

29.

Closing Address

Dr. E. Fenech Adami
Prime Minister

It was with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to make the closing speech of this Seminar which included the participation of a number of professionals who work with the handicapped. This Seminar was organised with the aim of giving an outline of the future and to identify those guidelines and directions which the country must take with regards handicapped persons and their families.

When one takes a good look around him, one notices that in the past years a great deal of work has been done in this field. Often this was the result of many sacrifices on the part of individuals who were not discouraged by financial problems and lack of specialised services. They ventured into such projects out of sheer determination and hope in divine providence.

There are three common factors to be found in almost every initiative taken in this field. First, there is the great contribution of either the Church or voluntary organisations. Secondly, there is the financial help given by Maltese individuals. Thirdly, the small contribution made directly or indirectly by the State, not only by providing essential services, but more so by providing specialised services.

It has been obvious since a few years ago, that it was time to study these initiatives which were involving great efforts on the part of various individuals, were not reaching the level of specialisation which is so necessary in such a sphere.

This need was especially felt due to the great progress made in other countries in the support of the handicapped, especially in the medical, sociological and educational fields. We began to realize and accept the fact that a handicapped person can reach a higher level of education than previously thought. We got used to the fact that there is place for

the handicapped person within the work force; and we realized that through specialization, services which are absolutely essential for the handicapped to integrate himself in society, could be provided.

The present Government has, from its very first days in office, understood that this is the road it must follow in future: i.e. it must recognise and support a genuine commitment on the part of voluntary and Church organisations, based on the Christian values which are so dear to us. Government had to give this recognition and support by joining these voluntary forces, so that together they could work out a concrete action plan which would lead the Maltese society accepting the handicapped completely within it, not out of charity or tolerance but as a right, like any other citizen.

This means putting into practice the principle of Social Justice. This aim can be reached, if the principles of solidarity and justice are encouraged in all spheres of the Maltese society, especially among those who are suffering from some kind of disability. That is why the Government, in its electoral programme, declared its intention to establish Social Services on a personal plan and promised that the United Nations' Declaration of the "Rights of the Handicapped Persons" be applied, especially the right that the handicapped have to live as normal a life as possible; the right they have to integrate themselves as much as possible, in society; and the right that they have not be taken advantage of. (vide. "Xoghol, Gustizzja u Liberta' - Is-Sisien Ghall-Gejjieni" - Chap 6.6 Page 111(53)).

The work of the Ministry for Social Policy in this field and the setting up of a National Commission for the Handicapped, are proof of this political and administrative commitment which is meant to create in our country, a nucleus of services integrated in all the aspects of the lives of the handicapped.

The National Commission for the Handicapped was set up because the Government believes that progress in this field can be attained if it joins in the efforts of voluntary organisations and institutions and if together they direct their resources to resolve the problems and difficulties, realistically, and also with respect towards the limitations which now and then are imposed by the prevailing circumstances.

Whoever is committed in this field, knows well how many needs and difficulties must be overcome. The handicapped has to bear his or her handicap until death, the handicapped, and his or her family, need continuous help and on many occasions specialised help.

Until a few years ago, the tendency was to be satisfied with financial help in the form of allowances and similar benefits. This was, still is, and will remain necessary. But undoubtedly, the urgent and essential needs of today's life require another form of help and on another level. Thus, for example, it is necessary that the help given by

the state start immediately the newborn baby is diagnosed as handicapped or at risk. It is at this critical moment that prompt interventions can be made to minimise the effects of the handicap that had been diagnosed; this apart from the fact that it is at this stage that the family needs most help, guidance and moral support.

It is also necessary that handicapped children and youths be given specialised education in schools that will be able to provide the special attention which they require and this without their having to forfeit their integrate with other children in their own environment.

It is also necessary that the handicapped are given the chance to find work which is not only suitable for their particular handicap, but also gives them a sense of independence and human respect. They expect this as a right, not out of charity.

Naturally, to do this, a national conscience must evolve which accepts these principles as duties of the modern society - and may be this is the most difficult part, because modern society is frequently engulfed by its own problems and does not find time to think about those who are suffering or the ones who become emarginated.

This was the aim which made my Government set up the National Commission for the Handicapped. Its function is a sort of go-between: between the voluntary organisations and the major Government departments. Thus two fronts have been linked in a common effort to identify those decisions which had to be taken and to see that these are being put into effect in the best way, and in the least time.

In fact, since the Commission was set up in October 1987, there have been substantial improvements in fields which are very close to the handicapped. We have seen improvements not only in social security in the shape of allowances or other benefits, but also in Government policies regarding the handicapped and their families, i.e. in health, education, housing, right for work, right for access.

Undoubtfully there is a lot left to be done before we can say that we have provided the necessary institutions and organisations which will provide the handicapped with all the opportunities modern society can offer. The biggest obstacle is the lack of specialisation in certain fields, although Government is doing its utmost so that where possible, adequate people are identified to train in these fields.

Naturally, this commitment on the part of my Government can continue to be successful only if it is added to the contribution of individuals and organizations who have worked for so many years among the handicapped. While we need to be aware of the limitations that circumstances sometimes impose on a society like ours, we must be able to set priorities and strive for their attainment.

That is why this Seminar, organised by the National Commission for the Handicapped and the Parents' Society for Handicapped Children was worthy of all support. The aims that were identified fit perfectly within the plan of the Government, a Government which is examining the reality of our country today, at the same time establishing the needs faced by handicapped in the years to come.

Therefore, I shall end this Seminar by thanking all those who in one way or another contributed or participated in it. I also thank all those who worked or are working in this field, those who have offered their moral and intellectual resources or their professional expertise and free time; and I encourage them to continue giving their share so that the Maltese Society will become fully aware that the handicapped person has a full place in this society, and this is a citizen with all his or her rights.