

Can Private Schools Survive?

The controversy over private schools has never been far from the headlines over the last five years, especially since February 1978, when a freeze on school fees was imposed by the government. As a result, private schools have been running up huge, annual deficits – totalling well over three quarters of a million liras.

In 1982, De La Salle College had an operating loss of some Lm40,000; St Aloysius Lm48,000; Santa Monica Lm53,000; and St Joseph's Lm50,000. Recurrent costs are increasing at an average of 11.5 percent annually. These costs would be much higher (by about Lm198,000 annually) were it not for the fact that many religious personnel working in the schools are not paid regular salaries.

The Squeeze

To ease the schools' financial burden, parents organized fund raising activities, provided scholarships for over 800 pupils, and made substantial term contributions, over and above fees paid. Late last year, the government banned donations to private schools by pupils' parents. Coupled with a previous decision to allow a 20 points advantage to sixth form pupil workers from government schools when it came to entering university, the ban on donations brought the private schools issue to fever pitch once again.

As was to be expected, private schools tried to devise alternative ways of raising money, even though these would lead in turn to countermoves by the government. The first such alternative, launched in mid-January, was to request parents to "lend" funds to their children's school.

Squeezed as they are by rising costs and by shrinking revenues, can private schools survive?

Twenty eight out of every hundred Maltese children – 22,000 in all – attend private schools. Their parents claim that educational standards and academic attainment have been very high – a point which is confirmed by independent observers. If the state were to take over the education of these children, the Ministry of Education would need an estimated extra Lm2 million to

cover added running expenses.

What have been the causes underlying this persisting crisis? Actually two main strands of developments that took place during the seventies, contributed in large part to the build up of the problem. One strand related to the implementation of educational



It's a heavy load

policies by the government, especially at secondary level. The second strand reflected the ongoing moves between the government and the church to place the latter's role in Maltese society on a completely new basis.

Private school pupils and their parents were caught in the cross-fire raised as these different concerns were pursued. But what kind of people actually choose to send their children to private schools, and why do they do so? Are these people the snobs some propagandists make them out to be, or are they the hardworking, decent citizens described by other propagandists? What expectations do they have about their children's

education? How are they coping with the problem raised by the private schools issue?

Social Origins

Possibly, replies to these questions could provide useful indications about why the whole issue has escalated to levels that are so controversial and emotional. With this aim in view, TOMORROW magazine carried out a survey among parents having children who attend Form I in four private schools. Two hundred questionnaires (in Maltese) were sent in November 1982, and one hundred and seventy six replies were received.

The survey was designed to obtain information about four

main topics of interest. The first topic related to the socio-economic background of respondents, the strength of their attachment to the private school system, and what their priorities have been in providing education for their children. As Table I shows, almost one third of respondents were working class, and another third were lower middle class. Professional and managerial households accounted for 24 percent of respondents, and business families for another 16 percent.

The majority of responding households (69 percent) either had none of the spouses educated at private schools or had only one spouse with such education. Yet

TABLE I**Social Class and Attachment to Private Schools**

Social Background of Households	Working Class	30%	Lower Middle	30%
	Business	16%	Professional/ Managerial	24%
Who of Parents Used To Attend Private Schools?	Husband Only	27%	Wife Only	19%
	Both	31%	None	23%
How Long Has Son/Daughter Attended Private School?	October '82	3%	1 Year	1%
	2 Years	2%	3 Years +	94%
Any Other Children Attending Private Schools?	Yes	72%	No	28%

TABLE II**Parents' Involvement in Schoolwork**

	YES	NO
Do you help your children with class projects?	84%	16%
Do you insist on your son/daughter reading 1 book a week at least?	85%	15%

though on the whole, responding parents had not been themselves "overexposed" to private school education, their commitment to such an education for their children appears to be well entrenched. The large majority (94 percent) had been sending their son or daughter to a private school for three years or more, and 72 percent have more than one child attending such a school.

What do these parents consider as being important in the education of their children? To cover this question, parents were asked to give preference from one to four to the following aims: a Christian education; moderate discipline; a sense of civic duty; and academic success.

The big majority of first preferences went to Christian education (72 percent), followed by academic success (17 percent), moderate discipline (7 percent), and a sense of civic duty (4 percent). When second, third and fourth preferences of respondents are also taken into account however, the emphasis on Christian education loses much of its weight. Analyzed by the total preferences

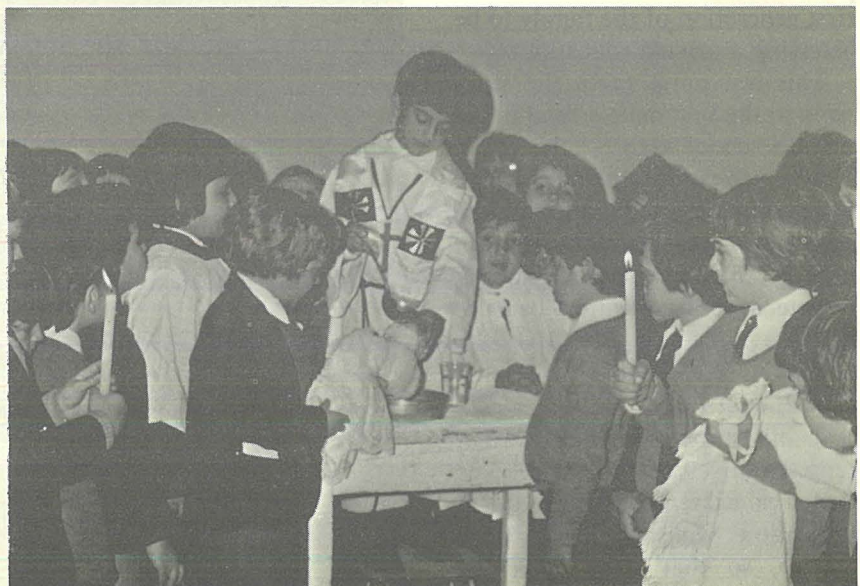
each aim receives, Christian education is quite closely followed by academic success which obtains a markedly high score (25 percent of all preferences). Moderate discipline rates 21 percent of all preferences, and a sense of civic duty 18 percent. Such a finding indicates that for the parents who took part in the survey, academic performance is of great importance in guiding their choice of education for their children.

Parent Involvement

This immediately leads to the second topic of interest that the TOMORROW survey sought to cover: how actively do parents participate in their children's school-work? In fact, parents take a very high degree of interest in their children's education (see Table II), which indicates that a child's educational achievement is probably *the* important family objective for most respondents.

The third batch of questions in the TOMORROW survey therefore tried to establish how satisfied parents were with the performance of their offspring, and with the care and discipline exercised by the school. Significantly, all respondents were happy with their child's performance at school, the large majority (65 percent) being very happy. The same levels of satisfaction are reflected in parents' replies regarding homeworks, since 70 percent report that homeworks are always carefully done, and on discipline (86 percent describe it as "moderate", which is probably the way most modern parents like it to be).

None of the parents think that discipline at their child's school is very lax, and only a negligible proportion find it lax. By contrast, these same parents believe that

*Christian education*

discipline at government schools is very lax or lax (32 percent for each category). Only a small minority say that discipline at government schools is moderate (13 percent) while 23 percent admit they don't know. All these results are shown at Table III.

Present Problems

How do parents of private school children react when asked about the implications of the existing problems? Respondents to the TOMORROW survey were asked for replies to five precise questions in this regard (see Table IV). The large majority of parents (94 percent) paid supplementary donations, and a smaller majority are in agreement that the education of less well-off children in private schools should be subsidized. 80 percent consider that government's attitude to the schools has been obstructive. If such schools were to be abolished, 78 percent of parents say they would be very angry (and another 8 percent would be angry).

The picture of private school parents that emerges from the survey is that of people who are highly motivated to provide their children with what they consider to be a good education. In their majority, they do not come from very prosperous backgrounds, and for many, their children are the first generation of the family to be receiving a private education.

This last point takes the story back to the first main strand in the private school saga – the effect left by educational policies which were implemented during the seventies. A reasonable conclusion may be that parents opted for a private school education because of these policies.

Educational Policies

It all started in 1970, when representatives of private schools signed an agreement with the then Education Minister, Paolo Borg Olivier, so that steps could be taken "towards the integration of

the private secondary schools, with the government schools system". It was understood that this was a long term process, requiring "constant reappraisal" – but in fact, the agreement remained a dead letter.

At the end of 1970, private

schools were in the doldrums. Their facilities were no match for the better equipped, better staffed and better financed state grammar schools, which creamed off the best students in the national 11-plus examinations. But then, the Nationalist administration intro-

TABLE III
Performance at School

Happy/Unhappy with Child's Progress?	* Very Happy	65%
	* Happy	35%
	* Don't Know	–
Are homeworks carefully done?	* Always	70%
	* Often	30%
	* Seldom	0%
	* Never	0%
How is discipline?	* Very Lax	0%
	* Lax	1%
	* Moderate	86%
	* Strict	13%
How is discipline in government schools?	* Very Lax	32%
	* Lax	32%
	* Moderate	13%
	* Don't Know	23%

TABLE IV
Parents' Attitudes to Private School Problems

	YES	NO
Do you agree that children from disadvantaged families should attend school paying no fees or reduced fees?	76%	24%
Did you pay donations additional to fees?	94%	6%
Did you pay donations willingly?	76%	24%
Is the government's attitude (a) helpful (b) neutral (c) obstructive?		
<i>Helpful</i>		<i>Neutral</i>
1%		10%
<i>Obstructive</i>		<i>Don't Know</i>
80%		9%
If private schools were to be abolished, how would you feel?		
<i>Disappointed</i>		<i>Annoyed</i>
1%		8%
<i>Angry</i>		<i>Very Angry</i>
8%		78%
5% Did not reply to the question.		

duced "secondary education for all". No real planning took place, implementation was chaotic, and academic standards in state schools declined dramatically.

With the change of government in 1971, problems were compounded when the comprehensive



Paolo Borg Olivier: Merger

system was abruptly introduced, abolishing streaming and examination. All these measures were very unpopular with parents, many of whom made a bee-line to church private schools. So heavy was the demand for places, the private schools could impose stiffer entry requirements, and selection procedures. That creamed too many promising children from the state schools, which thus experienced continuously declining standards at secondary level.

At a time when the total pupil population (exclusive of nursery levels) was shrinking, the private school population increased from 16,233 in 1972/73, to over 22,000 in 1979/80. The better, private secondary schools took over the role of pace setters. This was not the kind of situation that any government would tolerate for long. The stage was set for a confrontation between the government and the private school system. Early on in this confrontation, school fees and the capitation grant became key points of dispute. The government argued that

The Ding Dong between Government and Private Schools

- 12 APRIL 1972 Government informs private schools it will not be awarding "free places" (scholarships) as from October 1972.
- 29 JANUARY 1973 Government warns private schools it could stop subsidies unless the schools "provide valid reasons" why it should not do so.
- 1 SEPTEMBER 1977 All subsidies are stopped.
- 9 FEBRUARY 1978 Private schools inform the Education Minister they will open on 10 February, a religious day of observance, and previously a public holiday.
- 21 FEBRUARY 1978 Government freezes private school fees at a maximum of Lm 72 annually.
- 12 MAY 1978 The Education Minister turns down a request by private schools for a meeting. Another similar request is turned down in October 1978.
- 28 MAY 1980 The Private Schools Association issues a press release declaring parents' right to choose schools for their children. The release proclaims the principle of "subsidiarity": "that which can be efficiently done by a small group, should not be hindered by a larger, more powerful group - the state".
- 10 JUNE 1980 The capitation grant, roughly Lm30 for every pupil attending private secondary schools, and paid out of the state budget, is suspended "until the principle that education at (a private) school should be free on the same basis as that of government schools, has been accepted".
- 23 JUNE 1980 Private schools reply that practically all parents pay the taxes which finance government schools; private schools must pay a just wage to their teachers and meet other expenses from their own income.
- 18 JULY 1980 A public petition, signed by over 28,000, seeks the unfreezing of school fees, and the restoration and increase of the capitation grant.
- 1 OCTOBER 1980 Prime Minister Mintoff meets private school representatives at Castille.
- 25 AUGUST 1982 Pupil workers from government sixth forms obtain a 20 point advantage in entry to university.
- 30 NOVEMBER 1982 Donations to private schools by parents are banned.



Subsidiarity drives us



Philip Muscat: No donations

attendance at private schools should not be subject to payment of fees. The capitation grant – an allowance paid to private schools by the state based on their annual pupil intake – was clearly a point where the government could apply pressure.

Agreement vs. Minutes

The sequence of measure and counter measure spanned some eight years, before a crucial meeting took place at Castille between Prime Minister Mintoff and private school representatives (see Box for a rundown of how the dispute developed during the seventies). At the Castille meeting of October 1980, Mintoff stated he did not want to close private schools, but to avoid duplication. While private kindergartens and elementary schools were a duplication of the state system, secondary schools complemented it. Subject to cabinet ratification, he was prepared to let fees increase by

Lm21. He was also not against raising the capitation grant, provided 50 percent of it came from the church. Before the end of the meeting, both parties agreed to submit points or principles for future discussion to their respective cabinet or council.

There is then confusion as to what really happened. But a paper was signed which government said was an “agreement”, but which private school representatives claim were just “minutes” of the meeting, listing an agenda for future discussions. The second of the five points mentioned in the

document is of crucial importance. It states that “where adequate government facilities exist already, there will be no further intakes, and where duplication exists, this will be gradually run down”. Were the private schools to accept this, they would allow the government to totally control the educational system of the country.

Whether “agreement” or “minutes”, Archbishop Mercieca stated that he did not like the points at all, and on 11 November 1980, he sought further clarifications. Confrontation had really set in. The Vatican’s representative Mgr. Sil-

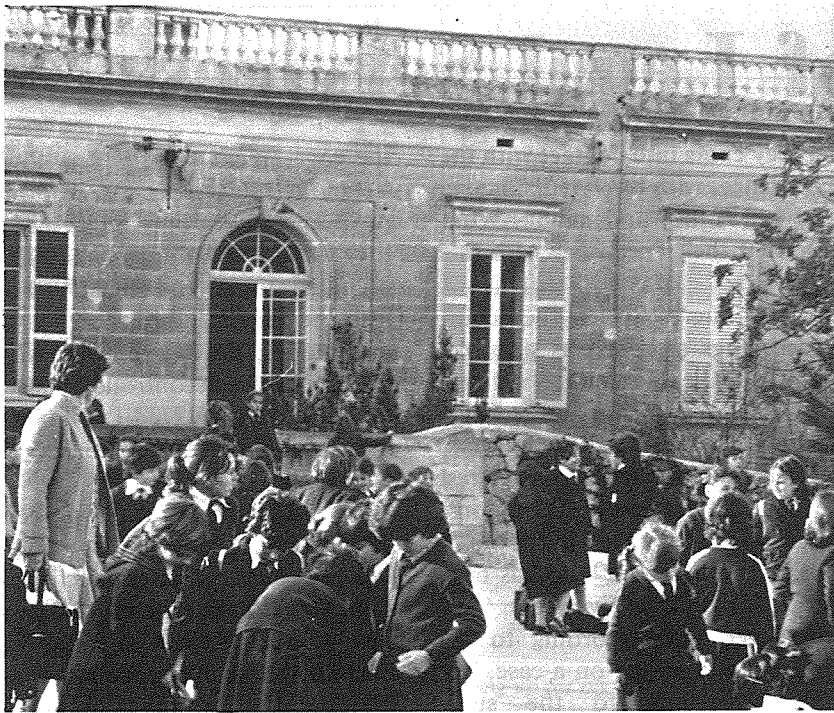
A meeting was held at the Auberge de Castille on the first of October 1980 between the Private Schools Association and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Malta.

Following discussions the points listed hereunder were agreed upon: -

1. The principle is accepted that by “non-profit-making” it is understood that no-unvested profits are profits.
2. Where adequate Government facilities exist already there will be no further intakes and where duplication exists this will be gradually run down.
3. With regard to the capitation grant for the last three months of the last scholastic year this Government will make pound for pound, up to a maximum of one half, the contribution secured from Church authorities.
4. Primary school fees shall remain unchanged; secondary school fees may be increased to a maximum of 21 per cent and every effort will be made in order that provided fees of change.
5. Discussions will be held later on regarding (i) the mode of contribution of intake (ii) the mode of Government aid where complementarity exists, including any contribution by the Church (iii) the ways of making the Church's contribution.

Signatures:
 - *Domènec Melicó*
 - *Marcelo Lopez*
 - *Shiffman*
 - *Domènec Melicó*
 - *P. A. Ag...*
 - *...*

Signatures on an Agreement



Schools or Businesses?

vestrini met Mintoff in February 1981 and it was clear that the Vatican had not accepted the five points drafted in Castille in their totality. When Silvestrini denied the five points were an "agreement", Mintoff replied "we shall see", and left the matter in suspense.

Balance of Power

It remained in suspense till in August 1982, a 20 point bonus was given to pupil workers at government schools for entry to the university. In December, donations to private schools were banned. As the arguments proceeded however, it was clear that a second type of concern — lying outside purely educational affairs — has been guiding the positions adopted by protagonists in the dispute. While secret and not so secret discussions continue in the corridors of the Curia and Castille, the Vatican and the Roman resort of Capranica, a real issue has become the balance between the church's power and moral standing, and the power and standing of the government.

Defenders of private schools claim that there exists a fundamen-

tal right of parents to choose schools for their children according to their conscience. The idea that attendance at a private school provides the guarantee of a Catholic education has strong roots.

Some also argue that the state is against private schools because they have been too successful in attracting students. They would be less of a "threat" if they just catered for the elite. "That is exactly what the socialists want them to do," argues an educationist. "The private schools provide a strong alternative for the lower income groups, to what the state has to offer. When they can only cater for the sons and daughters of the rich, the state can then carry on with the task of social engineering unhindered."

That is one interpretation, and as has already been noted, many parents do give top ranking to the concept of Christian education in determining their choice of school. Strangely enough however, the point is sometimes made by outside observers, that at government schools — especially at the elementary level — the amount of

religious activity going on during a normal day, can be much higher than in private schools. How does this fit in with the alleged social engineering strategy being followed by the state?

Free Private Schools

Meanwhile on the government's side, Mintoff has been quite clear — most recently in his speech to Parliament on the 1983 budget estimates for his departments — that he wants private schools to be free of charge. Otherwise, he claims, they should just be considered as businesses. To the point that even with the present level of fees, private schools now face bankruptcy, the government's reply is that they should be subsidized by the church. If this happens, government itself would also be prepared to "help".

Such an approach raises perhaps even more fundamental issues than that of private schools. If the government's logic is accepted, can the church assume the financial burden of supporting "its" schools? The question would open up for public discussion, the subject of what the church's financial assets are, and how they should be managed. Is this what the government really wants — and what the church has been firmly trying to avoid? (One factor that may have given added salience to the question, is the funds the church received during 1982 from tenants who availed themselves of a recent law allowing all tenants to redeem immovables held in perpetual emphyteusis.)

As the survey carried out by TOMORROW suggests, most parents really have one aim in mind — that the education of their children can develop to their satisfaction and under the best conditions. By any standards, this is a reasonable aspiration. The sooner a clearcut solution is found to the problem of whether and how private schools should survive, the better for all concerned. T