

# Ċensu Tabone (1913-2012): As I know him

ANTON TABONE

## Principal Episodes

During his political career, Ċensu Tabone occupied various posts. He was Secretary General of the Nationalist Party, Vice-Leader of the same party (1972-1977), Member of Parliament for twenty three years (1966-1989), Employment Minister (1966-1971), Minister for Foreign Affairs (1987-1989), and President of the Republic (1989-1994). As Minister for Employment and Social Services he proposed a measure, exceptional for those times, through which he introduced a new concept within the country's legislation which provided for the employment of persons with special needs.

The related law aimed to establish a process of registration for employment for persons with special needs and to make it compulsory for employers to engage a minimum percentage of these workers. In fact, in February 1969 Parliament approved the Act regarding the Employment of Persons with Special Needs, from which it was established that at least 2% of persons with special needs were to be considered for employment in appropriate jobs in the country's private sector as well as in Government Departments within the Public Sector, where that quota was reached and surpassed. This act was actually piloted by Minister Tabone almost fifty years ago.

In that same period he had submitted a proposal to the United Nations, in New York, which drew the attention upon the world's ever increasing ageing population. This led to the Vienna Action Plan and the establishment of the United Nations Institute on Ageing in Malta.

As Minister for Employment, Tabone had much to be proud of, as notwithstanding that he lived through the rundown years of the British Services, when thousands lost their jobs, the number of gainfully employed persons increased from 88,000 to 101,000 in the five year term between 1965 and 1970. Emigration, which also fell under his ministry, decreased from 9,000 in 1964 to 3,000 in 1971. Minister Tabone had established an official



contact with Maltese and Gozitans living abroad and he used to visit them both when he served as a Minister as well as later as President of the Republic. In 1970 he signed an agreement with the Australian authorities so that returned migrants would still continue to receive their Australian pensions on their return to Malta. Thus, while thousands of workers were laid off, emigration decreased and some of those who had emigrated in earlier years started to return, the number of Maltese and Gozitans gainfully employed increased and continued to increase just the same.

When he became Minister for Foreign Affairs, with a youngster's energy and in a short term, he succeeded in again strengthening Malta's diplomatic and traditional relations with European States and other countries around the world. He started to pave the way for Malta to become a member state of the European Union. He strived for Malta's membership within the European

Union, and had it been his decision, he would have hastened the date of its formal and official application for membership. During this time he also submitted a proposal to the United Nations in New York which proposal stated that the world's climate needed to start to be considered as common heritage of mankind, and within a short time the United Nations issued a draft resolution on climate change in order to initiate the process to decrease man's actions and activities that cause environmental harm. In my opinion, these episodes were not given due prominence at the time of Ċensu Tabone's career as a Minister in the sixties and eighties.

The next chapter regarding the time of his Presidency merits an article in its own right with no ample space available herein. However I have to remark that his Presidency years created a general feeling throughout the nation where he was considered to be a father to all without exception. In fact, in the opening speech delivered on the occasion of the Inauguration of the Seventh Parliament, on the 4th April 1992, he stated: *....irridu naslu biex meta nghidu 'aħna', ebdha persuna ma tħossha eskluża minn taħt il-kapp ta' dik il-kelma.* (.....we need to arrive at a point where when we say 'us', no person would feel excluded from the encompassing meaning of that word).

## His Family

It is right and proper that in this article I also include some comments about his family. My father (Anton) was considered to belong to another time and generation when compared to his brother. He was very proud of *Ċensu tagħna* (our Vincent) as he used to refer to him everytime he used to recount something about him. Everytime that my uncle crossed over to Gozo in connection with work or holidays, my father expected that he would meet him and he found pleasure in listening to his updates about what was currently going on and what plans he had in tow. I would say that most probably the conversation was mostly one way, because to keep up with Ċensinu wasn't easy! It also doesn't mean that they totally agreed on everything, because I sometimes heard my father telling him: *Ajma, Ċens, kemm tinkwetani meta titkellem hekk.* (how I worry when I hear you speak like that). But I truly believe that he was my father's joy.

My uncles's wife Maria, a woman of character, reminded one of the popular saying that behind every successful man there is a woman. I remember her supporting him in every step he made: defending him and caring for him. At the same time rearing eight children practically on her own owing to the long trips her husband made abroad due to



his services within the World Health Organisation (WHO), and before that, because of his studies in the United Kingdom. Back in Malta, between his services at the hospitals and his private practice he was also involved in the establishment of the Medical Association of which he also became the President, and which role also necessitated him to act and negotiate as a trade unionist during the long and turbulent disagreement between the Association and the Government of the time. When he entered the political sphere, he increased the rhythm of his activities, that without any doubt decreased the amount of quality time he dedicated to his dear family.

Albeit his wife was fully committed in her support, defence and care for him, she however also knew how to be critical in her judgement of their general environs in every aspect. Without giving herself any airs and without mincing words, she knew how to pass a fitting remark that would at the same time appropriately hit the mark. As for the rest, their family life in their St Julians home was always welcoming, merry and closely knit.

Very often, on many evenings, I would return with my uncle after Parliament sittings or meetings at the Party Headquarters (Stamperija) and have dinner with the family, since at the time Gozo ferry services were not available after sunset. I remember that on entering the house late at night we used to find my Aunt Maria and very often the numerous family members together with some of their close friends, all talking loudly at the same time. A whole cacophony of suggestions of what we should have done or said during the session or in another activity. It is true that those particular times are considered to have been turbulent ones for our country, and thus one would expect that a certain nervousness and anxiety prevailed. Soon, however, I used to proceed to share the kitchen table with my uncle and enjoying my aunt's tasty food in a merry and friendly atmosphere that I will never forget.

## Festschrift

I feel that to judge and justly assess the life of a man like Ċensu Tabone, there needs to be an initiative taken by persons who would be able to delve through the intricacies of the prominent person's

life in the context of his country's contemporary historical background. One could perhaps propose the establishment of a Foundation that would take up this suggestion and work on it. Another proposal would be that of issuing a festschrift publication that would consist of a volume of articles written by various authors who know Ċensu or who have heard about him, in order that they would give life to his memory and his contribution towards our nation.

Ċensu Tabone was born in Gozo and was buried in Gozo. He was a patriot, as witnessed by his own words that are now engraved on his tombstone: *Kun kburi li int Malti u thalli qatt id-daqs ta' pajjiżna jżommok lura milli tilhaq il-potenzjal tiegħek. Dejjem tajjar il-bandiera Maltija fl'ogħla quċċata.*

(Be proud of your Maltese citizenship and never allow our country's size to keep you back from reaching your potential. Always wave the Maltese flag up on the highest summit).

This was Ziju Ċens for me, how I know him and how I would like to remember him.

*Translated from Maltese by Ms Miriam Muscat.*

*This article was adopted from a speech delivered by Mr Anton Tabone on the subject during an event coordinated by the Gozo Cultural Office within the Ministry for Gozo on 13th May 2017.*

Anton Tabone was first elected as a member of Parliament in 1966 in the interests of the Nationalist Party and sat in Parliament for over forty two years, initially as a back bencher and successively as Shadow Minister, Minister and eventually as a Speaker of the House. He was also a member of the NP Executive Committee and a member of the now defunct Gozo Civic Council. He was appointed as the first Minister for Gozo Affairs in 1987 and re-appointed in the same portfolio in 1992, a post he held up to 1996. Between 1998 and 2008 he served as Speaker of the House of Representatives. He also served as Acting President of Malta from 2009 to 2012. In 2008 he was conferred the Membership of the National Order of Merit in the grade of Companion.