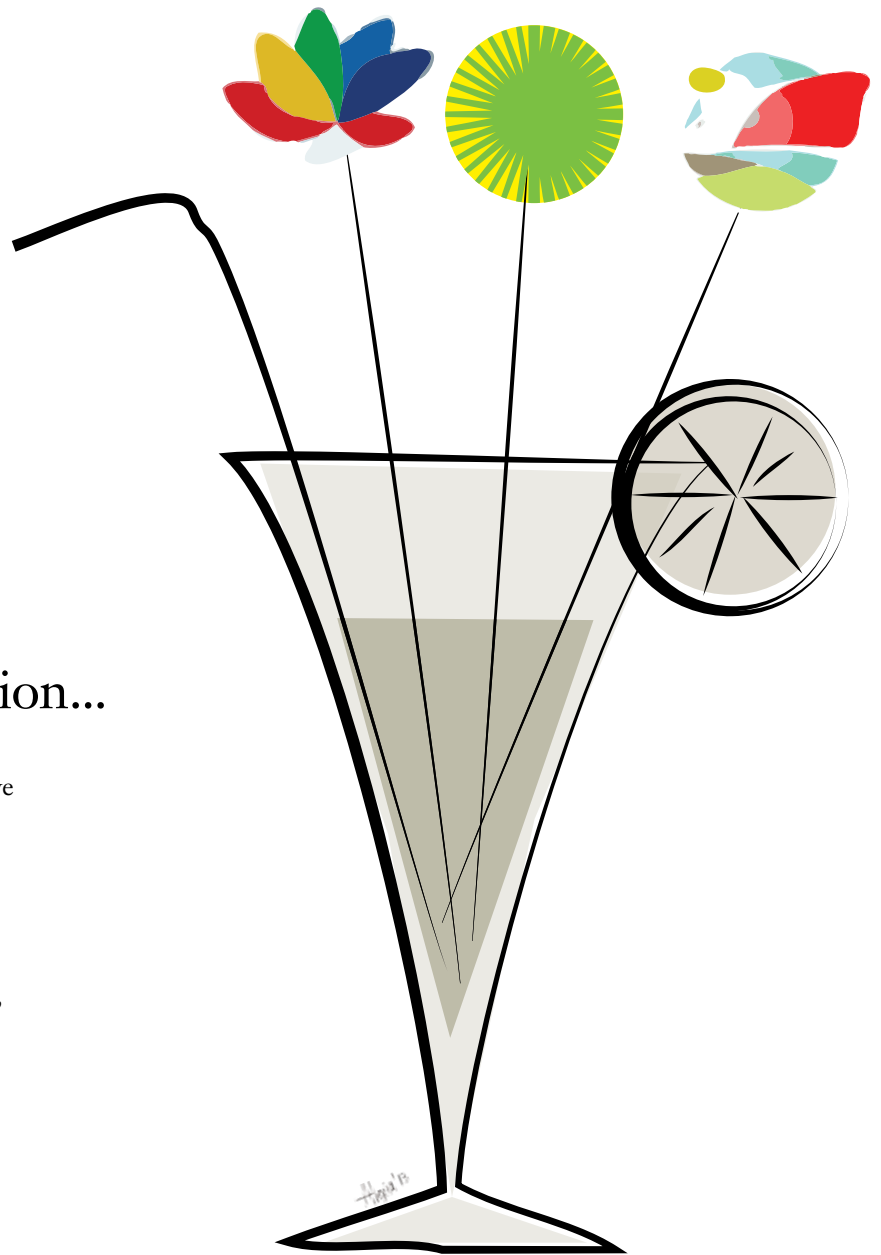


Beyond blue, green and red

Dreaming about a revolution...

By the time you read this, Malta may, or may not, have elected a new government. By now you've probably already made up your mind about who's going to get your vote, if at all. Actually, perhaps you've voted, or given up your chance to do so, already. Amidst the promises, accusations, proposals, manifestos, conjectures, scandals, dreams, plans, flags, mass meetings, toothpaste-advert smiles, flyers and growls, VIDA caught up with a few individuals who accepted to go beyond blue, green or red and explain how they would improve our political system.

David Vella meets Professor Godfrey Baldacchino, Marie Briguglio, Dr JosAnn Cutajar, Abigail Mallia, Lino Spiteri and Mario Vella.



Marie Briguglio

Dressed simply, carrying his policies, with a handful of loyal volunteers, David approached Goliath. The two-headed giant cursed at him, hurling threats and insults. David said, "you come against me with billboards, TV stations and big business, but I come against you in the name of those citizens whom you have defied... it is not by force or money that we will elect. For the battle is fought for the citizens. And they will use their weapon, the vote."

As Goliath moved in for the kill, David reached into his bag and slung his policies at Goliath's head. Finding a hole in the armour, the stone sank

into the giant's right forehead, which hit his left head, and he fell face down on the ground. David then took Goliath's own deeds and raised them in the sunlight for the people to see. When the privileged saw that their hero was defeated, they turned and ran. So the citizen persevered and voted, and a new voice came to be in parliament.

This is my main wish for our democracy right now.

Marie Briguglio is an academic and a screen-writer.

"And they will use their weapon, the vote."



Professor Godfrey Baldacchino

Nothing quite excites the Maltese like the thrill of an electoral campaign (well, a Eurovision song contest finale perhaps); to the extent that we often miss the wood for the trees, and the means for the end. The real mission of an electoral campaign is beyond itself: it is all about what happens next: for a party to secure office,

and political power, and govern. So, how many of us are thinking about life after March 9th 2013? How do we want to be governed in the long term before another election looms? What is the relationship between governed and government that we aspire to? Are we resigned to experience more of the same?

Here are my three inter-related proposals, controversial no doubt, just to get you thinking about a different form of relationship between our politicians and the public at large:

Cut down the number of members of parliament elected from each of the 13 districts from five to three. We have 65 members of parliament for a sovereign state of just over 400,000 souls. Sometimes, we have them topped up to 69, given the quirks of our electoral system and to avoid such perverse election results as that of December 1981. With some 330,000 eligible voters, that could mean one deputy for every 4,700 voters. Do we need such a close and intimate political system? Moreover, we have had 65 deputies elected to the House since 1976; at that time, there were no local councils, so such a cohort of politicians would have been easier to justify, seeing to all sorts of constituent matters. But, since 1993, this is no longer the case: a regiment of 68 mayors plus hundreds of councillors, most of them fielding political party affiliations, have taken over local administration, crowding out political work that would have been handled before by nationally elected politicians. We don't need $13 \times 5 = 65$ members of parliament anymore. $13 \times 3 = 39$ would suffice. Indeed, various countries with populations close to the Maltese figure also have less deputies than we currently do: such as Luxembourg (with 60), Suriname (with 50) and the Solomon Islands (with 51).

"No more Dom Mintoff or Franco Debono wild cards."

Assign a political party with a majority of first count votes with extra seats so that it has at least three seats more than the opposition. The details of this arrangement can be worked out later. But the argument

is simple: no more Dom Mintoff or Franco Debono wild cards, holding parliament and the Prime Minister hostage. Sure, it makes for high political drama, feeds the media with so much to write about, and so many of us run riot with speculative gossip. But this does not become a modern parliamentary democracy. It does not become a country courting foreign investment that requires stable and efficient decision-making. We can remove this one-person primadonna drama by ensuring that any government – as long as it secures a majority of first count votes – will start with a three-seat majority, at least. (We already have the one-seat amendment to the electoral law in the constitution, invoked in 1987, 1996 and 2008; so the principle is already accepted.)

Have proper by-elections whenever seats get vacated. Some would argue that enshrining a three-seat majority (as I propose above) would just make for more arrogant governments, even less accountable to the public; however it just makes it less likely for a Member of Parliament (even if a loose cannon) to have a critical impact on the process of government. This can easily be rectified by having proper by-elections when they are required. Currently, whenever a parliamentary seat is vacated in the course of a legislature, the ballot boxes from the immediately previous election are opened and a replacement declared on the basis of voter intentions then. This is quite ludicrous, when you think about it: Dr Michael Ascik was 're-elected' to the House from the 8th electoral division on 5th December, 2012, following a casual election. But wait, there was no voting on that day; the process merely counted votes that had been cast on March 8th, 2008, almost five years earlier! Should not by-elections reflect the voter sentiment of the present, rather than of the past? Is not such a measure more likely to keep the government of the day sensitive to voters and on its toes? This is normal practice in other countries. Moreover, would not an open election in this way also allow an Alternattiva Demokratika candidate to stand a somewhat better chance of being elected, than with the current system? It would be up to the voters to choose, not up to what they would have chosen, in markedly different circumstances, sometimes years before. There should be nothing casual in a Maltese casual election, where a political party always gets to hold on to its seat; only the incumbent changes. This has to end.

So there: three highly provocative, integrated and interrelated proposals, making for a leaner (and less expensive) Parliament, obliged to be more accountable, yet starting off with a stable mandate, not as liable to be hijacked by a theatrical ego-trip.

Prof Godfrey Baldacchino is Visiting Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Board of the Centre for Labour Studies at the University of Malta; currently serving as Canada Research Chair in Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada.



Lino Spiteri

Our political system has worked well over the years. However, **my preference would be for Malta to be a single constituency.** We use this system to elect our representatives in the European Parliament. There is no reason why it should not work for general elections. The advantages would be that parties can focus more on central issues, and it would cut down inter-party rivalries, which are intensified by the multi-constituency system that we currently use.

If the system remains the same, or even if it is changed to the way I have just suggested, **I would introduce tighter regulation on donations to political parties and overall election expenditure.**

I would also introduce a reasonable threshold to make it possible for third parties to be represented in Parliament, but in a manner that would not create instability. This means that the threshold would have to be pitched at a reasonable level. This proposal would be easier to implement if we had a single constituency.

Mr Lino Spiteri is a former Minister of Finance and a leading columnist in local media.

"I would also introduce a reasonable threshold to make it possible for third parties to be represented in Parliament"



Mario Vella

I do not believe that our political system is the best option we could have. **I would be much happier with proportional representation.** Until we decide to opt for such a system we cannot seriously entertain talk of minority rights and progressive ideologies.

However, the way I see it, the only way that the two major parties will ever bother to legislate in favour of an all-inclusive electoral system is through brute force. I no longer believe such a historical change is possible through sober, civil discourse. I do not think that such changes can be brought about through a democratic process. Democracy is just a fascist's wh**e. In this case I think that the end should justify the means. That is if you really care about change in this lifetime. I am not sure myself whether I do or not.

One other thing I would want is ensuring that the voter is fit to cast his vote in the first place. I don't believe that an individual who doesn't know the difference between a bucket and a spade should be allowed anywhere near a polling booth.

"I no longer believe such a historical change is possible through sober, civil discourse"

Mario Vella is the lead singer of the Maltese band Brikkuni.



Abigail Mallia

Primarily, I think the electorate must be encouraged to ponder, discuss and form judgement on the level of policies rather than simply following partisan allegiances. Having said that, it is essentially very difficult to read through the media and communication dynamics, which tend to add layers upon layers, and filters upon filters, making the way to hard solid facts practically inaccessible.

We are mature enough as a nation to understand that journalists should declare their bias. Everyone has an opinion, perhaps not a fixed one, but we all have opinions of some sort at specific points in time. Journalists should feel comfortable declaring their bias, whilst still being professional in the way they go about acquiring information and communicating it to the public.

A law regulating the financing of political parties is necessary. In such a small country it seems to be inevitable for the 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' symptom to develop. Unfortunately, at least in my industry, Malta is far from achieving the meritocracy it deserves. I believe meritocracy is fundamental to any democratic society, as is accountability.

Until people, starting from the ones governing, are made accountable, we will have to content ourselves with mediocrity. We will have to be satisfied with the idea that the ones who succeed and progress are the 'yes men', the ones who never question, and the ones who push forward the interest of the powerful. How can a democracy claim to be such, when people who do speak up about wrongdoings are often penalised?

I think accountability and meritocracy can play a big part in creating a better political environment in Malta. Naturally, the two party system does not help. Still, even within the two party system, if individuals are held accountable, thus giving the electorate the power of not choosing the mediocre, this country would take a big step forward. Instead, so far, we are left with dismissive shrugs and raising of eyebrows, in acceptance of the status quo that is telling us this is who we are as a nation, this is what we need to accept. I categorically reject this.

Abigail Mallia is a TV director and producer, and the founding director of Take 2 Entertainment.

"People who have been in power for more than ten years tend to take power for granted"

Dr JosAnn Cutajar

It is not the political system per se, but what the people do with it that counts. In Malta we need a more accountable system. People need to make their voices heard louder, and more often. In our country, social media is being used to delineate people's outrage at certain practices, such as the fact that the main road in Sliema was done and re-done a number of times in the last months.

People who have been in power for more than ten years tend to take power for granted. If I had a say on the political system, I would make sure that politicians who have already made it to parliament twice are not allowed to participate in the next elections.

There should also be more devolution of power. It is good that some political decisions are relayed to local councils.

At the same time, party politics should be left out of local council elections. There are plenty of people who would be interested in participating in these elections, but the idea of party politics in Malta, which has become anathema for some, has kept some of the best people afraid of entering the fray.

Dr JosAnn Cutajar is a senior lecturer within the Sociology Department of the University of Malta

And you?

What are your proposals for a better political system in Malta? Do you agree with the comments in this feature? Send us your feedback on yoursay@vida.com.mt or post your comments on the VIDA Facebook page. We'll feature them in our next issue.

"The ones who succeed and progress are the 'yes men', the ones who never question"