, the government stated that the medical school would commence operations to all effects by September 2016. Last February, the government stated that the first students would be accepted in September 2017, whilst the new medical school building would only be ready in September 2018. Further to this, during these last months, medical students have consistently protested that such privatisation of medical education in Malta would dilute the medical school's clinical and education resources.
- ❓ although the 2017 budget announced that Type 2 diabetic patients will start benefiting from an *unspecified* amount of free glucose sticks, no indication of the commencement period of this service has been given.

Further to the above, the opposition will most probably also criticize the fact that the construction of the €100 million, 200-bed, private St John Paul II hospital at Smart City has not even commenced. During a press conference in March 2015, the government stated that the hospital was to open in 2017...

At this stage, only time will tell whether these predictions are correct...

Pan Ellul



Cover: Santo Spirito hospital pharmacy in Rabat. This is the oldest pharmacy in Malta dating back to the late 16th century.

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