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Covid Christmas

Michael Briguglio

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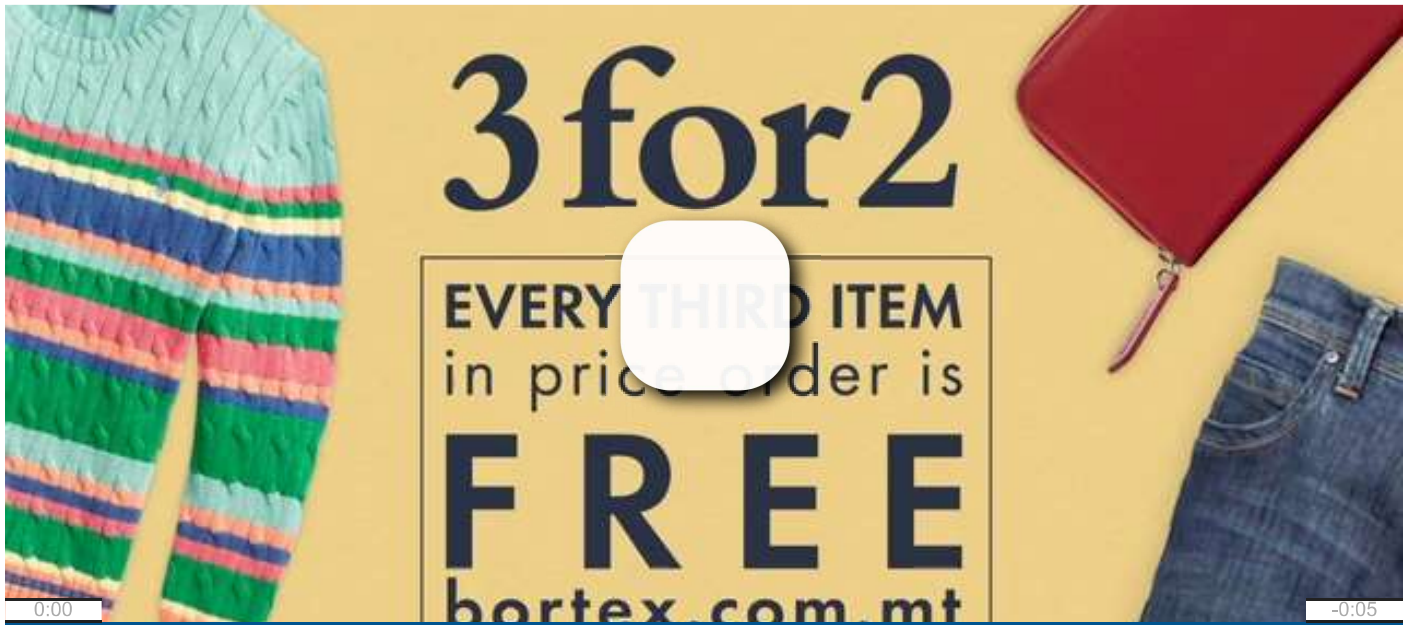
As Christmas comes closer, a snapshot of the current Covid-19 situation can help put things into perspective.

In this article, I won't be discussing the pros and cons of Government's plans for Christmas in Valletta. I only hope that the decision and its implementation will be in line with health protocols and follow recommendations by experts in the respective fields.

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What I would like to discuss is Deputy Prime Minister Chris Fearne's recent statement that the number of Covid-19 cases in Malta is likely to increase significantly in the coming weeks. The Minister did the right thing in presenting a stern but needed message in this regard. The message may not be to everyone's ears, but I prefer sober realism to partisan divisiveness, sectarianism and sensationalism.

As we know, Malta's Covid-19 cases and deaths have heftily increased in the past weeks, with the reproduction number currently standing at 1.50, according to statistician Vincent Marmara in his exclusive weekly blog in the Malta Independent on Sunday. The global aim for reproduction rates is to go down to 1, meaning that one person would transmit the virus to one other person, and not more. In the meantime, around 5,000 of the 7,000 cases in Malta have recovered.

Realism in Covid-19 narratives require that political and sectoral forces acknowledge that numbers were increasing in many other European countries, though this is no cause for consolation for us in Malta. Some countries are adopting tough measures such as lockdowns, whilst others are opting for softer approaches which aim to reconcile health with social and economic aspects in a more balanced way. Sweden is an example of the latter. Here, one has to keep in mind that people's cooperation with authorities' recommendations is imperative. Hence, cultural, social, economic and health aspects intersect.

In the meantime, earlier this week, the Malta Independent reported that the main culprit for Covid-19 transmission in Malta now seems to be "the unbridled mingling of families and friends, and the fact that infected people are still showing up at work and passing on the virus to their colleagues".

Whilst each and every one of us should take responsibility for actions in this regard, the government can and should consider policy interventions to help counter such trends. For example, enforcement needs to be stepped up and people should be given consistent guidelines regarding open rings with family and friends. Besides, teleworking should be encouraged as much as po

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imminent risks directly related to Covid-19, these also include people's mental health, the economic situation and the degree of social integration, among others. Besides, social scientific surveys such as the one recently published by Malta Today indicate that there isn't much of a public appetite for lockdown, with the majority being against it.

Only a few days ago, new US president-elect Joe Biden announced that he will set up a national task force to face the Covid-19 challenge – in this regard I reiterate the need for something similar in Malta, with experts and representatives coming from different sectors to articulate recommendations to the government and parliament. Thus, we can hopefully be spared the partisan sloganeering and experience constructive cooperation, based on evidence.

In the meantime, recent news that emerged on the Covid-19 vaccine needs to be engaged upon. The media sphere optimistically reported that drugs firm Pfizer announced that its coronavirus vaccine was 90% effective, which is comparatively extremely high when compared to the effectiveness of other vaccines. This means that if ten people who are Covid-positive are vaccinated, only one out of ten would get sick.

Consequently, Pfizer's shares rose by 14%, and it now plans to apply for emergency approval for usage of the vaccine by the end of the month.

But before we rush into triumphalism, it is important to recognise that the data published by the company have not yet undergone peer-review through scientific publication, although the data has been assessed by an independent monitoring board. Peer-review is a basic pre-publication procedure for scientific and scholarly studies, where independent experts in the field analyse the research and findings.

Besides, other procedural steps need to be taken, as per scientific and administrative protocol and policy. Thus it is not clear how long we will have to wait to have a widely available vaccine. On the one hand, Britain's National Health Service was quoted as stating that it could be available by Christmas, though universal access would take place in the first part of 2021. On the other hand, European Commissioner Ursula von der Leyen stated that in the best-case scenario, the first deliveries of vaccines within the EU could start in April.

Here one must also keep in mind that from a global perspective, citizens of different countries do not have the same privileges in terms of access. Whilst the UK and the EU have pre-ordered hundreds of millions of doses from providers, with Malta dubbed to receive the vaccine within a few days of its release, UNICEF has pre-ordered half a billion syringes for a multitude of poorer countries.

Besides, there are also challenges related to public trust for the vaccine. From a Maltese perspective, I once again hope that sober and evidence-based debate comes before sensationalism and fishing for points, votes or likes.

In the meantime, the leaders of the EU27 member states will shortly be reconvening to discuss the bloc's response to Covid-19. We will wait, see and deliberate accordingly.

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