It is Time to be Bold and Ambitious

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Introduction

"This is Europe's moment of truth. It is the time to be bold and ambitious."[1] Some weeks have passed since I have embraced the idea, supported it and proposed it to our Government. It has been on Gozo's agenda for decades, it has been discussed innumerable times and sadly it has also been shelved for a countless number of times.

But now, the opportune moment has come, and my Government has realised this. It is time to study the feasibility of permanently linking Gozo and Malta and my proposals are clear. I retain that a sub-sea tunnel between the two islands would offer the most economic and environmentally friendly solution. This is truly Gozo's moment of truth. It is definitely the time to be bold and ambitious.

The 6.2km Nordoya subsea tunnel connects Esturoy with Bordoy, the two most northerly islands of the Faroe Islands.

In the end this is just an enunciation of the political principles which I and the party in Government have upheld for years. These have been neatly spelled out in the present 2020 strategy for Europe which states that, "Economic, social and territorial cohesion will remain at the heart of the Europe 2020 strategy to ensure that all energies and capacities are mobilised and focused on the pursuit of the strategy's priorities. Cohesion policy and its structural funds, while important in their own right, are key delivery mechanisms to achieve the priorities of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in Member States and regions."[2] This is what we want to achieve for our nation and for the island region of Gozo in particular.

Cohesion Policy

The channel crossing between Gozo and Malta is a strategic thoroughfare of importance in the road network of the two islands. The allure of Gozo coupled with the necessity of Gozitans to travel to the mainland for study, work or health reasons have made it a vital point of connection which over the last twenty years has more than doubled in affluence passenger wise and more than trebled when it comes to vehicles.

Between 1990 and 2010, the annual passenger numbers have doubled to over four million and the annual vehicle figures trebled to over one million. In 2010, cars and cargo vehicles that crossed between Gozo and Malta, and vice versa, numbered 1,104,370 whilst passengers added up to 4,031,480.[3] Comparatively, and to put everything in perspective, if we quote the passenger figures that in

[1] European Commision (2010). *Europe 2020. A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*, Brussels. Preface Jose Manuel Barroso.
[2] Ibid, p. 20.
[3] Cf. National Statistics Office (17 January 2011). *Sea Transport between Malta and Gozo*. Malta. Q4/2010, 010/2011.

2010 transited the Malta International Airport, we come up with 3,293,524.[4] Nobody can put in doubt the fact that the road between Gozo and Malta is a true lifeline.

Nevertheless, the double insularity problem for Gozo remains. Although the present services provide a guaranteed and somewhat comfortable crossing, the insularity factor is impinging heavily on the island's economic growth. In 2009, a report detailing the Outcome of Social Dialogue within the Gozo Regional Committee of the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development showed that per capita output and income in Gozo are lower than that of the main island, and Gozo does not appear to be contributing to and benefitting from national economic growth in a proportionate manner. Per capita income in Gozo stood at 74.5% of that of the main island in 2007. Over one half of this difference is due to a lower rate of employment in Gozo. Another third is due to lower productivity of jobs in Gozo, and the rest is attributable to a lower proportion of working-age persons within the total population. The same report argues for the need for better transport as key to address the shortcomings of the economy of Gozo, and to help it exploit its distinctive advantages, thereby increasing its contribution to the national economy as well.[5]

The Cohesion Policy enunciated in the Europe 2020 strategy is about ensuring people are able to make the most of the inherent features of the territories in which they live. "Cohesion policy should continue to play a critical role in these difficult times, in order to deliver smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, while promoting the harmonious development of the Union and its regions by reducing regional disparities. Cohesion policy has made a significant contribution to spreading growth and prosperity across the Union, while reducing economic, social and territorial disparities."[6]

Ċirkewwa harbour.

[4] Cf. www.maltairport.com
[5] Cf. Cordina, Gordon and Vella, Stephanie (2009). *A Package of Measures to address Short-term Pressures and the Medium- to Long-term Development Goals of the Economy of the Island Region of Gozo. Outcome of Social Dialogue within the Gozo Regional Committee of the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development*, Gozo. Executive Summary, 2.
[6] European Commision (2010). *Investing in Europe's Future. Fifth Report on economic, social and territorial cohesion*. Luxembourg. XXIII.

The Gozo Channel ferry leaving Mġarr.

I retain that the answer that can give Gozo true territorial cohesion with mainland Malta is the infrastructure we are proposing. I believe that the surest way of bringing to Gozo the four freedoms promoted by the European Union, namely freedom of movement of people, freedom of movement of goods, freedom of movement of services and freedom of movement of capital, is by linking the two islands in a permanent manner. We want to do away with the constraints that presently hamper Gozo from achieving the same results of mainland Malta.

Tangible Improvements

The construction of all forms of infrastructure that have bettered connectivity and improved accessibility have always led to tangible improvements in the life of the people. Although studies will be conducted into the social, cultural and economic impact on the island of Gozo by connecting the two islands permanently, one does not have to be very imaginative to understand that Gozo stands to benefit from such a project.

The experience that has been accrued from such infrastructures in other countries makes one believe that the same will occur on our island. The construction of sub-sea tunnels in Norway have led to the generation of new business and the creation of new initiatives in the smaller communities. These permanent links have also induced people originating from the small island communities to continue to live permanently on the island or to return after they had gone to live on the mainland.

Two sub-sea tunnels (Vaga tunnel, 2002, 4.9km - Nordoya tunnel, 2006, 6.2km) that were constructed in the Faroe Islands, where the population amounts to 50,000 people, have completely revolutionised the quality of life of the islanders, whilst decentralising business growth and development. The results accrued from these two experiences are so positive that another two projects are presently under consideration.

We will soon start delving deeper into the implications of such a project on our islands but the positive reactions we have received from our people, from all walks of life, is that this project is not only desirable but also a sine-qua-non solution that look to the future, invests in the future, and gives an assurance of a better future.

Our community at large will be involved in various discussion forums because in line with the EU's fifth document of cohesion policy, we believe that, "involving regional and local communities can improve policies. Evaluation evidence has demonstrated that the active participation of people and organisations at regional and local level, from the design to the implementation stage, is a crucial success factor. Indeed such partnership is one of the key sources of added value of Cohesion Policy, mobilizing the skills and knowledge of those concerned to make programmes more effective and inclusive".[7]

Technical Studies

We will shortly be getting ahead with the various investigations that need to be done before deciding whether the construction of sub-sea tunnel between Malta and Gozo is feasible or not. In my opinion this project will be beneficial and cost effective, but ultimately it will be the feasibility studies that will show us if this is true or not. Until then, my opinion will be based on a number of considerations which I have discussed thoroughly with various members of the Gozitan community, and which I have also decided to share with the general public.

Presently the Gozo-Malta Channel is being served by the 'new' fleet of vessels which has now been in

[7] European Commision (2010). *Investing in Europe's Future. Fifth Report on economic, social and territorial cohesion*, Luxembourg. XXI.

The Mġarr Terminal.

operation for the last eleven years. We should now be planning the substitution of this fleet which will take place in approximately ten to fifteen years' time. But should we go for a similar solution or for a way out that is of a different nature, with a long term configuration? The proposal of a sub-sea tunnel envisages a life span of at least one hundred and twenty to one hundred and fifty years and per se the tunnel will always remain there. In the meantime four or five fleets of vessels would have to be constructed.

Although we are proposing a sub-sea tunnel, other options will also have to be considered in our studies. A field survey produced in 1972 by members of the Overseas Technical Cooperation Agency of the Government of Japan in "full cognisance of the necessity for Malta to construct this connection road,"[8] spells out three different options namely, a bridge, a causeway and a submerged tunnel. What we know for sure from evidence and similar experience in hand, is that the option that is being proposed is substantially lower in cost than bridges or submerged tunnels even in the case where there is a challenging geology.

Likewise the studies should delve into the required tunnel class which is to be proposed. This depends on the length of the eventual tunnel and the traffic volume. If we were to take the year 2010 for example, we know that the 4,000 vehicle mark was only surpassed marginally in thirty-seven days whilst in another fifty-one days more than 3500 vehicles made the channel crossing. This, and future projections will determine the size of the tunnel.

As in similar circumstances and for similar projects, studies into the required installations will also need to be made. These should include the setting up of emergency lay-bys at regular intervals with fire-extinguishers and telephones, including also turning niches for trucks. A high voltage electrical supply will have to be configured with supply coming from both tunnel entrances with transformers along the tunnel, all supplemented by emergency power. Illumination will be planned and divided into nightlight, transition and daylight zones. The ventilation compliment is normally supplied through reversible jet fans providing longitudinal ventilation to the required standards. The pumping out of any water inflow will also be catered for with a water reservoir located at the bottom end of the

[8] Overseas Technical Cooperation Agency (1972). *Link Road between Malta and Gozo Islands. Preliminary Survey Report.* Japan: Government Of Japan. Foreword, Tazuke, Keiichi, 1.

tunnel with a capacity to store at least a twenty-four hour of allowed inflow.

Communication through the tunnel especially in the case of emergencies, together with radio reception and cellular phone coverage are also important. In such cases the tunnel operator would be able to interrupt the radio stations with emergency messages. Speaking about safety and emergency situations, the experience from past similar projects shows that accidents are more prone to happen on an open road than in tunnels themselves.

When it comes to the feasibility of the tunnel one will also have to incorporate maintenance costs which would also include all operational costs. There is enough historical evidence to guide us in this matter with typical replacement of 'light weight' installations being replaced over an average of 15 years. On average maintenance and operational costs average at between 1% to 1.5% of the original (initial) cost of the tunnel. This is even much more contained than other permanent link solutions.

The most important element in the studies that will have to be conducted is into the geology of the islands and the dividing sea bed. Whilst recognising that tunnels have been built in all types of geological conditions, costs may vary according to the environment in which they are completed. All risk-analysis will also have to take into account seismic activity to which our reality is prone. In this case one will have to accrue from the experience drawn up from tunnels constructed in the past in Iceland (where volcanic eruptions, together with earthquakes are common) and Japan. Sub-sea tunnels have withstood even the most severe seismic activity in both these countries.

The Way Forward

Preliminary studies into the feasibility of the project will be in the hands of Transport Malta. These studies will take into account the various conditions and technical configurations which have been mentioned above without sidelining the environmental, social and economic impact which such a project will have on the life of the two islands especially Gozo.

It is also public knowledge that Jaspers (Joint Assistance to Support Projects in European Regions)[9] have been called upon to assist in the possible application of EU funds on such projects. Whilst the original Ten-T network for the islands of Malta and Gozo did not envisage a permanent link between the two islands, this plan is being amended to take account of this development.

The application of EU funds for the project will not discard the possibility of combining the same grant offered by Europe with a PPP (Public Private Partnership). In fact various financing models will be looked into as part of the studies being undertaken. It is also known that Jaspers themselves have already been looking at addressing issues that may arise because of such funding structures and the support that is required under a PPP approach.

Although Government will not be tying its hands at this stage, this project appears to fit like a glove into the scenario of a Design-Build-Operate (DBO) or a Design-Build-Finance-Operate (DBFO) project which can bring significant benefits to both contracting authorities and end users. It is also a project where public funding can be integrated with EU grant funding. Previous valuable experience has been built in many sectors and the lessons from this experience can be incorporated into DBO/DBFO structures.[10]

Without doubt, great challenges lie ahead. But we are ready to persevere against all odds, being bold and ambitious to deliver what we believe to be an effective lifeline to our island and a better future for our children. We are duty bound to do this, and we will not shirk from our duty.

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[9] Cf. www.jaspers-europa-info.org
[10] Cf. Pricewaterhousecoopers Eeig, 2010. *Jaspers Horizontal Task: Combining EU Grant Funding with PPP for Infrastructure Projects. Guidelines for the use of DBO to procure infrastructure projects using EU structural funds*. Luxembourg.