

## News

# Malta's national day – the *Otto Settembre*



**Simon Mercieca**

This year's independence celebrations have rekindled the topic concerning Malta's national day, which was tackled, two years ago, by the then President of the Republic of Malta, George Abela. At the time, his speech on Republic Day raised more than an eyebrow in many quarters

He suggested Malta should have just two national days – Independence Day and Republic Day, omitting to mention in his proposal 31 March (Freedom Day). This was a courageous political move even if it drew criticism from various Labour quarters. This year the issue has cropped up once again but stirred less controversy: a sign that the country is progressing towards political maturity.

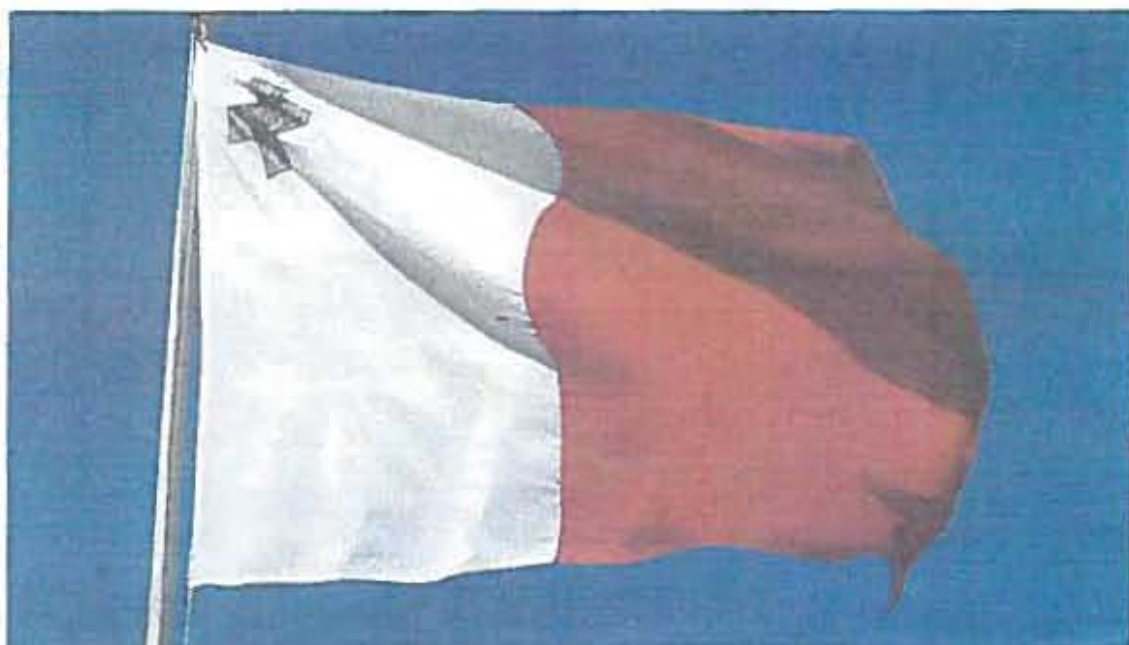
At long last, there is now consensus that a small state like Malta should not have five national days. Dr Abela had foresight. Most agree that there is only need for one national day to be chosen from one of the present five. Yet, there again, there is no consensus as to which of these five should be our national day!

When these five days were set before Parliament they were intended only as a wishlist for Parliament to choose from. Nobody remotely could have foreseen that it would actually adopt all five. Parliament's decision meant that Malta at present has Freedom Day (31 March), *Sette Giugno* (7 June), *Otto Settembre* (8 September), Independence Day (21 September) and Republic Day (13 December) as national days.

In 2012, President Abela made the first move by reducing our national days to two: Independence and Republic Day. At the same time he left the door open for future changes, so that there would be a further cut and we would be left with just one national day.

President Abela's reasons in favour of Republic Day have been re-proposed by Prof. Dominic Fenech in an interview carried by *The Malta Independent* (Tuesday, 23 September). Prof. Fenech supports the new significance that 13 December represents our national awareness. It also signifies that all political parties are now agreeing that 13 December is indeed the festivity that should be represented by the most senior figurehead in the organigram of Malta's governance: the President of the Republic. Traditionally this is the day when the President gives his most important address to the nation.

Choosing *Sette Giugno* also as a national holiday enhanced the significance of the Speaker's institutional role in Malta. This holiday has ended up representing the day when the Speaker of the House addresses the nation and an occasion when ideas, with regard to political change or reform in our parliamentary system, are announced. Removing



ing this festivity could have negative repercussions from a PR perspective. Besides, there is political consensus among all parties that there ought to be a date allotted for the Speaker. Thus, even this national holiday, which is a post-colonial creation, has succeeded in achieving new significance but this would be lost if removed from our national calendar.

The Prime Minister is the next political figure of significance in Malta. Glancing at how our historical events have evolved, Independence Day or Freedom Day should be the day to be identified with the Prime Minister and around whom the festivities should revolve. Very intelligently, Joseph Muscat has succeeded in 'hijacking' this celebration out of the Nationalist Party and used it to increase the aura of his political figure, even if, this event was gained by his opposing party. I don't think that Muscat wants independence as the sole national date but definitely he can now claim, as Prime Minister, paternity over this date, which till now was only associated with the Nationalist Party.

Our history books credit different Prime Ministers with important political achievements. Giorgio Borg Olivier is hailed as the father of Independent Malta. Dom Mintoff is considered as the architect of Freedom Day, while Eddie Fenech Adami is the man who piloted Malta into the European Union. Historically, the *Otto Settembre* is the date which has fathered all these celebrations, thus it has all the credentials to be the day that any Prime Minister can celebrate without any censorship from our political system.

Yet, if there is legacy from these two celebrations is the fact

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that they focused on the figure of the Prime Minister. Thus, the loser in this political bickering is the figure of the Prime Minister himself. He has ended up without an established date, around which there is a national consensus, and unlike the President or the Speaker, he has no day when to address the nation without the traditional aura of political controversy and beyond the usual rhetoric of mass meetings.

I would like to suggest the *Otto Settembre* as the national day to be patronised by the figure of the Prime Minister. It is a date which has all the ingredients to boost national unity. It is a historical fact that Giorgio Borg Olivier planned to get Malta's

independence on 8 September but for unforeseen reasons this was pushed forward to 21 September. Moreover, unlike other nations, Malta did not wait for Independence or Freedom Day to celebrate the day of the nation. It began to celebrate *Otto Settembre* as the island's national day during the colonial period. The nation accepted this choice.

In post-colonial Malta, it does not make any sense to speak in terms of national days; these belong to a bygone nationalistic era. It is more than logical that if Malta wishes to remember her colonial past, the only appropriate day would be the *Otto Settembre*.

When the Nationalist Party replaced 8 September by Independence Day, and the Labour Party replaced it with Republic Day and subsequently with Freedom Day, all they wanted was to boost the political ego of their parties. Therefore, both Independence Day and Freedom Day can never achieve national consensus irrespective of the political rhetoric dished out to justify their importance. This explains why Republic Day is being earmarked as Malta's eventual national day. But this is the feast of the President and not the Prime Minister of Malta.

Mintoff too recognised 8 September as the date to represent the nation for, between 1971 and 1974, he reinstituted it as Malta's national day. Furthermore, having the parties reach mutual agreement on one national date would be of great significance to all since it would help reinforce the political figure of the Prime Minister, and, for once, the figure of the Prime Minister would not be associated with the head of a political party but with the nation.

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