

# Malta: Euroscepticism in a Polarised Polity

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*From the candidate country in the EU's 2004 Enlargement with the lowest levels of support for EU membership, the situation in Malta has changed since accession so that all mainstream political parties now support membership. After presenting factors influencing attitudes to Europe, the article analyses party euroscepticism from Maltese independence in 1964 to the present, focusing on the Malta Labour Party. The examination of public opinion focuses on the period before and after the 2003 referendum on EU membership. The significant role of the eurosceptic media is also noted.*

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For many years, EU membership encountered fairly strong opposition in Malta and up to the last moment it hung in the balance. The Nationalist Party (Partit Nazzjonalista—NP) and the Malta Labour Party (Partit Laburista—MLP),<sup>1</sup> the only political parties represented in the Maltese House of Representatives, each commanding the support of approximately half of the Maltese electorate, took diametrically opposed positions. The NP promoted EU membership, the MLP opposed it. In 2003 the Maltese electorate twice voted in favour of membership by a narrow margin, first in a referendum and then in a ‘cliff hanger’ general election, called because the MLP refused to accept the referendum outcome (Cini 2003) (Tables 1 and 2).

The national vote in favour of membership constrained the MLP to re-evaluate its position on Europe. As a result, it decided to drop its opposition to membership and adopt what leading spokespersons described as a ‘pragmatic’ stance. It managed this in a brief span of a few months, in time for the first elections to the European Parliament which took place in June 2004 and which the MLP contested within the ranks of the Party of European Socialists (PES). The decision paid off and the MLP elected three out of Malta’s five seats in the Parliament much to the embarrassment of the

**Table 1** Maltese Referendum on EU Membership, 8 March 2003

	Total number of votes	Percentage of registered voters	Percentage of valid votes
In favour	143,094	48.0	53.7
Against	123,628	41.5	46.34

*Note:* Question: 'Do you agree that Malta becomes a member of the European Union in the enlargement that will take place on 1 May 2004?'

*Source:* <http://www.maltadata.com>

Nationalist Party which had worked since 1987 to secure Malta's membership. Five years later, in Malta's second EP election, the MLP repeated this success with an improved majority.

The MLP's decision to join the PES was a significant turning point in the party's history. Following discussions in Malta between the MLP and a PES delegation in August 2003, the MLP was accepted as a full member of PES on 14 November during a meeting of the PES presidium which was also attended by Dr George Vella, MP, former Deputy Leader of the MLP. The previous Sunday, the general conference of the MLP had approved by a large majority a shift in the party's policy in favour of EU membership. The party conference urged the MLP to maximise the benefits and minimise the adjustment costs of membership. At the PES presidium, the MLP representative said the party would support the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and European Security and Defence Policy, as long as actions taken under these policies did not undermine Malta's neutrality. The MLP's participation in the PES means that its new EU policy was strengthened by the additional discipline imposed by PES commitments.

In many ways, the MLP's policy shift is comparable to the reorientation on European integration made by the Greek socialist party, PASOK. These developments led to what can be described as a 'sea change' in Maltese party politics, in which all the main political parties in the House of Representatives now support EU membership. Euroscepticism has since been confined to a minority of individuals on the fringes of the MLP and the extreme right.

When Malta prepared to introduce the euro on 1 January 2008, the two main political parties found themselves once again in agreement in support of this step, though the MLP frequently voiced its concern about the impact on inflation resulting from the switchover. The euro was introduced on schedule without major problems and without political controversies. Furthermore, on 29 January 2008, both the NP and MLP voted in favour of

**Table 2** Malta's Second Vote on Europe: Results of the 2003 Maltese Election

Party	Total votes	Percentage of valid votes	Seats
Nationalist Party (for EU membership)	146,172	51.8	35
Malta Labour Party (against EU membership)	134,092	47.0	30

the Treaty of Lisbon in the House of Representatives, making Malta the third member state after Hungary and Slovenia to ratify the treaty.

In the 2009 EP election the MLP not only repeated its success in the 2004 EP election but improved on it. As will be discussed in this paper, this success was less influenced by its EU policy shift than by domestic affairs.

### **Structure and Methodology**

This article focuses on the Maltese political parties' policy stances towards EU membership. It begins with a brief overview of Malta's relations with the EU and the way in which the membership issue gradually crept into Maltese politics and gained momentum. Subsequently, the focus shifts to the content of the political discourse which separates and at times paradoxically unites the main political parties on many aspects of the question. The background material covers developments in Malta's domestic and foreign policies from just before the country's independence in 1964 up to 2003, when the membership issue was finally decided in the referendum and following general election. The starting date was chosen because Malta's first foreign policy act under an NP government following independence was to 'return back to the European home'. Subsequently, the policies which the island followed in 1971–87 under an MLP government are sometimes interpreted as a policy away from Europe. This article will ask to what extent this perception is true.

The impact of the Maltese electoral system on party politics is also included because this impinges on their stand on major issues, including the EU. Given Malta's bi-polarism and the very competitive nature of its politics, 'zero sum' calculations can play a salient role in determining the stands taken by the political parties. Following this brief appraisal, the analysis shifts to the rapid, breath-taking changes which occurred in Malta after 2003 and which saw the MLP consolidate its pragmatic approach towards the EU.

### **Factors Influencing Attitudes to Europe**

#### *Multiple Identities*

It should be noted that while the MLP has been against European integration, it has not really been against Europe. It can be said that the Maltese have multiple identities: European, Catholic and Mediterranean. Notwithstanding that they speak a language which is descended from Medieval Sicilian Arabic, though written in the Latin alphabet, the Maltese consider themselves European. Christianity was gradually consolidated on the islands after the Normans took them from the Arabs in 1090. The Constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as Malta's religion, and an estimated 98 per cent of Maltese are baptised Catholics, though not all practising ones. Catholicism influences the way the Maltese perceive themselves and the rest of the world. As Catholics, the Maltese feel part of a much bigger, global community. Catholicism has influenced the Maltese on some controversial issues such as divorce, abortion and more recently on same-sex unions.

While Catholicism unites the Maltese people with most of the peoples of south-western Europe, it separates them culturally from the Muslim North African peoples—though this ‘cultural cleavage’ is not absolute. As Fernand Braudel (1995) observes, ‘civilisations continually borrow from their neighbours, even if they reinterpret and assimilate what they have adopted’ (Braudel 1995, p. 2). Maltese cultural identity is no exception. The divide with Muslim North Africa was consolidated when the Order of St John occupied the islands (1530–1798). The successful resistance by the Order and the Maltese to the incorporation of the islands into the Ottoman Empire is commemorated annually on 8 September, the feast of ‘Il-Vitorja’, which celebrates the lifting of the ‘Great Siege’ of 1565 and the defeat of the ‘Turks’. This perception still colours the way in which many Maltese view Turkey’s EU ambitions. Reference by the Maltese to ‘the Turks’ predates the application of this appellation by the Turks to themselves, which has been dated to the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 (Lewis 2002, pp. 1–2). ‘Turk’ used to be applied by the Maltese to all Muslims, including North African Arabs.

### *Catholicism*

As elsewhere in Southern Europe, the influence of the Catholic Church in Malta is declining in some respects, but is still strong in others. The Church’s direct intrusion into Maltese politics is a thing of the past. A survey by *The Sunday Times of Malta*, published on 26 January 2007, succinctly revealed that while almost 99 per cent of respondents classify themselves as Catholics, only a minority follow the Church’s teaching on sexual practices, for example, with only 40.7 per cent agreeing with its ban on extramarital sex. Similarly, while there is widespread rejection of abortion (over 95 per cent), only around 55 per cent support the Church’s stand on divorce and birth control. Only 35 per cent say that religion still plays an important role in Maltese life. And while it seems that the majority of those who declared themselves Catholics are still practising, such practice varies widely.

Given the party duopoly and the small size of the Maltese electorate, with 315,000 registered voters in the last election of 2008, governing majorities can be overturned by small margins of votes. As a result, no political party can ignore minority issues, even those of concern to the smallest groups and, least of all, of the Catholic Church whose appeal is still very strong. Hence, parties tread carefully on issues such as abortion, divorce and same-sex unions. During the membership campaign, an attempt by eurosceptics to raise concern among the electorate that joining the EU would lead to the introduction of abortion constrained the government to negotiate a Protocol on Abortion (Protocol 7), attached to the Accession Treaty, and to make reassuring statements on all other issues of concern to the Catholic community. The Church did not take sides in the debate on EU membership, but it urged people to participate in the membership referendum, even though the MLP had declared it would not be bound by it.

*The Business Community*

The limitations of the domestic market, in this small island with 405,000 inhabitants, are too obvious to merit extensive comment. Opponents of EU membership did not espouse the severance of economic ties with the EU, but favoured a free trade agreement with the Union. The proponents of membership have frequently referred to the direct transfers that Malta receives from the EU budget through the Cohesion instrument.

The position on EU membership of the main business organisations is also crucial and one which the political parties ignore at their own peril. The main organisations, namely the Malta Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise (MCCE), the Malta Federation of Industry (MFI), the Malta Employers Association (MEA), the General Retailers and Traders Union (GRTU) and the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA), all support membership. The extent of support for membership in the main business organisations was revealed in a Malta Chamber of Commerce and Industry Survey, which showed that a staggering 91 per cent of respondents to an internal survey favoured membership (*Commercial Courier*, vol. LVII, no. 2, February 2003, p. 5). The MCCE, the MFI and the MHRA based their support for a 'yes' vote in the referendum on a study they commissioned on the costs and benefits of membership and non-membership written by Prof Ali Bayar (2003). Of these organisations, the MFI faced the most significant difficulties, since its membership was divided between exporters who were already directly integrated into the EU's internal market and those producing for the local market and who benefited from protectionism.

Within the trade union movement, the General Workers' Union (GWU), historically allied with the MLP, took an anti-membership line. In contrast, for both economic (investment, jobs) and social reasons (workers' rights), EU membership was supported by both the independent *Union Haddiema Maghqudin* (UHM), which is sometimes criticised for leaning towards the NP, and the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions (CMTU), which brings under the same umbrella a number of unions including UHM but not the GWU.

NGOs representing the farming sector mostly supported membership except for Association of Progressive Farmers, which, however, changed to a more pragmatic approach after membership. Environmental NGOs, such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Arbor, Birdlife and others—about 16 NGOs in all<sup>2</sup>—saw in membership a way in which to defend Malta's fragile environment. Today, they successfully employ EU directives in defence of the environment.

**Evolution of Malta's Relations with the EC/EU***EEC on the Radar Screen*

Given Malta's geographic proximity to European Economic Community founder member Italy, and its undoubtedly European culture (about 98 per cent are Roman

Catholic), as well as its historic ties with the main powers of Europe, the launching of the EEC in 1958 elicited some positive reactions among opinion leaders in the Maltese media, who entertained the possibility of Malta eventually joining the newly formed European bloc. However, it was Britain's first application to join the Community in 1961 which placed Malta's future relations with the EEC squarely on the national political agenda. Given Malta's high dependence on the UK, it was evident that unless some preferential arrangements were made for Malta, the country risked suffering adverse economic effects as a result of UK's membership. In 1962 Malta requested independence from Britain and Prime Minister and NP leader, Dr George Borg Olivier, envisaged attaining independence and joining the EEC. Of itself, this stance says a lot about the NP's brand of 'soft nationalism'. The initial membership objective was later modified to the more immediately attainable goal of an Association Agreement following independence.

Malta achieved independence in 1964 and six years later an EEC–Malta Association Agreement was signed in Valletta. The agreement envisaged the eventual creation of a customs union. Modelled on the Athens and Ankara agreements with Greece and Turkey, it had one important difference: namely, that it made no specific reference to the possibility of membership. However, the NP-led government did not hesitate to present the Association as a preparatory step towards full membership. In the first phase of independence, 1964–71, Malta joined the Council of Europe, promoted a market economy, attempted—but failed—to join NATO, and fully subscribed to what can be described as a Western orientation.

#### *Change in Political Orientation (1971–87)*

In 1971, soon after the Association Agreement came into effect, the MLP led by Dom Mintoff was elected to govern the country. As a result, Malta's domestic and international policies began to shift from their liberal and pro-Western orientation, under the stewardship of the NP, towards non-alignment. NATO's Mediterranean headquarters was immediately closed down, while on the domestic front the accent began to be placed on increased state intervention in economic affairs. State control was extended to the banking and utilities sectors and eventually also to the importation of goods through a so called 'bulk-buying' policy. A progressive income tax system and redistributive welfare policies were also strengthened. The state heavily subsidised the ship repair sector and expanded state investment in shipbuilding at a time when Malta was already losing its competitive advantage in both sectors due to rising labour costs. Both sectors were bedrocks of traditional MLP support.

In 1981–87, there was also a short-lived and unsuccessful experiment with import substitution in an attempt to stem rising unemployment, though the official excuse was that it was needed in order to foster a Maltese industrial base. Foreign direct investment was nevertheless encouraged throughout the period of MLP rule (1971–87), mainly in the export-oriented manufacturing sector. As shown by Pomfret (1982), the latter put to good use the preferential arrangements with the EC and the

trained and flexible Maltese labour force. But this policy also led to the creation of a dual economy: a very dynamic export-oriented sector based mostly on foreign direct investment except for tourism where domestic investment predominated, and a protected local sector catering almost exclusively for the local market. These economic policies were edging Malta further away from the concept of a market economy as championed by the European Community.

In international affairs, the MLP successfully negotiated with Brussels to broaden the scope of the 1970 Association Agreement, but in foreign policy it espoused non-alignment and leaned more towards the Arab world. With the passing of time this *philo-Arab* policy transformed itself into a close relationship with Libya alone, which was not devoid of its mercurial instances. Diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China were established on 31 January 1972, at the expense of relations with Nationalist Taiwan which had provided the island with economic aid since independence. A 1972 Anglo-Maltese agreement provided for the closure of the UK military installations in Malta by 1979, whereupon Malta embarked on a policy of neutrality. In 1980, following an incident with Libya regarding oil prospecting in disputed territorial waters, Malta signed a treaty with Italy, a NATO member state. Italy promised to come to Malta's aid, should the latter request it, in order to defend Maltese neutrality and/or territorial sovereignty. Italy could not have signed the treaty, in reality a bilateral defence accord, without NATO's knowledge. But, a year later, Malta signed a similar agreement with the Soviet Union, the main justification being that this was required to 'balance' the Italian agreement, given Malta's neutrality and its policy of equidistance from the two superpowers. This agreement irritated the Italian authorities and alarmed Western capitals about the possibility of Soviet meddling in Maltese affairs (see Pace 1999).

An attempt was also made to graft on Malta a 'Mediterranean' identity and a political orientation, which perhaps in the mind of its more radical proponents could one day replace its European one. After all, as was sometimes argued, being physically separated from the continents which surround the Mediterranean Sea (Africa, Asia and Europe), Malta is quintessentially a Mediterranean state. However, at the same time that this new emphasis was being made, Malta continued to participate fully in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), maintained its membership of the Council of Europe, and expanded its economic relations with the European Community. Of course, Malta's behaviour led to some difficult and tense moments in all three organisations: it provoked an impasse in the CSCE's Helsinki (1973–75) and Madrid (1980–83) conferences over security in the Mediterranean region. In 1983, Malta also threatened to leave the Council of Europe. The problem in relations with the EC in the period 1980–87 arose mainly because Malta wanted to deepen its economic links with the Community by means of a 'special relationship', comprising most of the benefits but not the burdens of membership. Unprecedented in EC external relations, the Community showed no enthusiasm for this idea.

In short, under the MLP governments, Malta sought as close an economic relationship with the EC as possible while maintaining an independent foreign policy.

Anti-Western European rhetoric was, needless to say, abundant in this period. However, one must not overlook its manipulative objective of securing more western aid for Malta by playing east against west. When Mintoff referred in the Maltese House of Representatives to the 'Europe of Cain' (the west) and 'Europe of Abel' (communist bloc) (*L-Orizzont*, 7 November 1978), or when he accused western Europe of 'being without a soul' in a speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, he probably had nothing more in mind than to coax the European democracies into increasing their economic aid to Malta to replace that being lost by the closure of the UK military bases (Mintoff 1978).

One of the main characteristics of this 'Mediterranean' orientation was Malta's insistence on Mediterranean security, often in complete oblivion to broader international developments. This was shown in the CSCE process, where the Maltese government's insistence on inserting Mediterranean security on the conference's agenda pitted Malta against all the other member states. On the domestic front, it took the form of anti-west European rhetoric and an insistence on promoting Arab culture and the teaching of Arabic, which was made compulsory in the secondary educational system from 1975 to 1987. These policies went against national sentiment, as succinctly captured by Jeremy Boissevain:

... the Labour government broke off relations with NATO and sought links with the Arab world. After 900 years of being linked to Europe, Malta began to look southward. Muslims, still remembered in folklore for savage pirate attacks, were redefined as blood brothers.... (Boissevain 1991 p. 88)

The MLP's enthusiasm for the Arab world was not shared by the majority of Maltese. On the abolition of Arabic as a compulsory subject in 1987, only a handful of applicants bothered to register for the Matriculation examination in the language. More tellingly, a survey carried out 12 years later showed that only one per cent of Maltese secondary school children volunteered to learn Arabic as a third language after Maltese and English. The survey showed that the most popular third languages amongst Maltese students were French (33 per cent), Italian (42 per cent), German (nine per cent) and Spanish (one per cent) (Sciriha 2001). Malta's 'Europeaness' could not be more clearly defined.

### **Membership on the Political Agenda**

In 1979, the date for the closure of the UK military bases was drawing closer and Malta's foreign policy was not only turning southwards but also starting to shift eastwards, with gradually strengthening relations with the communist bloc countries. The NP, then in opposition, made a clear commitment that, if elected, it would seek full EC membership. That this commitment to anchor Malta in democratic western Europe had more resonance with the majority of the Maltese people than the 'Mediterranean' policy pursued by the Labour Government is to some extent supported by the 1981 election result. The NP won more votes than the MLP in the



1981 election (although it was prevented from governing because, due to the way in which the electoral boundaries had been drawn up, it won fewer parliamentary seats than the MLP).

The 1981 election was a watershed because it signalled the beginning of the end of the decade-old MLP policies. The political impasse that ensued led to a negotiated settlement providing for majority rule and the entrenchment of neutrality in the Maltese Constitution. In 1987, a few weeks before the election and with the MLP still in government, Malta signed the protocol allowing its citizens the right to petition the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The second 'return' to Europe had begun. The NP won the 1987 election, this time with a parliamentary majority, and in July 1990 Malta applied to join the EU. Membership rose to the top of the domestic political agenda.

In 1996, the NP lost the election to the MLP, which immediately suspended the membership application to pursue its policy of concluding a free trade area agreement with the Union within the ambit of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. At the same time, the MLP entertained a deeper arrangement which it called a 'special relationship' and referred to a 'Switzerland in the Mediterranean', a populist title originally coined by Mintoff in the 1960s. The MLP government had a very short life as internal dissent provoked by former party leader and Prime Minister Dom Mintoff led to the party losing a crucial confidence vote in the House of Representatives in the summer of 1998, precipitating an unprecedented early election. In the 1998 election, the NP regained its electoral and parliamentary majority, mainly on a promise to reactivate the membership application. Membership negotiations with the EU began in 2000 along with the other candidates for membership of the so-called 'Helsinki Group'.

## Political Parties and European Integration

### *The Maltese Political System*

The standpoints of the Maltese political parties on EU membership before the 2003 referendum and general election should be analysed within the context of Malta's political history since independence and the intensely bi-polar nature of the political system (Baldacchino 2002; Cini 2002). The main cause of this bi-polarism lies within the Maltese electoral system, which is based on proportional representation and the single transferable vote. This normally leads to a stricter correlation between the share of votes obtained by a political party and the number of seats allocated to it in the House of Representatives. The proportional system can also lead to political fragmentation and government by coalition. However, in Malta's case this fragmentation came to an end in 1966 when only the NP and MLP won seats in the House. New political formations have since unsuccessfully tried to challenge this duopoly.

The poor performance of the smaller parties is attributable to the fact that to win a parliamentary seat a party must secure a 'quota' of votes within at least one electoral district. The votes obtained by the parties in the individual electoral districts are not

**Table 3** Maltese Party Duopoly: Election Results, 1966–2008 (Percentage of Votes Obtained in Elections to the House of Representatives)

	NP	MLP	AD	DNP	PCP	CWP	DCP
1966	47.9	43.1	–	1.29	1.46	6.00	–
1971	48.1	50.8	–	–	1.04	–	–
1976	48.5	51.5	–	–	–	–	–
1981	50.9	49.1	–	–	–	–	–
1987	50.9	48.9	–	–	–	–	–
1992	51.8	46.5	1.69	–	–	–	–
1996	47.8	50.7	1.46	–	–	–	–
1998	51.8	47.0	1.21	–	–	–	–
2003	51.8	47.5	0.68	–	–	–	–
2008*	49.3	48.8	1.31	–	–	–	–

*Notes:* The Communist Party obtained 0.05 per cent in the 1987 election and the Democratic Party 0.16. NP = Nationalist Party; MLP = Malta Labour Party; AD = Alternattiva Demokratika (Greens); DNP = Democratic Nationalist Party; PCP = Progressive Constitutional Party; CWP = Christian Workers' Party; DCP = Democratic Christian Party. \*In 2008 all other small parties apart from AD obtained 0.82 per cent, which is not shown in the table.

*Source:* <http://www.maltadata.com>

transferable to other districts or to a national 'pool'. At the national level, they are only useful to determine which party ought to have an overall majority of seats in the House. Thus, in the extreme, it is theoretically possible for a party to fall just short of the quota by a handful of votes in all of the 13 five-seat electoral districts, and still be unable to secure a parliamentary seat despite its overall share of the national vote. Meanwhile, a party which contests a single district but manages to secure a quota also secures a seat in the House. This hypothetical situation has so far not arisen as Malta's third party, the green AD (Alternattiva Demokratika—Democratic Alternative), secured only 1.69 per cent of the national vote when it first contested a general election in 1992. This dropped to 0.68 per cent in 2003, rising to 1.3 per cent in the 2008 election. In total numbers, AD's national vote fell from 4,186 in 1992 to 3,810 in 2008. In each of the districts AD fell quite short of a quota.

As a result, Malta is a party duopoly (see Table 3). It also has a high voter participation rate, consistently over 90 per cent in the nine elections from 1971 to 2008 and over 94 per cent in six of them. This is attributable to the political culture and the heavy involvement of the political parties in the media, which strengthens their ability to mobilise supporters.

#### *Political Party Stands on Membership*

Political polarisation led Godfrey Baldacchino to inquire whether Malta was a 'nationless state'. Baldacchino argued that although Malta has all the legal trappings of a state, there are doubts as to whether it possesses national identity and unity, or whether it is rather two nations in one state (Baldacchino 2002). The analysis in the present article shows that political differences may not be as radical as at first meets the

eye. Despite the sharp differences and polarisation, the Maltese people have their own way of reaching consensus on many hot issues.

Polarisation means that 'zero-sum' calculations feature prominently in the political stands of the political parties. However, the evidence shows that policy convergence and even consensus is also possible, often after strongly vocal and divisive campaigns. Policies tend to be dressed as sharp alternatives even when the divergences may not be so acute. Hence, it can reasonably be argued that it lay in the 'logic' of the Maltese political system that if one of the leading parties should propose EU membership, the other would oppose it with equal intensity. However, as happens in such 'cat and mouse' situations, the nuances are often missed and stronger attention to the political discourse will certainly identify the points of convergence.

Thus, although the NP is the party which consistently sought EU membership, it has pursued with quasi-equal intensity policies towards the Mediterranean. Malta's first policy statement in the Council of Europe, delivered by Prime Minister Borg Olivier on 4 May 1965, stressed that Malta's membership of the Council was like returning home after hundreds of years of absence. But he also added that Malta would champion Mediterranean issues in that Organisation. Meanwhile in 1971, when the MLP changed gear towards a more Mediterranean orientation, it was careful not to isolate Malta from Europe. It also continued to benchmark Malta's development strategy against western Europe's achievements, even though the policy tools it employed were, to say the least, unconventional.

Nor is Maltese politics lacking in paradoxes. The NP, which negotiated independence from Britain in 1964 and whose name suggests a possible nationalist stance on EU membership, was the party that in 1979 proposed EU membership and unwaveringly pursued this goal until its attainment. On the other hand, the MLP, which had sought Malta's integration with Britain in 1955–58 and with Italy in 1963 (Frendo 1999) opposed EU membership. Even in its 'new Labour' mould of the 1990s and notwithstanding its more 'internationalist' outlook, the MLP took a eurosceptic line and a much harder nationalist approach towards the EU than that taken by the NP.

However, the MLP's euroscepticism needs to be carefully qualified. In 1996 when the MLP won the general election, it showed its penchant for radical decisions by immediately suspending the EU membership application without withdrawing it and by pulling Malta out of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP). However, MLP discourse tended to navigate the EU issue carefully, refraining from overtly attacking the idea of EU integration as such, but only opposing Malta's membership. This 'nuanced' rejection of EU membership confounds attempts to classify the MLP as eurosceptic as strictly defined. Indeed, in its 1996 Electoral Manifesto, the MLP stated that:

Within a framework of Maltese constitutional neutrality, there must be two basic orientations for Malta's foreign policy: the European and Mediterranean directions. The former arises from the deep political, commercial and cultural ties we have with Europe. The latter results from our geographic position and the common interests we share with our Mediterranean neighbours on such issues as the environment, security, trade and economic development (MLP 1996, Points 1, 3–4).

This policy, emphasising balanced relations with Europe and the Mediterranean, is similar to that pursued by the NP since independence, with one major difference: whereas the MLP speaks of the '*deep political, commercial and cultural ties we have with Europe*', the NP affirms as one of its fundamental principles '*our Latin and European culture*' (NP 1971, point 26b). Thus, while the NP has consistently seen Malta as an integral part of Europe with strong Mediterranean interests, the MLP depicts Malta as a quintessentially Mediterranean isle, linked equally with Europe and the Arab world and maintaining a neutral stance in between.

An analysis of the MLP's election manifestos brings into sharp relief these nuances and the way they have evolved. In the 1971 manifesto, the MLP described Malta as being both European and Mediterranean. It promised to secure for the Maltese citizens the right of individual petition to the European Court of Human Rights and described the economic and social objectives it wished to achieve by reference to the 'advanced countries of Europe' (MLP 1971). In 1976, the MLP stated that its political, social and economic goals could only be achieved with the active help of 'Western Europe' (MLP 1976). In the 1981 manifesto, we encounter the extraordinary statement that Malta cannot join the Community before full cooperation and understanding exists between the EC and the Arab states:

This is the political reason which explains why Malta cannot share the same aspirations and ideas of the European Community before full cooperation and understanding exists between the Community and Arab States. It is not considered in Malta's interest to break ties with Arab countries to expect that in this way the respect of European states will be gained because it is really in the interest of the European countries bordering the Mediterranean that Malta will continue to serve as a bridge of peace between the two sides (MLP 1981).

As the NP made EU membership the priority goal of its political programme, the MLP reacted by proposing an agreement comprising the closest possible relations with the European Union, compatible with Maltese and European interests and based on an industrial free trade zone to be achieved within a reasonable timescale. In addition, the MLP also envisaged the conclusion of bilateral agreements with the EU in foreign policy, security and cooperation in the technical, economic, financial and social fields. Hence, the MLP, while rejecting membership, proposed a high degree of integration with the EU. Several MLP spokesmen made it a point to laud the EU as a project which was good in itself, but which was unsuitable for Malta's needs. This much contested 'unsuitability' was spelled out in the 1996 Manifesto:

Labour believes that Malta should refrain from seeking full membership of the European Union, which would entail the adoption by Malta of all the Union's policies. Many of these have been designed for big European countries and do not suit the specific economic and social characteristics of small islands like Malta and Gozo. Besides, membership of the EU would also undermine Malta's neutrality (MLP 1996, Point 1.4).

This position, 'not against the EU, but not for membership', is succinctly reflected in what Chris Cardona, then Labour Spokesman on Foreign Affairs, told an interviewer:

‘The MLP is certainly not against the EU. If anything, the hard work we are doing and the vision we have are clear signs that we’re in favour of it’ (*Malta Today*, 22 May 2002). While in reality, ‘not against the EU, but not for membership’ corresponds to a rejection of membership, the qualifier that the EU was a good thing in itself mellows it.

Perhaps this stance also betrays an underlying readiness by the MLP to change course should expediency so dictate: it offers an escape hatch, dictated by political prudence in the event of the need to switch policy. To some extent, it may also reflect longstanding internal MLP cleavages on membership. Whatever the case, this position enjoyed more credibility than one of outright opposition to the EU. In addition, Malta’s economic and geopolitical realities, which are amply comprehended by all political parties, rendered a radical stance towards the EU irrational. Indeed, notwithstanding the MLP’s political rhetoric on the EU, at no point in its history did it ever seek a complete severance of relations with the EU. Instead it consistently worked to achieve a ‘special relationship’.

For many years, the MLP struggled to maintain an open mind on EU membership. A 1990 MLP Report on the EU, which served as a basis for the party’s policy, stressed a pragmatic approach: while reiterating that membership was not beneficial for Malta, it recognised that the situation could change as a result of the Community’s evolution. ‘The MLP should not therefore adopt any alternative as if this could not be changed in accordance with the changing times and changing circumstances; the situation should be analysed continuously’ (MLP 1990, p. 20). Ten years before, at a public meeting in Birzebbugia, Mintoff had declared that the MLP would take Malta into the EC if and when this was in its interests, adding, ‘We will never say we will not join . . . and then even when we join, should we discover that it is not in our interests, we will pull out’ (*It-Torca*, 20 July 1980).

As already mentioned, in 1998, after 21 months in government, the MLP was forced to call an early election, precipitated by a split in the parliamentary group provoked by former MLP leader, Dom Mintoff, on a non-EU related issue. As Malta headed for the election, the MLP’s 1998 electoral manifesto maintained nearly unchanged the 1996 position on the EU, but with additional nuances suggesting that the industrial free trade area it was proposing with the EU, now named ‘*A Switzerland in the Mediterranean*’, would not be the final objective but could serve as a step towards eventual membership.

The Labour Party believes that Malta should not consider full membership of the European Union prior to the implementation of the Free Industrial Trade Zone and the achievement of the restructuring process of local industries in such a way that we can consolidate the foundations of our Maltese Home in Europe (MLP Manifesto 1998, Point 1.1).

Interestingly, the Manifesto once again endorses the importance of the EU integration process: ‘The New Labour Government appreciates and supports the process of economic, social, and political integration spearheaded by the European Union’ (MLP 1998, Point 1.2). This modified position was no doubt in response to growing

domestic pressure on the MLP government to change its policy and reactivate the membership application, particularly after the EU began negotiations with the first group of applicants, amongst which Malta would have been included had it not suspended its application.

The 1998 electoral victory by the Nationalist Party permitted Malta to reactivate its membership application, just in time for the EU to include it in the 'Helsinki Group' of applicants. Negotiations with this group started on 15 February 2000. Notwithstanding its electoral defeat, the MLP did not shift policy on membership and campaigned against accession. It rejected the Nationalist Party's 1998 election pledge to hold a referendum at the end of the negotiations. The MLP also threatened to withdraw the membership application if it were elected again. Thus, from 1998 onwards the MLP position against membership hardened.

### *Political Parties and the Media*

The role of the media in fomenting EU scepticism and pro-EU sentiment in Maltese public opinion needs to be carefully dissected. However, since this is not one of the main objectives of this article, it would be apt to summarise the role of the media as carriers of the information campaigns of the Maltese political parties and to point towards potential avenues for future research. In terms of their reach, newspapers fall behind the broadcasting media, but an analysis of the content of the eurosceptic print media is sufficient to show the nature and content of party and 'popular euroscepticism', since most of the arguments in the print media tended to find their way into the many debates and news items on Maltese radio and television programmes. The MLP-GWU tandem together with the pro-MLP Campaign for National Independence (CNI), led by a former MLP Prime Minister and party leader, spearheaded the anti-membership movement prior to the 2003 referendum. Hence, the media owned by the MLP-GWU became the main message carriers of the EU-sceptic campaign. In general, writers and commentators often slipped their harness, going beyond the strict limitations imposed by official party stands. Thus, a content analysis requires the analyst to separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to identifying party positions.

External influences are also relevant. The sale of UK newspapers in Malta, particularly the eurosceptic ones, is substantial, which may account for the influence of UK euroscepticism in Maltese newspapers. Many European and UK eurosceptics contributed to the media, mostly the English-language media, including during the referendum campaign. On the other hand, previous UK Prime Minister Tony Blair threw his weight behind the 'yes' campaign. Confidential information supplied by newspaper distributors and which cannot be published *in totum* shows that besides the Maltese English-language dailies and weeklies, all UK national newspapers are sold in Malta. In the winter period, sales of these newspapers reach around 20–25 per cent of daily English-language newspaper readers and 35 per cent of them on Sunday. The leading titles are in this order: for the dailies, the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun* and the

*Daily Mirror*; and for the Sunday newspapers, the *News of the World*, *The Sunday Times* and the *Mail on Sunday*.<sup>3</sup> These are among the most eurosceptic newspapers in Europe.

The presence of the Maltese political parties is most felt in the Maltese-language newspapers. *In-Nazzjon* and *Il-Mument*, published by the NP, and the MLP's *Kulhadd* are party papers. *It-Torca* and *L-Orizzont* are published by the pro-MLP General Workers' Union (GWU), Malta's largest trade union, and their content is aimed almost exclusively at the MLP rank and file. This explains why these dailies became the uncompromising voices of the 'yes' (NP) and 'no' (MLP) positions and 'deviant' views from the party line were not tolerated.

Thus, it was just as impossible for the NP papers to carry a eurosceptic piece as it was for the MLP-GWU newspapers to carry an opinion favouring membership. The English-language Maltese newspapers, which enjoy a bigger circulation, took a more pro-membership editorial line (particularly those published by Allied Newspapers). However, these papers also provided a national platform for all views to be aired. The result of this is that while the more educated segment of the population which is likely to follow English-language newspapers had reasonable access to all views, those who read only Maltese-language newspapers, where the political parties predominate, tended to have a one-dimensional view, depending on which newspaper they preferred.

### Public Opinion

Public opinion surveys were published in Malta prior to the 2003 referendum and general election but many of them lack scientific rigour. Their results are not completely irrelevant, since they partially coincide with Eurobarometer findings. A survey carried out by Standard Publications in 2000 showed 50.3 per cent of the Maltese in favour of membership and 39.7 per cent against, with 10 per cent undecided (*Malta Independent*, 6 December 2000). A survey carried out by the popular national TV programme *Xarabank* on 12 and 13 June 2001, involving some 1,200 respondents, showed that public opinion was extremely fluid on the issue one year into the membership negotiations. The question asked of respondents was: 'If a referendum on EU membership were held tomorrow, how would you vote?' The results revealed that 39.6 per cent of respondents favoured membership, 39.7 per cent were against while 20.7 per cent were still undecided (*Malta Today*, 17 June 2001).

Finally, an opinion poll conducted by *The Sunday Times of Malta* and published on 26 January 2003, some five weeks before the actual vote took place, showed that amongst the decided voters those in favour of membership outnumbered those against by 2:1. The poll indicated that 47.7 per cent would vote for membership in a referendum, 22.3 per cent would vote against, 22.3 per cent were undecided and 1.7 per cent would abstain. The actual result of the referendum, in which 91 per cent of eligible voters cast their vote, was 52.87 per cent in favour and 45.67 per cent against while 1.45 per cent invalidated their ballot (Cini 2003; Pace 2004). The evidence shown here indicates that as the negotiations advanced further and the public became

much more informed about the contents of the ‘package’ being negotiated, opinion began to sharpen.

In comparison with these surveys, Eurobarometer data are more reliable, because it applies a standard methodology across time and therefore yields a more consistent set of data. An analysis of Eurobarometer data (see Table 4) leads to certain observations. In autumn 2001, support for membership in Malta stood at 39 per cent, well below the EU average of 53 per cent, while opposition to membership stood at 25 per cent more than twice the EU average. The Eurobarometer data do not really say much on how public opinion varied just before the 2003 referendum and election since the surveys closest to these ballots pertain to fieldwork undertaken in autumn 2002 and spring 2003, in the latter case after the membership issue had already been decided at the polls. However, the data show some stable trends, namely that support for membership in Malta has consistently been higher than that against (Table 4). Meanwhile, support for EU membership has generally been lower in Malta than the EU average, while opposition to membership has been slightly higher.

Opposition to membership has also tended to be higher in Malta than in the other applicant countries. According to Eurobarometer, in autumn 2001, 65 per cent of respondents of voting age in the candidate countries declared that they would support their country’s EU membership in a referendum. The only country without a large

**Table 4** Mass Attitudes to EU Membership in Malta

Survey date	Malta			EU		
	For	Against	Neither	For	Against	Neither
Autumn 2001	39	31	25	53	12	28
Spring 2002	38	24	24	53	11	28
Autumn 2002	45	25	22	55	10	29
Spring 2003	51	19	24	54	11	27
Autumn 2003	55	17	22	48	15	31
Spring 2004	50	16	26	48	17	29
Autumn 2004	45	17	30	56	13	28
Spring 2005	40	19	36	54	15	27
Autumn 2005	43	18	35	50	16	30
Spring 2006	44	18	36	55	13	28
Autumn 2006	45	15	36	53	16	27
Spring 2007	51	17	30	57	15	25
Autumn 2007	54	15	28	58	13	25
Spring 2008	60	12	26	52	14	29
Autumn 2008	46	14	36	53	15	27
Spring 2009	57	13	27	53	15	28
Autumn 2009	45	20	33	53	15	28

*Note:* Answers to the question whether Maltese membership of the EU is regarded as ‘a good thing’, ‘a bad thing’ or ‘neither good nor bad’.

*Source:* Eurobarometer.



majority in favour of accession was Malta, where only 53 per cent of eligible respondents indicated that they would vote in favour. Further, the same survey showed that Malta was the only candidate country where more than three in 10 respondents (34 per cent) had a negative image of the EU (CCEB 2002, p. 3).

In the long term, the MLP's post-2003 pragmatic approach and support for membership could see support for the EU rise even higher. Of course, other determinants should also be taken into account, such as public perceptions as to whether membership is leading to improved welfare and an increase in the so-called 'feel-good factor', or whether it is having the opposite effect. Economic growth tends to increase optimism in the EU, weak or sluggish growth depresses it. Indeed, support for EU membership peaked at 55 per cent in 2003 but then gradually declined as unpopular decisions began to be implemented such as the restructuring of the dockyards and the tightening of fiscal measures to reduce public spending, which in that year stood at 5.7 per cent of GDP (Ministry of Finance 2006).

Another sign of public dissatisfaction in the first years of membership, apart from that indicated by the Eurobarometer surveys, was that the NP was soundly thrashed in all local elections held since the referendum and in the 2004 election to the European Parliament. The gradual upward trend in public opinion in favour of the EU from 2005 onwards coincides with a period in which the Maltese economy began a slow recovery, though public optimism was dampened by the increase in fuel prices as a result of the increase in world market prices. The latter have been widely described as 'the fourth oil shock'.

In July 2006 the EU approved Malta's introduction of the euro as from 1 January 2007. Malta's ability to secure substantive aid from the Cohesion Funds (€855 million for 2007–13) also improved public perceptions. An increase in undocumented immigrant arrivals led to public disgruntlement since it was blamed by some on EU membership. The EU's help in mitigating the impact and the establishment of Frontex, the EU frontier coordinating agency, softened some of the negative impact, notwithstanding criticism of the agency's operations. The NP was able to pounce on the positive developments to argue that its membership decision had been vindicated, while the MLP was further pressurised into continuing along its pragmatic road concerning the EU.

After winning the 2008 parliamentary election by a whisker, the NP was again thrashed in the 2009 EP election, with the MLP once again securing three seats (and also a fourth should Malta's seat allocation be increased from five to six seats now that the Lisbon Treaty is ratified). Adverse domestic political developments were largely to blame for this negative NP result, particularly high increases in water and electricity rates (Pace 2009).

The introduction of the euro does not appear to have triggered a eurosceptic backlash. The new currency has been quickly accepted and the old one just as quickly forgotten. A public opinion survey carried out by Eurobarometer in early 2009 showed that while, broadly speaking, public opinion in the EU was equally divided as to whether the old currencies would have better protected the member states in this

recession, in Malta a clear majority felt that they would have been worse off with the Maltese lira. At the same time a slightly bigger majority believed that the introduction of the euro mitigated the adverse effects of the recession (see Table 5). These data for Malta contrast with those of Cyprus which switched to the euro on the same date, since more than half of the Cypriot sample agreed that the country would have been better off with their old currency, while paradoxically just under half also agreed that the introduction of the euro mitigated its worse effects.

### The MLP's Metamorphosis

This section analyses the internal debate within the MLP which led it to shift from euroscepticism. When the party refused to recognise the result of the March 2003 referendum, a general election was called which took place on 12 April 2003. The main campaign issue was EU membership. The incumbent NP obtained just under 52 per cent of the vote to the MLP's 47.5 per cent and thus won another five-year term in government. Ironically, the election also meant that the membership issue had been decided in the manner favoured by the MLP, which had opposed the referendum and had insisted that the issue be decided in a general election (Cini 2003; Pace 2004). As a result of the election, the MLP had to adopt a pragmatic position on membership and to do this rapidly, in time for the European Parliament elections scheduled for June 2004.

Just two months after the election, MLP leader Alfred Sant told a newspaper: 'What we believed about EU accession is now immaterial. The thing has been decided and we face a new reality now' (Pace 2004, p. 115). An MLP general conference was called to adopt the new party policy. However, to do this successfully the MLP had to grapple with the challenge of winning over grassroots opinion, which as a result of the negative campaigning of the past years did not make this task any easier.

**Table 5** Public Opinion in Malta a Year after Eurozone Entry: Effects of the Euro on the Recession

		EU	Malta	Cyprus
QD6a: Our Country would have been more protected if we had kept our old currency	Agree	45	33	52
	Disagree	45	48	39
	No answer	10	19	9
QD8: Overall the Euro has mitigated the negative effects of the current financial crisis	Agree	39	49	49
	Disagree	44	26	37
	No answer	17	25	14

*Note:* Figures are percentages.

*Source:* Special Eurobarometer 311, January–February 2009.

In addition, two former party leaders and former prime ministers, Dom Mintoff and Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici, leader of CNI, urged party followers not to accept this policy shift but to continue to oppose membership. However, the party conference of 7–9 November 2003 endorsed the leadership's pragmatic line by an overwhelming majority (Pace 2004, p. 116). In the European Parliament election of June 2004 (Table 6), the MLP, campaigning as a full member of the Party of European Socialists (PES), took three out of the five seats available to Malta while the NP took two (Pace 2005). The MLP's achievement was helped by the exceptional performance of the AD candidate, Dr Arnold Cassola. Indeed, AD, which had campaigned in favour of membership during the referendum, failed to elect its candidate but managed to snatch enough votes from the NP to allow the MLP to overtake it (see Pace 2004).

But the rumblings continued within the MLP. When the draft EU Constitutional Treaty was endorsed by the European Parliament in January 2005, the Maltese MEPs in the PES broke ranks with their colleagues by abstaining, given that the MLP had not yet adopted an official position on the Treaty. Meanwhile, the government, which had planned to put the draft treaty to the vote in the House of Representatives by the end of 2004, postponed the vote to allow the MLP time to adopt a position. An MLP general conference called to discuss the issue met between 30 June and 3 July 2005. The conference approved a motion empowering the party to vote in favour of the Constitution when this was tabled for ratification in the House of Representatives. The party conference was preceded by a broad public debate involving the grassroots sector, with a small faction, mainly CNI activists led by Dr Mifsud Bonnici, urging delegates to vote against the motion. In the final tally, 85 per cent of the delegates carried the MLP's motion, which included five 'reservations'. These reservations were reiterated in the House of Representatives by party leader, Alfred Sant, during the debate on the Draft Constitution. In that debate, Dr Sant also underlined that the MLP had accepted that Malta was a member of the EU and that it would be harmful for the country to try to put the clock back.

**Table 6** Results of the 2004 and 2009 European Parliament Election in Malta

Party		Total votes	Percentage of votes	EP seats
Malta Labour Party	2004	118,983	48.4	3
	2009	135,917	54.8	3 (+1)*
Nationalist Party	2004	97,688	39.8	2
	2009	100,486	40.5	2
Alternattiva Demokratika	2004	22,938	9.3	0
	2009	5,802	2.3	0
Others	2004	6,113	2.5	0
	2009	5,964	2.4	0

Note: \*After Lisbon Treaty is enforced.

Source: <http://www.maltadata.com>

The five reservations were:

1. that the opposition understood the Constitutional Treaty as not being prejudicial to Malta's constitutional neutrality;
2. that the Constitutional Treaty did not prejudice sectors of the Maltese Constitution which required a two-thirds majority in Parliament to be changed;
3. that since Malta was an island state which needed to create jobs and improve the level of its economic growth, it should be given full consideration in the interpretation and application of articles III-167 and III-168 of the Constitution (concerning state aid to develop backward regions), as was being done for Portugal, Spain and Greece, even though these were not islands;
4. that the Constitutional Treaty would not prejudice Malta's freedom to implement a social welfare policy suited to its particular circumstances;
5. that the Constitutional Treaty would not prejudice Gozo's status as an island region with specific economic and social characteristics and disadvantages stemming from double insularity (MLP 2005).

The Maltese House of Representatives unanimously ratified the Draft EU Constitution on 6 July 2005. However, this was not the watershed in the MLP's policy turnabout. In October 2006, Dr Sant declared that the MLP supported the adoption of the euro in 2007, stating that if the MLP were to be in government at any stage prior, or post, the euro conversion date, it would still implement the decisions already taken on the matter. As it happened, the euro was introduced on schedule on 1 January 2008 without any serious problems and no controversial political issues ensued. The ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon, on 29 January 2008, was unanimous with the MPs from both parliamentary parties voting in favour and no abstentions. All these are clear indicators of a gradual and consistent consolidation of the MLP's new EU policy.

The internal MLP cleavages, however, between those who still view the EU in negative terms and the party leadership which is piloting a pragmatic approach may not have been completely resolved. Time alone will tell whether the fissures will resurface. Indeed, as the electoral campaign for the 8 March 2008 election began gearing up, the MLP leader Dr Sant said that if his Party were to be elected to govern the country it would seek renegotiation of the terms of accession. This statement elicited an NP retort that Labour was still ambivalent on EU membership. It helped change the thrust of the NP's campaign from a defensive one, regarding its record in office, to a more 'offensive' campaign concerning the MLP's EU ambivalence and may have helped it to win the 2008 election. It is true that the MLP bounced back and soundly thrashed the NP in the 2009 EP election, but as has already been argued here this must be attributed to other, mainly domestic factors. In addition the lower turnout in the 2009 EP election, when compared with both the 2008 national election and the 2004 EP election, seemed to indicate that, for a growing number of Maltese, the EP election may be becoming a 'second-order' national contest, since it does not

have a direct impact on the make-up of the national government (Hix & Marsh 2007). This, however, merits a separate and more detailed analysis.

### **Conclusion: The Fate of Malta's Euroscepticism**

Up to the point where Malta joined the EU, two categories of euroscepticism were manifest: the 'hard' strain, which opposed both membership and the EU itself and which was confined largely to the CNI, and the 'soft' strain which considered the EU in a positive light but rejected Malta's place in it, at least in the short-term perspective. The latter was the position adopted by the MLP. Once Malta joined the EU, and following the MLP's policy shift, none of the mainstream Maltese political parties pursued a eurosceptic agenda.

The reasons behind the MLP's policy shift on Europe need further scrutiny. In this article, it has been argued that the MLP's policy statements, as laid out in its electoral manifestos, carefully avoided a complete rejection of the process of EU integration. The MLP also avoided any suggestion of severing its links with the EU, even at the height of the radicalisation of its domestic and foreign policies under the Mintoff government between 1971 and 1987. On the contrary, in the 1970s Malta expanded its relations with the EC while emphasising its role as a bridge between Europe and North Africa. In the 1980s, Malta intensified its policy of playing east against west to secure more aid from western Europe. But the latter remained the benchmark for measuring Malta's socioeconomic progress and was perceived as the most important source of aid. When Malta's foreign policy took on a markedly Mediterranean dimension by shifting more towards the Arab states and non-alignment, the MLP steered clear of a complete rupture with Europe and maintained Malta's membership of the CSCE and the Council of Europe, despite the occasional problems resulting from some of its political stances.

Falling electoral support from 1981 onwards and the NP government's 1990 membership application led the MLP to further revise its policy stance on Europe. In 1990 the party stated that, although membership was not in Malta's interests, the fact that the EC was evolving rapidly constrained it to adopt a more pragmatic position: 'The MLP should not therefore adopt any alternative as if this could not be changed in accordance with the changing times and changing circumstances; the situation should be analysed continuously' (MLP 1990, p. 20) In its 1998 manifesto, the MLP alluded to the long-term possibility of membership when it stated that:

The Labour Party believes that Malta should not consider full membership of the European Union prior to the implementation of the Free Industrial Trade Zone and the achievement of the restructuring process of local industries in such a way that we can consolidate the foundations of our Maltese Home in Europe (MLP 1998, Point 1.1).

This statement should not be taken at face value. The issue in that election was that while the MLP had frozen Malta's application to join the EU, negotiations were about to begin with the rest of the applicant countries. A substantial number of voters who

had supported the MLP in 1996, because they thought that its EU policy was better than that of the NP, had by now changed their mind. The MLP's 1998 manifesto was, therefore, an attempt to placate some of these fears, by holding out the carrot of the long-term prospects of membership without surrendering the short-term policy of continuing to oppose membership and concluding a free trade area with the Union.

The MLP misjudged public sentiment on the EU in 1998 and this was certainly one of the main factors which led to its electoral defeat. The party also failed to turn public opinion round in its campaign against membership from 1998 to 2003. It is more than probable that it was these hard political facts, more than its carefully worded and nuanced policy statements on Europe, theoretically permitting it to keep 'an open mind' on the issue, which led it to change tack. The immediate demands of membership, namely the 2004 European Parliament election, the 2005 ratification of the Draft Constitution and, later, the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty as well as Malta's decision to adopt the euro, created a political framework requiring the MLP to make a rapid policy shift or risk becoming unelectable. For example, had it decided against contesting the 2004 election to the European Parliament, it would have had to wait its turn until 2009. Opposition to the Draft European Constitution or the introduction of the euro would have been read as a continuation of the MLP's opposition to Europe. In any case, the MLP itself had insisted that the membership issue ought to be decided in a general election and the people had signalled their choice in the 2003 ballot.

The issue of winning over the party's grassroots was a graver challenge because, after so many years of opposition to EU membership, it was difficult to convince the MLP rank and file of the need to suddenly switch positions on membership. All that the MLP had criticised as being bad had suddenly to be accepted. The party's political leadership and strategists were far ahead of their supporters. This internal situation would have been rendered easier had the party really kept an open mind in the national debate and allowed its supporters a free vote on the issue. It is also argued by some that had the MLP accepted the referendum result it would have stood a better chance of winning the 2003 election which followed and of coming to terms with membership. The internal situation was more difficult because the core of the anti-membership Campaign for National Independence was made up of MLP supporters led by a former MLP leader and prime minister. CNI worked hard amongst party delegates to convince them to remain consistent with past party policy by maintaining an anti-membership line.

The MLP's policy shift on EU membership has changed the Maltese political scene in the strict sense that, since there is no mainstream political party with a eurosceptic agenda, opposition to the EU or to particular EU policies has been pushed to the political fringes, though one cannot necessarily assume that it will stay there. The data on the Maltese parliamentary elections shows that eurosceptic parties received 1,893 preference votes in the 2009 EP election.<sup>4</sup> The MLP has also carried with it the GWU, which also quietly changed its policy. From being an opponent of membership, the GWU now pursues a policy of active participation in national EU-related bodies and the EU's Economic and Social Committee (EESC). One of the five Maltese

representatives on the latter committee is a GWU official. Hence, the Maltese trade unions, divided in the past on EU membership and still divided today on many other issues, have united in their support of EU membership. This change in the trade union movement also implies that unionised labour, like the business community, is supportive of the EU.

At the same time, this does not mean that all social cleavages on the EU have been eliminated or that new ones will not come to the fore in response to future developments in the EU. Nor does it mean that all social partners are going to see eye to eye on all policies. Situations could arise where one side would want more Europe while the other would want less. The formerly politically biased eurosceptic media have also changed their stance in line with the policy shift effected by their owners, the MLP and GWU. However, the pro-labour GWU regularly publishes the views of the eurosceptic CNI.

A lot will also depend on the future policy orientations within the political parties. In the period immediately after membership, the NP government was often hesitant to counter public perceptions that the 'problems' being experienced in a number of economic sectors were due to the EU. For example, the problems in the ship repair and shipbuilding sectors had existed since the 1960s. But government spokesmen often failed to defend changes on the grounds that the restructuring of the sector had long been delayed and was needed to make the yards more competitive. They preferred to stress that such changes were being implemented because the EU required them. In other cases, attempts were made to legitimise policies on the grounds that they had been approved by the Commission. In other instances, such as the debacle surrounding the establishment of the Medicines Authority, which led to increases in the prices of medicines, local mishandling rather than compliance with EU directives was the cause. But popular perceptions blamed a substantive increase in the price of medicines on the EU.

Government ministers frequently portray the EU as the arena where David struggles against Goliath to secure his rights. Political statements are frequently laced with nationalistic phrases that could be the seed of further problems in the future. These practices could have a telling cumulative effect on public perceptions and on domestic political and social forces, which in turn influence party policies on the EU. Indeed, as narrowly nationalistic tendencies are reinforced by this kind of behaviour, the logic of integration tends to become weaker.

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### **Notes**

- [1] After losing the general election of 2008, the Malta Labour Party (MLP) changed its name to Labour Party (LP). In order to avoid confusion, MLP will be employed throughout this article.
- [2] The information concerning the number of NGOs is compiled from various unpublished lists of participants in the Malta-EU Action and Steering Committee (MEUSAC) consultations.

- [3] The sale of UK newspapers is also affected by tourist arrivals, more than a million annually, over half of which are British. The figures for the winter period increase slightly during the tourist high season in spring/summer.
- [4] In the 2009 EP election, the two eurosceptic formations, *Azzjoni Nazzjonali* and *Libertas Malta* obtained 1,595 and 298 preference votes respectively, which add up to 1,893 votes or 0.8 per cent of valid votes cast.

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