

2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 5 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN MALTA JUNE 12 2004

Roderick Pace
European Documentation and Research Centre
University of Malta
Email: roderick.pace@um.edu.mt

Key points:

- As was forecast, turnout in Malta's first election to the European Parliament (around 82%) was very strong, indeed the third strongest in the European Union after that of Belgium and Luxembourg.
- However, judged by national standards, this turnout was lower than the one that is normally achieved in general elections and closer to that in local elections.
- The main surprise was that the Opposition Malta Labour Party (MLP), which joined the Party of European Socialists (PES) in September 2003 and which, until last year, opposed Malta's membership of the EU, grasped three of the five seats contested.
- This happened mainly because of the good performance of Malta's Green Party, *Alternattiva Demokratika* (AD). In the 2003 general election, AD obtained just 1,929 first count votes and gained no seats in the House of Representatives. But in this election it managed to bite deeply into the ruling Nationalist Party's (NP) electoral support, taking no fewer than 22,938 first preference votes, thus debilitating the NP's ability to secure enough votes to elect three out of five seats contested. Indeed, the third seat went to the MLP without a quota.
- It is also likely that had the NP and AD concluded an electoral pact encouraging voters of both parties to continue giving their preferences to each other's candidates, something which is possible under the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system, the third seat could have gone to AD by a few votes, instead of the MLP, but not to the PN.

Background

In national elections, normally called every five years, the Maltese islands are divided into 13 electoral districts of more or less equal size. Each district returns five deputies to the House of Representatives. The method of election is the proportional system based on the STV. This method was retained for the European Parliamentary (EP) election but in this case Malta was turned into a single electoral district.¹ The number of seats to be filled was five and the 'quota' of votes needed for a candidate to be elected was calculated by the simple formula indicated below, the 'quota' being of course the $X \text{ votes} + 1 \text{ vote}$ shown on the right hand side of the simple equation:

¹ The European Parliament Elections Act, Chapter 467 of the Laws of Malta, entered into force on January 1st 2004 and can be consulted on line at <http://www.gov.mt/frame.asp?l=1&url=http://justice.gov.mt/>

$$\text{Valid Votes Cast} \div 5 \text{ seats} + 1 = X \text{ Votes} + 1 \text{ vote}$$

All Maltese citizens, who are domiciled in Malta and who have reached the age of 18 or above are eligible to vote and their names are automatically entered into an electoral register which is published bi-annually. In the case of the elections to the European Parliament, a special Electoral Register was prepared which included non-Maltese EU nationals residing in Malta in conformity with EU requirements. Turnout in the Maltese elections has traditionally been very high, indeed amongst the highest in the world, as indicated in the **Table 1** below.

TABLE 1
Participation in Maltese Elections:
Valid Votes Cast as a Percentage of Registered Voters

Year	National Election
1992	95.31
1996	95.3
1998	94.1
2003	95.82

Hence the turnout in the European Parliamentary elections indicated in **Table 2** has to be looked at from two angles. Beginning from an EU perspective, where participation in the EP elections has been in freefall for quite some time, the Maltese turnout was definitely on the high side. Eurobarometer polls conducted before the election consistently showed the Maltese electorate ahead of the rest of the EU-25 voters by a wide margin in their certainty to vote.² A poll conducted by *The Sunday Times of Malta* and published on June 6, indicated that 84% of voters intended to vote. Hence the real turnout did not disappoint the pollsters. However, from a Maltese perspective the turnout while satisfactory, was much lower than the average turnout in the last six general elections and more comparable to that achieved in the local council polls. This observation is relevant when discussing the possible political implications of the latest EP election further down in this paper. One must also keep in mind that this was Malta's first election to the EP and judging from voter behaviour in past EP elections there is a tendency for higher participation rates when voters are voting for the first time. In subsequent elections the voter participation may stabilise at a lower level.

On the other hand it was the third time in about 15 months that Maltese voters had been called upon to participate in a major nation-wide ballot, the previous two occasions being the 2003 referendum and general election. This may have also led some voters to abstain out of what may be described as 'voter fatigue', though the statistical significance of this is not easy to establish. A third consideration that must be kept in mind is that in the referendum on EU membership held in March 2003 and in which around 91% of those eligible to vote had done so, no fewer than 46.4% of valid votes were cast against

² Three separate and successive opinion polls on the attitudes of Maltese voters carried out by Eurobarometer showed that Maltese voters indicating their certainty to vote in the election as 62%, 67% and 71% in each of the polls when the corresponding figures for the EU-25 were 45%, 49% and 52%. The last poll was taken between May 31 and June 2 2004. See *Flash EB 161:European Elections 2004 Barometer*, at <http://www.elections2004.eu.int>

membership.³ This ‘Eurosceptic’ tendency was expected to work against a high level of voter participation in the EP election. The fact that this did not happen on a big scale is positive.

TABLE 2
2003-2004 Ballots Compared

	Referendum on EU Membership 08.03.2003	General Election 12.04.2003	European Parliament Election 12.06.2004
Registered Voters	297,720	297,930	304,283
Valid Votes Cast as a % of registered Voters	266,722 89.59	282,213 94.72	245,722 80.75
Yes	143,094 (53.65%)*	na	na
No	123,628 (46.35%)*	na	na
Invalid	3,928 (1.47%)*	na	na
Nationalist Party	na	146,172 (51.79%)*	97,688 (39.76%)**
Labour Party Alternattiva Demokratika	na	134,092 (47.51%)*	118,983 (48.42%)**
Others	na	1,929 (0.68%)*	22,938 (9.3%)**
	na	20 (0.01%)*	6,113 (2.49%)**

*percentages indicated in brackets are of valid votes

** first count votes and as a percentage of valid votes

Local Elections

The election to the European Parliament which took place on June 12 was held concurrently with elections to renew a third of the Maltese local councils. The first local government elections were held in 1993 and 1994. A third of the local councils are renewed each year. In all there are 68 local councils, 54 in Malta and 14 on the island of Gozo. This year’s local council election involved 22 localities in Malta and Gozo. The percentage of eligible voters who cast their votes was 82% which was the same as the nation-wide participation rate in the EP election. In 2001, the voter participation rate in the same group of local councils was 71%. It is thus possible that the EP election may have induced more voters to participate in local elections than would have perhaps been the case without it. This explanation of course needs to be verified or falsified by reference to voter participation in future elections.

³ For brief account of the result of the 2003 referendum and election and their aftermath, see: R. Pace, "Malta's EU Membership: Chapter 1 Concluded, Chapter 2 Just Started", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol 9, No 1, Spring 2004, pages 114-121. See also: M. Cini, 'The Maltese EU Accession Referendum, 8 March 2003' *Opposing Europe Research Network Referendum Briefing No 2*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2002) at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/maltese2.pdf>; and M. Cini, 'The Maltese Parliamentary Election of April 2003' *Opposing Europe Research Network Referendum Briefing/Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 12*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2002) at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/oernmaltabp12.pdf>.

The Dramatis Personae

The '*dramatis personae*' in this election were the people, the traditional political parties, the new parties formed for the occasion, independent candidates and the media. The role of the media cannot be overlooked since this has a vital role in mobilising public opinion and participation, though it also strengthens political polarisation. Given that for the European elections Malta constituted a single electoral district, the role of the media became even more crucial. This happened because candidates could not engage in a lot of personal contact with the electorate as they normally do in national elections, when their electoral campaigns are limited to a single or at most two districts. For this reason the media, and in particular radio, television and the electronic media acquired more relevance in projecting the candidates' messages to the public than they normally do in other Maltese elections.

Media Ownership

The ownership of the media throws a lot of light on whose voice could be the most audible above the electioneering din. In this respect it is important to underline that apart from the state owned *Public Broadcasting Service* (PBS) which broadcasts radio and television programmes, the NP and the MLP both own a television and radio station each. In addition the NP publishes a daily and weekly newspaper while the MLP publishes a printed weekly, an electronic weekly and relies on the unwavering support of the dailies and Sunday papers published by its ally the *General Workers' Union* (GWU). The lion's share of the space allocated by PBS in this campaign went to the two main political parties and to a much lesser extent to AD. The Catholic Church owns its own radio station, which maintains a non-partisan course. It also owns a Maltese weekly newspaper, which is also non-partisan. The biggest circulation newspapers, *The Times of Malta* (TOM) and *The Sunday Times of Malta* (STOM) as well as *The Malta Independent* (daily) (TMI) and *The Malta Independent on Sunday* (TMIS), all English language newspapers, tend to allocate space to all shades of opinion. The editorial policies of all the English language newspapers are critically in favour of the EU. The presence of the two main Maltese political parties in these newspapers is very salient. Less so is this presence felt in another English language Sunday newspaper, *Malta Today*, whose popularity, and presumably also its circulation, are rapidly increasing. Given the domination of the media by the two main political parties, candidates not belonging to either of them thus faced considerable difficulties in getting their message across to voters. This normally also applies to local and national elections.

Analysis of the Campaign and Results

Candidates and Issues: Local Issues Dominate

27 candidates contested the election. Of these, the MLP and NP fielded 8 each and AD one. The other candidates comprised independents representing various shades of opinion: anti-immigration, pro-divorce, pro-immigration as well as pro-bird hunting and trapping. The quota of votes required for a candidate to be elected was 40,954. In the next section, I shall briefly analyse the role played by each major participant in this election, beginning first with the established political parties.

The issues in this campaign consisted of a rich, fruity 'Macedonia' of domestic and EU issues mixed with American campaign-style attacks on the credibility of some of the candidates, with sporadic anti-clericalism and anti-Catholicism and not excluding a few racist diatribes for good measure. The bias was stronger towards domestic issues with the opposition focusing on the government's record. The MLP allegedly did this for good reason: in order to encourage the Eurosceptic elements within its rank to vote - the rationale being that they would be voting against the government and not merely participating in a European Parliamentary election. On the whole, the array of candidates and opinions

in this campaign was more exciting than in the more monotonous (or monochrome) national elections dominated by the NP-MLP duopoly with AD wedged in between.

The Church Urged People to Vote

The influence of the Catholic Church in Malta is undeniably strong though consistently waning. On May 28, the Maltese bishops published a statement in which they urged voters to prepare themselves for the vote and to go and cast their vote on the appointed day. They added that whoever has the right to vote also has the duty to vote and to do so responsibly. This statement was in line with, though perhaps a bit more direct than, the statement issued by the Bishops Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) in which it was stated that “we all have an interest and a moral duty to participate in the European elections.” The main question is whether the Church's position had any effect on the Maltese voters' decision to participate? It is to be expected that in a Catholic country like Malta the Church's statement is bound to have an impact. But there is no proof of a causal link between these statements and the level of voter turnout nor is there a measure of the extent of the Church's influence. This could be an important area for future research. It appears that though the effect of the Church's appeal must not be minimised, political polarisation, which is a characteristic of Maltese politics, may have had a stronger impact on voter turnout. The other main factor which encouraged voter participation was the fact that all the main political parties are now supportive of the EU, not just two of them (AD and NP) as was previously the case.

The Established Parties

The *Nationalist Party* has been in government since 1987, save for a brief period between 1996 and 1998 when the Malta Labour Party was in government. The NP styles itself as a Christian Democratic party and is a long-standing member of the European People's Party (EPP) and other international Christian Democratic organisations. It has favoured membership of the European Community since the 1960s and more definitely so since 1979. It used to espouse a ‘soft’ kind of nationalism aiming for independence from Great Britain and self-determination, concurrently asserting that this would enable Malta to fully participate in the process of European unity. It was a Nationalist Government which submitted the membership application in 1990 and which successfully strove for its reactivation after being returned to government in 1998 following a brief 22-month period out of office during which the application had been suspended.

In the EP election campaign, the NP stressed that MEPs elected on its ticket would form part of the largest political group within the European Parliament. By this the NP implied that by supporting its candidates voters would enhance Malta's ability to achieve its national aims within the EU. Tactically, the NP did its best to rake up its main opponent's (the MLP) most recent past by stressing that the MLP and, particularly the candidates contesting the election on its behalf, had campaigned strongly against EU membership in the 2003 referendum and the subsequent general election. This side of the campaign was intended to discredit the MLP on Europe and to pit those MLP supporters who have now accepted the reality of EU membership against the die-hard ‘rejectionist’ minority in the MLP, which constitute the backbone of the anti-EU *Campaign for National Independence* (CNI). These tactics were not successful in denting the MLP's performance but they did succeed in preventing the NP from focusing upon the probably more rewarding EU issues and the political programme of the EPP, both of which featured only marginally in its repertoire.

As the campaign got under way, the NP became alarmed by the results of its own unpublished voter attitude polls, which showed that Alternattiva Demokratika's one and only candidate, Professor Arnold Cassola, who is also the Secretary General of the Greens in the European Parliament, may have begun

to bite deeply into the NP's support, thus endangering its ability to elect three MEPs. To arrest this haemorrhage, two cards were played. The first consisted of an attempt to undermine Mr Cassola's credibility by accusing him of belonging to a party which actively supported the legalisation of abortion. In a pre-dominantly Catholic country like Malta, where the vast majority of voters are against abortion, this tactic could have had a devastating effect. The NP's move forced AD to institute libel proceedings against leading NP candidates and party officials, eliciting counter legal action by the NP. The NP claimed in reply that it was not enough for someone to oppose abortion if at the same time he was part of a European party that included the legalisation of abortion among its guiding principles. On such a fundamental issue one had either to fight to change the stand of the party or else re-consider his membership of that the group. This public outburst on abortion came as a surprise considering that many viewed the issue as having been closed from an EU perspective. The government itself had safeguarded the Maltese position on abortion by insisting on the inclusion of the necessary safeguards within the Act of Accession⁴ and thus those who had already made up their mind to vote for Cassola found it hard to accept that his political affiliations could lead to the introduction of abortion in Malta. AD further stressed that Cassola himself had made it publicly clear on many occasions including, in a letter he had sent to the European Greens when he took up the post of Secretary General, that he was against abortion. The court cases begun at the start of the campaign were not concluded before polling day (nor by the time that this paper was written). Moreover, following the initial outburst and the initiation of the court proceedings the issue soon fizzled out.

The second and more legitimate approach taken by the NP was to try to explain to its supporters that a vote for Alternattiva's candidate could unwittingly help the socialists secure their third seat. In other words that "*tra i due litiganti il terzo gode...*" or when two are locked in battle, the third party wins or gets the better of the two. The NP left this explanation to the very last minute by which time most voters had already made up their mind on how they were going to vote. The intention may have been to sow enough doubts as to entice many voters who had gone astray to return to the fold - the rationale of course being that uncertain and confused voters would normally play safe and vote as they had always voted. The tactic does not seem to have had the desired effect and the forecast that AD would prevent PN from gaining a seat did in fact materialise.

Although the two factors just analysed can be described as tactical errors, they alone do not fully explain why voters behaved the way they did on June 12. But there are a few other issues that I would like to deal with quickly before I turn to more substantive hypothesis that seems to explain why people voted the way they did. Firstly, the NP left the choice of its candidates until very late. The MLP chose three of its candidates in November 2003 and five more in January 2004; AD had nominated Arnold Cassola as its candidate in the summer of 2003. But the NP announced its candidates on April 2 2004 following a decision of the Executive Committee taken a week before. Part of the delay was connected with the Party's leadership contest following the retirement on February 7 2004 of its leader and Prime Minister, Dr Edward Fenech Adami. He was replaced in both positions by Dr Laurence Gonzi who was sworn in as Prime Minister on March 23. In addition, speculation was also rife that the President of the Republic was considering the possibility of contesting the EP elections at the end of his term of office at the end of March. This may also have delayed the NP in finalising its list of candidates. The delay also meant that the NP candidates had a shorter time in which to run their campaigns. By contrast, AD candidate Professor Cassola started his campaign very early, in the last quarter of 2003. He focused his

⁴ It is important to recall that although the introduction of abortion is a matter in which the EU as such cannot interfere in the individual member state, public opinion in Malta is strongly against its introduction. During the negotiations on EU membership, the Maltese authorities found it necessary to negotiate Protocol 7, which was subsequently included in the Act of Accession stating that, "Nothing in the Treaty on European Union, or in the Treaties establishing the European Communities, or in the Treaties and Acts modifying or supplementing those Treaties, shall affect the application in the territory of Malta of national legislation relating to abortion."

activities in the predominantly pro-EU Nationalist districts, presenting himself as a good European, who was knowledgeable of the intricacies of EU affairs by virtue of his international position and who had helped Malta at crucial stages in its EU membership negotiations. His image among the electorate must have also been reinforced by the NP's frontal attacks on him. But he was also capable of debating European issues, particularly the environment which was a very important issue, especially among the young and first-time voters.

The importance which voters attached to European issues and in particular the significance of public perceptions of the candidates' knowledge of EU affairs also had a decisive effect on the final election result. The "Flash Eurobarometer" survey (Flash EB 161) identified voters' main concerns as: unemployment (64%), protection of the environment (45%), economic growth (39%), terrorism (20%), crime (19%) and the euro (10%). Voters placed knowledge of national issues (81%) and European issues (80%) as the most important reasons for supporting particular candidates. It is important to note, therefore, that the NP's candidate Dr Simon Busuttil, a European specialist and former head of the Malta-EU Information Centre (MIC) was elected on the first count surpassing the 'quota' by nearly 18,000 votes, his runner up in the NP group by 50,000 votes and his main MLP rival by nearly 22,000 votes. The leading MLP candidate Mr Joseph Muscat is also a graduate in European Studies and enjoys a sound reputation of being knowledgeable on EU matters. The two other elected MEPs from the Labour Party are also known to have strong pro-EU sentiments. AD's candidate, Cassola, who also campaigned on EU issues obtained just less than 23,000 first preference votes or 11 times what AD had obtained in the 2003 general election. Of course such comparisons must be made with some caution since in national elections the conditions and rules are different and the number of candidates contesting is much bigger, while turnout is much stronger.

Probably a more serious cause of disgruntlement with the NP was the effect of the restructuring measures that the Government began to implement following its re-election in April 2003. This was perhaps the most salient issue which determined the pattern of voting given that, as noted above, Maltese public opinion showed that its three biggest worries were: unemployment, the protection of the environment and pension reform. The Government was constrained to introduce drastic and long-delayed changes in state-owned companies such as the dockyards, the national airline *AirMalta* and the *Public Broadcasting Services* (PBS). Most of these measures involved layoffs, the downward adjustments of incomes and/or early retirement schemes. In some cases, such as in the state-owned *Gozo Channel*, the shipping company operating the ferry service linking the island of Gozo to Malta, the government increased passenger and vehicle tariffs in a bid to cut losses. The latter reform did not go down well with inter-island commuters and Gozitans in general. In the social domain the Government began reforming the pension and the welfare systems. Debates on these reforms were also introduced in the campaign by the MLP.

On some other issues, the Government betrayed some hesitancy in confronting problems and taking the necessary decisions. The Minister of Health delayed the introduction of a smoking ban in places of entertainment (bars and restaurants) following strong resistance by the association representing the owners of such establishments. Another issue on which the government appeared to be indecisive was the question of relocating a site for a controlled landfill to absorb urban waste. Both this and the smoking ban debacle also worked in AD's favour. In addition public finances appeared to be running out of control following a sizeable deterioration in the fiscal deficit. It is true that the task of addressing this deficit was made more difficult by a downward trend in economic activity provoked by the events of 9/11 and the war in Iraq, not to mention the growing burdens placed upon state administration and expenditure resulting from complying with the EU membership obligations. The resultant increases in unemployment were quickly pounced upon by the Opposition and were used to criticise the government. An outcry was also raised during the campaign on the government's handling of illegal

immigrants/refugees. This followed an *Amnesty International Report* published in May 2004, claiming that the majority of around 220 Eritrean illegal immigrants forcibly repatriated by Malta in 2002 had been imprisoned and tortured on arriving in their country and that many of them were still being held captive. The issue of the repatriation of the Eritreans was taken up by the Maltese press from around mid-May right up to election week. *The Times* carried a full-page news report on this issue on Saturday June 5, just seven days before the ballot. Also, during the campaign another issue was raised by the MLP alleging inappropriate behaviour by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and calling for his resignation. In fact the Minister resigned on Saturday July 3. The NP has claimed that in view of the many changes confronting the country, voters hit by these changes took the occasion to punish the Government for taking sound but unpopular decisions. But it could also be the case that many voters were angered by the decisions that could have but were not taken on time. Government indecisiveness is known to have alienated many voters.

Trouble in the Labour Camp

The Labour Party (MLP) did its best to capitalise on the issues most salient to the electorate. Unemployment, the protection of the environment and pension reform were the main points stressed by the MLP showing that they were sensitive to public concerns as identified by the opinion polls. However, the MLP was also beset by a series of internal difficulties. The party had strongly campaigned against EU membership for more than a decade. Following the 2003 referendum and election results which signified that the Maltese electorate had twice rejected its stand on membership, party officials began to argue that the Maltese people had in fact decided the membership question and that this was no longer a political issue. The General Conference of the Party was convened in the summer of 2003 to approve this new policy on Europe, which it did, and in September 2003, and the MLP was asked to join the Party of European Socialists (PES) as a full member. Having completed all these tasks, it proceeded to select its candidates for the EP elections. However, 10 years of strong anti-EU rhetoric had nurtured a strong anti-EU movement within the MLP most of whom also became active within the *Campaign for National Independence* (CNI) led by former MLP leader and prime minister Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici and the *Front Maltin Iqumu* (Arise Maltese Front) led by former MLP leader and prime minister Dom Mintoff.⁵ The MLP's main fear was therefore that a substantial part of its traditional electorate would not participate in the EP elections thus making it easier for the NP to secure three seats.

For this reason it was in the MLP's interest to divert attention from EU issues to national ones and thus try to transform the election into a test of approval for the Government by focusing on domestic issues. It succeeded in this task, in part thanks to the NP's dogged resistance to debating real European issues and their possible beneficial effects on Malta. Thus traditional Labour voters, inclined to abstain from voting because this was after all a 'European' election, could be induced to vote in order to show their disapproval of government policy. As a result, voter turnout in predominantly MLP areas was slightly higher than the national average while turnout in predominantly Nationalist areas was at, or lower than, the national average. Indeed soon after the first projections of the result became known, the MLP declared that it had become the biggest political party in Malta.

The election had other repercussions for the Labour Party and may have strengthened its leader's position. It has been speculated that notwithstanding the fact that the current MLP leader Dr Alfred Sant was reconfirmed in his post last year (despite losing the 1998 and 2003 general elections and the referendum in a row), the MLP leadership issue was far from closed. Another electoral defeat for Labour could have provoked another leadership crisis - but this will not now materialise. However,

analysis of the results suggests that the MLP's three EP seat tally may indeed turn out to have been no more than a Pyrrhic victory since voters deserting the Nationalist Party were prepared to switch to AD but not to the MLP. The implication of this is that all other things being equal, in the event of a national election, the MLP is still short of achieving an overall majority of valid votes cast and could still fall short of securing a parliamentary majority. This will be discussed in the next section.

Alternattiva Demokratika's Performance

It is important to observe that AD's electoral performance was better in NP strongholds than in the Labour ones adding more proof to the observation made earlier that the votes it gained came mostly from the NP. 69% of the preference votes obtained by AD's candidate came from predominantly Nationalist areas. Analysis of the local council elections, held concurrently with the EP election and in which the AD normally performs better than in national elections, shows that the AD captured only 6% of preference votes compared with the 9.3% that it obtained nationally in the EP election.

This reinforces the theory that in the EP election, traditional NP voters switched to AD because they wanted to send a message of protest to the Government. In achieving this they were helped by the fact that Professor Cassola was considered to be knowledgeable of EU affairs and that he had taken a prominent role in the campaign in favour of EU membership. One other theory is that many of those who had voted in favour of membership also wanted to thank him for his efforts. This reinforced by the fact that, as noted above, the candidates who were eventually elected to the European Parliament all had strong European credentials.

Political Crisis, a Constitutional Impasse or both?

If the share of the votes obtained by the main political parties was to repeat itself in a general election, a big political crisis could result - and perhaps a constitutional one as well. The Maltese Constitution states that:

- (a) if a political party obtains first preference votes which amount to more than 50% of the valid votes cast but elects fewer deputies than that to the Parliament (due to vote wastage and the way in which electoral districts are drawn up), then the number of members of the House shall be increased to give the party in question one member more than the total number of other candidates elected in that election;
- (b) The same happens in a situation where only two political parties elect seats to the House of Representatives, no party secures enough first preference votes which place it above the threshold of 50% of valid votes cast and the party with the relatively bigger share of votes gains less seats.

In a general election, if three parties elect deputies to the House of Representatives then it is the number of seats gained by the parties which determines which party or coalition of parties governs. It could thus lead to a situation where the relatively bigger party secures an overall majority of seats but with fewer votes than the rest. If the smaller party, AD makes a good showing but wins no seats, than the Party with the relative majority secures an overall Parliamentary majority of 1 seat. However it could still be claimed that such a government does not enjoy the support of the majority of voters.

There is a lot of sensitivity in Malta over ensuring that the party which governs must also have the backing of the majority of voters representing the majority of the valid votes cast. The Maltese Constitution was amended in 1987 to avoid a repetition of the 1981 election crisis whereby the MLP with 49% of the valid votes cast had a three-seat majority over the NP, which had secured 51% of the

valid votes. Following the EP election, it was claimed that the electorate's behaviour, if repeated, could once again lead to a political or constitutional crisis in a general election. Both the NP and the AD have called for changes to the electoral system to preclude this. Thus the EP election result may yet catalyse further changes in Malta's electoral system.

The Other Protagonists

The EP election encouraged many single-issue independents, including some eccentrics and new political formations, to enter the political arena. Some of these individuals called themselves a 'party' even though they lacked the organisational basis to qualify as such. The *Alpha Party* which fought in favour of legalising divorce in Malta, probably selected that particular name in order to place itself at the head of the ballot sheet. In the end it obtained no more than 756 preference votes.

Imperium Ewropa founded by N. Lowell, its only candidate in this election, proposed a political programme based on Maltese ethnic purity and identity. Mr Lowell made a number of anti-immigrant and allegedly racist statements both in televised programmes in which he participated and on the Internet which are now the subject of a number of law suits and criminal investigations started against him by the Maltese authorities following the election result. Further comment is precluded by the fact that these cases are all *sub judice*. Mr Lowell's tally of around 1,603 votes shows that anti-immigrant feelings run high in Malta and cannot be ignored.

Another independent candidate, Mr Carmelo Farrugia contested the election on behalf of the 16,000 strong *Federazzjoni Kaccaturi, Nassaba u Konservazzjonisti* (FKNK) or the *Federation of Bird Hunters, Trappers and Conservationists*, which is the hunters' and trappers' organisation. Mr Farrugia is FKNK's secretary general. He had expected to obtain most of his federation's members' votes but in the end managed just over a fifth of them. He blamed his poor showing on discriminatory treatment by the media and in particular *The Times* which printed "inappropriate photos" and which for example "used a photograph of him which was 15 years old"⁶

A Malta-based Nigerian who is also a Maltese citizen, Damian Iwueke Chukwuemeka, also contested the election. He declared that if elected he wanted to represent minority groups and pledged to defend a long list of issues including women's rights, single parents, the right of gay couples to live as a family, children's rights and improved conditions of work for sportsmen and women. He also pledged to induce smokers and non-smokers to live happily together. Mr Iwueke's slogan was "Why Vote for Damian?" "Why Not?" Not more than 153 voters responded positively to his rhetorical question.

The other political parties formed to contest the election included *Kul Ewropa* of C. H. Jones, son of a former politician who had founded the *Jones Party*, which, alas, was not successful. Mr Jones's slogan was for a European Union based on a cultural union. *Kul Ewropa* obtained 66 votes. The other novice to the Maltese political scene was the *Christian Democratic Republican Party* of Mr Mark Von Brockdorff which obtained a mere 64 votes.

As can be concluded from this very brief survey of some of the 'non-mainstream' candidates, the EP elections encouraged many individuals with a cause, mostly a single issue, to try their luck. This does not normally happen in general elections when, as has already been shown, the duopolistic control of the two major parties leaves little space for such freedom. However in the case of the EP elections sufficient individuals were convinced that they stood a good chance of being elected - or they just wished to make a point.

⁶ Report of a press conference in *The Times*, Tuesday June 29, 2004

Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from the first Maltese EP election:

- (a) Turnout was satisfactory and reflected public support for the EU and Malta's place within that process;
- (b) Domestic and local issues dominated the debate but voters preferred European issues and looked for the 'European' credentials of the candidates proceeding to vote for those that best fitted into this mould.
- (c) The reasons which led to this high turnout are multiple and the polarisation in Maltese politics and the rivalry between the parties might have lent a helping hand as well. Other factors cannot be discarded such as the appeal by Church authorities and a desire to punish the government;
- (d) The EP election was not treated by voters on a par with national parliamentary elections. Voter turnout, in fact places this election closer to the local council elections, than to national parliamentary ones.
- (e) The NP government was punished by the voters but the MLP did not appear to profit from this by picking up former NP voters. Indeed, an NP-AD electoral pact to encourage their supporters to continue to vote for each other after casting their preferences could have robbed the MLP of its third seat by a small margin;
- (f) AD made a good showing but its failure to win a seat strengthened perceptions that it is unelectable. This may increase its difficulties in future elections.
- (g) Had the NP focused on European issues, towards which the public mood was very positive, it might have performed better. The cost of missing out on this was the forfeiture of the third seat;
- (h) The EP election was the first of its kind for Malta and therefore some of the conclusions reached here must only be considered to be provisional until future verification.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>