

Concluding Address

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“**O**ne of Gozo's major assets is its culture. Gozo has its own distinct identity, its special character, its special development potential, and its special interests.” I could not think of more appropriate words to close this seminar than this succinct, significant excerpt from the Acting President's address delivered on the 9 July 1987 outlining the Government's policy and programme, when he was inaugurating the sixth Legislature of independent Malta.

The history of Gozo goes back thousands of years. Its prehistoric sequence is in line not only with that of Malta, but also with those of Sicily and other areas of Europe and North Africa. Then again with the advent of history, Gozo shared practically the same vicissitudes which the main island of Malta went through.

So how is it, one may ask, that Gozo has its distinct identity and characteristics? It could be said that the culture and heritage of Gozo are distinctive owing to a great extent to its relative isolation, its size and topography.

Gozo's relative isolation and peripherality always kept it farther away than Malta from the mainstreams of human activities and influences. The size and topography of the island have always constrained the development of new economic activity and made its population reliant almost entirely on the primary sector, on agriculture, fishing and the construction industry. Gozitans had always had to face harder adversities and a fiercer struggle for survival which discovered in them the virtues of hard work and of intimate attachment to their family and land. These quantitative and qualitative natural disadvantages have moulded in Gozitans a different life-style and different characteristics. They have given Gozo a distinct culture. We are fortunate to have saved that.

We have now to bring about in the most effective way possible the valorisation of Gozo's unique cultural heritage. Our culture has both an economic and a social value which can improve not only our standard of living

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but also our quality of life. We have therefore to appreciate fully these values so as to be in a better position to preserve our cultural identity, of which we are all so proud, in the face of the modern means of communications and the development of tourism with their tendency towards cultural standardisation.

Today, more than ever before, a struggle goes on continuously in every culture – and Gozo's in no exception – between new and alien ideas and trends and the forces of conformity, that is the desire to do things according to custom and tradition. We need of course to maintain conformity, to maintain our established social and moral customs in order to safeguard our identity. However, we also need new ideas to permit progress. Our culture is likely to be strong and progressive if we strike a balance between conformity and change. This is no mean task. We have to steer continuously between Scylla and Charybdis.

We have on the one hand to strive hard to catch up with the rest of the developed world if we want to survive. And we cannot survive without adequate and efficient means of communications whether they are transport or telecommunications. We cannot survive without properly and fully exploiting the island's potential in the tourism sector.

We have on the other hand to be very careful to preserve and protect our traditions and customs. How? It has to be inculcated upon everyone of us that British tourists need not come to Gozo to enjoy a good English breakfast; Italians need not come here to swoon over a Neapolitan *canzonetta*; German tourists need not come to us to buy Dresden china. Tourists, whoever they are and wherever they come from, would prefer to savour local agricultural products, to be served typically Gozitan dishes; they cherish a folkloristic *ghanja* (song) and dance; they marvel at a hand-made intricate piece of Gozo lace; they admire the Gozitan farmer tilling his terraced fields or the Gozitan fisherman's fish-laden *luzzu*; they enjoy the simple rustic life of our villages; they find it interesting to learn a few words in Gozitan dialect; they wonder at our rich archaeological and architectural heritage; they are impressed at the way we celebrate our religious feasts; they like our way of merrymaking. These are the things that make us distinctively Gozitan. These are the heirlooms that we have to preserve and protect.

It is because of our awareness that our cultural heritage gives Gozo a natural advantage both socially and economically that the Ministry for Gozo has been implementing a policy that enhances our cultural patrimony and leads to a resurgence of interest in it.

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My Ministry has in fact always acted in the belief that there is scope to support and strengthen the links between culture, community, identity and economic development of the island, thereby providing the foundation for economic and social regeneration. Action is concentrated in three main areas, namely the conservation of the island's architectural and archaeological heritage; support and training for artists and workers in traditional trades; and widening the audience for culture.

In its efforts to conserve Gozo's architectural heritage, the Ministry has embarked on an extensive programme of restoration and rehabilitation of Gozo's monuments and buildings, which programme has been going on uninterruptedly for these last eight years. To date it covered the Ċittadella, the Ġgantija Temples, the Ta' Kola Windmill, the aqueducts, fountains, arches and rubble walls.

Our action to support and train artists and workers in traditional trades includes:

- the opening of schools, notably the School of Arts, the School of Music, the School of Drama and the Centre for Catering Studies;
- the leasing of workshops and boutiques to craftsmen; and
- the allocation of plots of land to tradesmen for the construction of workshops.

In its programme to widen the audience for culture, the Gozo Ministry:

- has opened a Cultural Office in Gozo and set up a Cultural Council to organise and promote cultural activities;
- helps artists to put up exhibitions of their works;
- helps authors publish or launch Maltese-language literary works and works on Gozo;
- gives financial assistance and other indirect incentives to folklore groups and band-clubs; and
- promotes and supports the organisation of Conferences on different aspects of cultural life in Gozo.

This annual seminar is a case in point. In the organisation of this seminar, my ministry has collaborated very closely with the Gozo Centre of the University and with Löwenbräu Malta. This collaboration is paying dividends, as is amply evident from the successful outcome of this seminar.