

EARLY GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS IN MALTA

by

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Government's attitude towards education in the first decade of British Rule in Malta is marked with apathy and inactivity. In 1800, Captain Alexander John Ball reopened the University which Napoleon had closed two years earlier and though considering the education of the masses of the utmost importance to the security of the Empire he did not initiate any system of popular education. If Lord Bathurst Secretary of State advocated the teaching of English Reading and suggested the establishment of public schools, he was politically motivated. His real aim was to supersede Italian culture and offer a challenge to local Italian influence and though nothing practical to further popular education was attempted, a knowledge of English became a requisite to the legal profession (1) and candidates possessing a knowledge of English were preferred when filling up vacancies in the Government General Service.

Up to 1837, Government disassociated itself completely from the organization of primary instruction. The only concern was shown by private individuals and societies. Most of these private schools were organised on a profit-making basis. We have ample evidence from advertisements appearing in Government Gazettes of numerous existing primary and secondary private schools. (2)

In 1836 a Royal Commission appointed by the British Government came to Malta to report and suggest means of improving local conditions. As the Maltese put high hopes in this Commission, its members Professor John Austin and George Cornwall Lewis were very well received. They together with Mrs. Sarah Austin arrived in Malta on the 20th October, 1836, nineteen days after Major General Sir Henry Fredrick Bouverie assumed the governorship of these islands. The Commission remained in Malta up to July, 1838, when its work was suddenly brought to an end. Mr. Austin was abruptly dismissed and according to Janet Ross (3) he did not

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1. Gov. Gazette, 342, Wednesday, 17th May, 1820.
 2. A small school known as **Grande** existed at Notabile. There ten boys were taught to read and write some grammar. This school was jointly supported by Government and the Cathedral Chapter. The Government contributed £5 and the Chapter £3 6s 8d annually; the Master and Mistress were each paid five scudi a month. See, **Report of Commissioners on the Affairs of Malta, 1839, Part III, p. 12** and P. G. Badger, **Sullo Stato della Educazione Pubblica**, p. 3.
 3. Janet Ross, **Three Generations of English Women, Memoirs and Corres-**

even receive from the British Government a single word of recognition for his sterling work. No reason was assigned for this change of policy.

Its comprehensive report presented on the 27th April, 1839, covered a multiple of aspects, including education. (4) The report on the University, the Lyceum and the few existing Elementary Schools, besides containing useful information and recommendations, was itself important because following its publication the Government started to participate more actively and more directly in the organization of public instruction. It is mainly due to this report that the Government became conscious of its responsibility towards popular education and undertook the task and started providing free elementary instruction.

In 1836 there were two Elementary Schools in Malta, one at Valletta and another at Senglea which together took in about 450 boys and 278 girls. There was another Elementary School at Gozo with an inconsiderable number of pupils. The Commission deplored the state of universal illiteracy and the bad quality and small quantity of education — the total sum paid for education in 1837 was only £1,725 of which only £400 were allotted to Government elementary schools.

The Commissioners said that the working class could not see any advantage in educating its children; in any case, it was so poor that it could not afford to send children to school. (5) G.P. Badger said (6) that in the villages of Malta only about 2½% of the inhabitants could read Maltese, the figure in Gozo was less than 2%. He considered "the scanty means which the people enjoy of obtaining an education" another cause of their backward state. (7)

The Commission made it clear that local education could not be expanded and improved without Government's help. Therefore it recommended that Government should establish and maintain additional schools, the number of which should be large enough to give elementary instruction to the whole population. Though the Commissioners were against a gratuitous type of education they believed however, that the time was not yet ripe to demand school fees from parents. "At present the working people

pondence, (London, John Murray, 1888, in Vols. 11), p. 123.

4. See, *op. cit.*, PART II, No 19 (Institutes for Public Education). The Commission attached great importance to the introduction of free press which at that time was censored and monopolised by Government. The recommendation to introduce liberty of printing and publishing accompanied by a law for preventing its abuse was a great stride forward. The Ordinance IV of 1839 introducing free press came into effect on the 15th March, 1839.
5. *ibid.*, p. 10.
6. Badger, *Sullo Stato dell'Educazione Pubblica*, (Filippo Izzo, Malta, 1839), p. 2.
7. Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo*, (M. Weiss, Malta, 1838) p. 82.

are so poor and so little able to imagine the manifold advantages of knowledge, that the exaction would probably prevent them from sending their children to school". (8) They hoped that some day in the future part of the expenses could be defrayed from school-fees and for economy purposes they favoured co-education. Mrs. Sarah Austin (9) made it clear that it was impossible to make the Maltese pay one grano a week (3 grano = 1 farthing) because if this measure was adopted they would not send their children to school. Neither was compulsion to be thought of and the economic system of sending children of the two sexes to the same village school impossible because of "i' decore". (10)

The Commissioners suggested that the Rector of the University should be made responsible for the whole administration of local education and on the Governor's consent be empowered to enact rules for determining school discipline, and regulate the nature and order of instruction which ought to be imparted in schools; he should be responsible for the appointment and dismissal of teachers and had to account for the administration of funds provided for the up-keep of schools. (11)

The Commission also recommended an adjustment in the teachers' salaries and an increase in the education vote. The only increase in Public Expenditure proposed by the Royal Commission was on public education. It was recommended that the Education Vote of £1,725 be increased to £4,000 and the sum of £400 spent annually on Elementary instruction be increased to £850. (12)

The new rate of salaries was proposed with a view of having the most competent candidates attracted to the teaching profession. The Com-

8. *op. cit.*, p. 42.

9. Ross, *op. cit.*, letter to M. Victor Cousin, p. 122.

10. *ibid.*

11. The Governor did not agree with this suggestion of placing the Organization of Elementary schools under the University. The organization was entrusted to a Committee of Management which was made up of the Rector of the University, Rev. Can. Dr. E. Rossignaud, John Clough and G. Casolani. The decisions of the Committee were subject to the Governor's approval. Can. Rossignaud resigned and the new Rector Rev. Thaddeus O' Malley together with Mr. Inglott reformed the Maltese orthography. Mr. Inglott had just returned from a Government scholarship in England.

12. The proposed Establishment for elementary instruction:—

a.	expenses for a school at Valletta, including the salary of the Mistress of the annexed Girls' School	£200
b.	expenses for two schools for the Three Cities	£150
c.	expenses for seven schools for Città Vecchia and for the villages of Malta and Gozo	£350
d.	expenses for the salary of Mistresses of the Girls' School attached to the two schools at the Three Cities and to the seven schools of Città Vecchia and the villages of Malta and Gozo	£150

missioners suggested that the new rates should be the highest which the actual resources of the island could afford. The aim should be "the giving to the Maltese youth of every class and description the most complete education which the resources of their country can afford". (13)

Various other recommendations in connection with the teaching of subjects were made. Assuming that al' the children frequenting local schools were Roman Catholics, the Commission considered that religious instruction in schools should be exclusively directed by the c'ergy. For this reason it was suggested that Parish Priests should have access to schools at any time during the day.

Language teaching in Maltese schools had always been a thorny prob'em and it was always the cause of endless controversy. The Royal Commission of 1836 considered Italian the literary and written Language of Ma'ta, the language of business and the law courts. "Italian is the language of the Maltese for all purposes but those of familiar conversation". (14) Italian is still the officia' language of the Church in Malta. The Commission attached this importance to Italian because of the nearness of Malta to Sicily and the Italian mainland and because it considered Ma'tese a corrupt dialect of Arabic, never used for any literary purpose and never written in a uniform and established ortography. (15)

The Commission, therefore, suggested that children in Government schoo's should be taught to read Maltese and Italian reading and writing. The teaching of Italian had to be made through Maltese and so, the teaching of Maltese in schools was never at this time considered for its own sake. English was considered of less practical value than Ita'ian and the Commission recommended that a child should be taught to read and speak English only if time in school allowed it. It also favoured the introduction of Arabic at the Lyceum. Students at the Lyceum included prospective e'ementary school teachers and it was proposed that after having acquired the language from an Arab professor, the students should in turn teach it to children in e'ementary schools. As this system was considered efficient and offered no problems, it was expected to occupy not too much time. Much of the time in school had to be employed gainfully in acquiring Italian and English in the order and way a'ready mentioned. In suggesting the teaching of Arabic, the Commission was motivated by the belief that

13. *op. cit.*, p. 44.

14. *op. cit.*, p. 42.

15. G. P. Badger in his, *Description of Malta and Gozo*, p. 78, said, "attempts to reduce the Maltese dialect to writing have been the attempt of several persons within the last thirty years. Attempts have been the effect of private exertion, without any support or countenance from Government. All attempts have failed".

business and labour prospects with the coast of Barbary, Egypt, Arabia and Syria, the affinity of languages and customs favoured emigration to these countries.

Ultimately, the Commission did not consider that the individual had the right for a "fu'l education". In fact it agreed with Dr. E. Rossignaud, Rector of the University, that as the supply of doctors, lawyers and priests was greater than the demand an increase in the professions should not be encouraged.

The Committee of Management which had been entrusted with the organization of elementary schools planned to open new schools as the Royal Commission had recommended. It was intended that the boys' school's at Notabile, Lia, Zejtun, Zebbug and Zurrieq and the three girls' schools at Notabile, Zejtun and Lia were to serve as centres for the neighbouring villages. (16)

The most serious problem facing the Committee of Management was that of recruiting efficient teachers to take charge of the newly opened schools. This crucial problem was never really solved for many years to come. We find a notice calling for teachers to teach English Language, Arithmetic and Writing in Primary Schools in the Government Gazette of the 21st March, 1838. Besides, the Government sent two young students to England to study the system of teaching and school organization. (17)

On the occasion of the arrival of the new Governor Sir Patrick Stuart, Dr. Francesco Grungo published a memorandum (18) in which he gave his suggestions on legislation, agriculture, commerce and public instruction. Dr. Grungo deplored the miserable state of local education

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16. Information about these early schools can be obtained from Government Gazettes of the 22nd August, 1838 and 23rd January, 1839. The School at Notabile was opened in 1837: the boys from Lia, Balzan, Attard, Birkirkara, Mosta, Naxxar and Ghargur could now attend the new school at Lia opened in May, 1838. The school at Zejtun opened in June 1838 admitted boys from Zejtun, Zabbar, Tarxien, Axiaq and Luqa; in August of the same year schools at Zurrieq and Zebbug were also opened for boys coming from Zurrieq, Zebbug, Qormi and Siggiewi. During their first year of their foundation 955 children attended these new schools. The total elementary school population, including the children in the existing schools amounted to 2,530.
 17. Mr. Inglott and Mr. Portelli were sent to Battersea Training College and were under the personal supervision of Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth. Kay-Shuttleworth, the Secretary to the Committee of the Council on Education from 1839-1849, had founded Battersea College in 1840. P.V. Inglott completed successfully a three-year course of study, but Portelli died in England soon after his arrival.
 18. Francesco Grungo, *Dei Bisogni del Popolo Maltese — Riflessioni*, (Malta, 1843).

and described a situation where the number of priests, lawyers and doctors increased and popular instruction worsened. (19) He said that much had been said about local education but nothing substantial had been made. Our writers had lost much valuable time in polemics with the result that, "I protettori dell'ignoranza, che per nostra disgrazia non mancano si sono prevalsi di questa guerra letteraria, e mostrando di lodare tutte le opinioni pienamente trionfarono sotto l'egida dell'a pinguimnerva." (20)

A booklet published in 1844 (21) contained a summary of what was considered necessary at the time, "...uno scrupoloso rigore nella scelta dei precettori, un metodo migliore, la sorveglianza di un direttore generale, e di comitati nei rispettivi siti in cui sono stabilite le scuole..."

An important step was taken when the first Director of Elementary Schools was appointed. The Governor of Malta, Sir Patrick Stuart dissolved the Committee of Management in October, 1844, and appointed Canon Dr. Fortunato Panzavecchia Director of Primary Schools. Marchesino Gustavo Barbaro di San Giorgio was appointed Assistant Director.

A few years after these appointments we find Dr. Vincenzo Bonavia, M.A., addressing a long letter (22) to H.E. Richard More O'Ferrall, Governor of Malta in which he submitted suggestions for the improvement of local education... The state of the few established schools had been strongly criticised and deplored in an anonymous treatise printed in 1847. (23) These two documents are important to us because they deal with the last few years previous to Can. P. Pullicino's appointment as Chief Director of Schools. The elementary schools and the systems of teaching were the object of strong criticism.

Perhaps the strongest critic to the system had been the author of the pamphlet, *Facts and Opinions on the Malta Primary Schools*, published under the pseudonym "a Ma'tese". The critics of the time did not lack nor did they mince words. They were viscious and unsparing in their attacks.

"A Maltese" said that these first schools were a complete failure and

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19. Dr. F. Grungo *op. cit.*, p. 41, suggested the establishment of colleges on the pattern of existing ones in Europe. He was convinced that public instruction was the basis of society. "Un popolo ignorante ed incolto, che non ha altra idea che nel mestiere che esercita, che non ha altro bene fuori di quello che da vicino riguarda se stesso, che non è ragionevole che per la potenza di ragionare, non può essere mai rispettato, operoso e cordiale, requisiti necessari in ogni buon cittadino, ragion per cui la pubblica istruzione sempre venne riguardata come base della felicità de' popoli".
 20. *ibid.*, p. 40.
 21. *Prospetti di Vera Pubblica Utilità*, (Malta, 1844), p. 17.
 22. Vincenzo Bonavia, *Sulle Scuole Primarie Del Governo*, (Malta, 1849).
 23. A. Maltese, *Facts and Opinions on the Malta Primary Schools*, (Anglo Maltese Printing Press, 1847).

were doing more harm than good. He spoke about the scenes of immorality practised in these schools, of the barbarous way of treatment in disciplining young minds and of the 'udicrous manner adopted in communicating elements of knowledge. (24) "Children were kept for hours together lounging and yawning in an ill ventilated school room." (25) The monitorial system of teaching, then everywhere abolished, was still being used to teach the simple elements of Arithmetic, Writing, Reading, Italian and English. (26) While teaching the Catechism lesson the monitors were superintended by a priest. The writer while speaking of the Model School at Valletta, described how visitors were deafened by noise on approach. He went on to say that on entering the school one was struck with the confusion of marching and counter-marching around monitorial circles. He saw boys fighting in these circles which deridingly he called them vicious circles. The children were receiving little more than the requirements of parrotizing certain sounds. With two to three exceptions all teachers were unfit. (27)

The writer called the appointment of Panzavecchia as Director and of Barbaro di San Giorgio as Assistant Director an unhappy choice and described the authority which effected it "dullheaded, hard hearted". He declared that, "The Director and his Assistant were gradually working for the complete ruin of these institutions. No other individuals more ill-suited, or worse prepared, than Can. Panzavecchia and the Marchesino Barbara di S. Giorgio, the former notorious for eccentricity and the latter for consummate ignorance...", could be found. (28)

The portrait which the critic left us of Can. Panzavecchia is not much stimulating. (29) He is described entering the sacred precincts of the school "dealing destruction at every step", and putting a look, which would strike terror in Pluto's breast. He never uncovered his head and his very presence terrified to death everyone in the classroom; children never expected a smile in return for a correct answer or for any good gesture. Panzavecchia would never heed a useful suggestion and would curtly dismiss a proposer, "Silenzio, non si suggerisce ai superiori". The teachers were treated with vulgarity, reprimanded in front of the class and represented as menials — a hireling in the service of the Director and his Assistant. It was reported that these two gentlemen tendered their valuable service to the community 'gratis' and wanted to appear in the eyes

24. *ibid.*, p. 4.

25. *ibid.*, p. 11.

26. *ibid.*, p. 3.

27. *ibid.*, pp. 5, 6.

28. *ibid.*, p. 7.

29. *ibid.*, pp. 8, 9.

of everyone as philanthropists, but the writer said that he had found out that under the denomination of calesse-hire, boat hire and other malicious subterfuge the Director was getting a salary of £40 per annum while the Assistant accrued £80 yearly.

The post of Director of Education was too important to be assigned to an amateur and the choice of Panzavecchia might have been real'y an unfortunate one, but critics had been too harsh, considering the fact that "he consented to accept for a limited time according to the wishes of the then Lieutenant Governor Stuart, the charge of superintending the Primary Schools of Malta". (30) Some credit was due to the first Director for preparing new text-books and for trying to estab'ish a somewhat unified and common system of teaching in all elementary schools.

"A Maltese" reported (31) that out of a population of 114,499 only 1,262 or 1/90, were attending school. He said that he had obtained these figures from personal observation which took him two years to carry out. Statistics could not be obtained from school registers because these were not correct. Teachers who were afraid of meagre attendance always exaggerated numbers. The Director was accused too, and the writer mentioned the parade-days when the Canon tried to swell the number of children by distributing worthless religious prints.

"A Maltese" offered suggestions (32) for the improvement of education. He proposed the importation of apparata, various teaching methods, besides a Model-Town School, a Model Industrial-Village School from that part of the world where they were best understood. He believed that school premises should be built for the purpose and to be perfect these ought to be organised on the motto "Union of physical labour and inte'lectual skill". So he favoured the introduction of practical subjects, e.g. navigation in town schools, carpentry and agriculture in vi'llage schools. Other suggestions included the formation of a series of books upon a Pestalozzian plan, strictly synthetical to suit loca! needs and the formation of a class of pupil teachers.

The Governor tried to remedy by inducing Mr. Inglott to accept the office of Director of Education (33) but the offer was dec'ined and in January 1849, the Governor appointed Marchesino Barbaro di San Giorgio Director of Education.

This time criticism was even harsher and the Government was accused of the worst possible blunder. "La nomina di questa persona e' un insulto ai Maltesi come popolo, anche maggiore di quella del cessato Direttore

30. Can. Fort. Panzavecchia, **Breve Storia di Malta**, Introduzione, 1847.

31. *op. cit.*, p. 10.

32. *ibid.*, pp. 21-23.

33. Malta Govt. Gazette, Monday, 18th September, 1848.

Can. Panzavecchia". (34) Dr. Vincenzo Bonavia, M.A., had been the strongest critic and in his letter he tried to show the three existing evils of the time by examining (i) the method of instruction which was being adopted in schools, (ii) the amount of instruction which was being imparted and (iii) the choice of persons to direct schools.

Instruction in elementary schools at that time was conducted in Italian and Dr. Bonavia described the teaching of English through Italian "soprammodo ingiurioso", (35) He believed that Maltese ought to be the basis of all instruction and considered that Italian introduced here in Malta by Italians and by other governing foreigners contributed extensively in keeping the lowest class in an illiterate state. Bonavia dealt at some length with the difficulty existing in our schools of teaching foreign languages. He believed that the teaching of foreign languages in primary schools wasted too much time and accounted for the low standard of education in schools.

Dr. Bonavia was harsh on the appointment of Barbaro di San Giorgio. (36) He asked Government if by this choice it was determined to keep the people in ignorance. Those who gave him the job "ch'hanno un gran peccato da scontare in faccia a Dio e in faccia al popolo." Nothing was known about the new Director, if he had had a public or a private education; he might have even been unable to read and write but "i poveri sono sempre in potere de'ricchi." Dr. Bonavia commented how could such a person take the burden of reforming primary education in Malta if he was unable to assume such a position. The Director was accused of senseless economy-complained that he gave only ten sheets of paper to serve for three months Senglea Girls' School which contained sixty girls. He abused in a tyrannical way school teachers; his orders were extravagant and threatening. Dr. Bonavia asked if teachers were living under the dictatorship of the Pasha of Egypt or in despotic Russia. Children could be punished (battuto con legno) if they were late for prayers or if they were absent from school. The school was not only the place of chaos and confusion but it was also "un campo di divertimento per colui, che non ha altre qualificazione che di opprimere alla moda dei diplomatici." Dr. Bonavia said that before improving the conditions of these schools, one had before to destroy what existed.

In 1847, Richard More O'Ferrall of Balyna in the province of Kildare was appointed Governor of Malta. He initiated a series of reforms which comprehended all the public sectors. In the meantime, the Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies had approved the creation of a Chair of

34. Bonavia, *op- cit.*, p. 16.

35. *ibid.*, p. 7

36. *ibid.*, p. 20.

Primary Instruction at the University of Malta. O'Ferrall appointed the Rev. Can. Dr. P. Pullicino, D.D. Professor of Primary Instruction and Chief Director of Primary Schools of Malta and Gozo with effect from the 1st. July, 1850. (37) Immediately on his appointment, Pullicino was instructed by the Governor to prepare a report on primary schools (38) which he presented on the 10th July, 1850. This First Report (39) is particularly important from a historical point of view because besides containing an official estimate and a thorough survey of the actual state of primary schools when Pullicino became Director, it is also a documentary proof that from this very first instance Pullicino realized the urgent need of reform. Pullicino entered his work full of enthusiasm and energy.

37. Govt. Gazette, Friday 24th May, 1850.

38. From 1850 to 1860 Pullicino issued six biennial reports on primary education in Malta and Gozo and statistics relative to these Government Primary Schools for the years 1858, 1875, 1877, 1878 and 1879.

39. Pullicino, **Rapporto Sulla Educazione nelle Isole di Malta e Gozo**, (Malta Govt. Press, 1850).