

The PN's good governance proposals: an actionable plan or a PR stunt?

Sunday, 13 December 2015, 08:00

Last update: about 7 years ago



Following the publication of the Nationalist Party's good governance proposals last Sunday, *The Malta Independent on Sunday* asks three leading political and social commentators for their views on the proposals and on whether they have gone far enough to address Malta's good governance lacuna

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contents are worth discussing. The document, like similar pious hopes wheeled out by Opposition parties the world over, is a philosophy by which the PN now says it wants to live if and when it regains power. Who could possibly say no to impeccable governance?



But the problem is this. Why, if Simon Busuttill believes, as I'm sure he does, in a style of government that is beyond reproach, did the party, in government for 25 years, run a coach-and-four through every single precept we held as decent. It might help to refresh memories here. For years government institutions, including Mepa, Broadcasting, the system of appointing government consultants, the award of government contracts by direct order, the despicable lack of transparency in the corruption-riddled award of the BWSC contract, the manner by which Mid Med was undersold to HSBC, the great robbery of taxpayers' funds in the building of Mater Dei where €80 million is believed to have greased palms, the huge overruns in the final cost of infrastructural projects, which again many of us suspected to be part of widespread corruption going on at the time, the appointment of party officials to all sorts of government boards – Noel Buttigieg Scicluna was known to have hoovered up a tidy sum sitting on a huge number of government boards before going on to being appointed ambassador to various countries for countless years, as though to the manor born. There were people appointed to government boards who were utterly corrupt, who were there only to line their pockets on the back of the taxpayers.



Even the award of state honours was limited to the party faithful. There were ministers who took retainers from building contractors and there were building contractors who suspiciously lent huge amounts of money to the Nationalist Party in return for undue and unlawful concessions. Direct orders were rampant. One minister gave an advertising agency €2 million worth of advertising contracts by direct order. And then there was the utter arrogance, the arrogance of people with such little talent and much less skills that caused the country a great deal of damage to the country's reputation abroad and cost us much treasure at home. One remembers our dealings with the EU where ministers were noted for repeatedly lying to EU officials and fellow ministers, a constant embarrassment to journalists like me who had to listen to these stories in Brussels and elsewhere. Who could forget the inane public transport reform and the €80 million subsidy given to farmers and more to fishermen for which the country saw minimal returns.



What we have here therefore is 'virtue signalling', first coined by fellow journalist James Bartholomew, which means these are people really want you to believe they are virtuous, they don't lie, cheat, and will behave with boundless propriety if they are elected to government again.

This document says nothing new. A similar document called *Fehmiet Basici*, by whose stated values the Nationalist Party was meant to govern, was published before the party came to power in the 80s. Sadly, all its values were ditched the minute they took over Castile. It was by the dread system of privilege and patronage that the Nationalist Party ruled Malta for two-and-a-half decades.

So the question the party now faces is this. How readily will people believe that the party will provide us with a government brimming with virtues this time round, more so when many of the people who brought dishonour on the party's head and account for its historically unprecedented electoral defeat are still around and will probably be appointed ministers again if given a chance.

Politicians have a habit of relying on the myth that people forget.

The truth is that the past is always present.

Marie Briguglio

Well, yes, of course actions speak louder than words. And, yes it is easier to write about good governance when you're *not* in government.



But the document still matters. Firstly, it matters because it provides some very detailed proposals which flesh out what good governance can actually mean beyond big words like “transparency”, “meritocracy” and “accountability” (which have been considerably devalued over time). Secondly, it matters because this gives us a potential yardstick against which to judge current (and past and future) governance. There are a growing number of people who *do* actually judge what parties do when they are in power – and vote accordingly. Thirdly, if implemented, it will matter also for loyal partisans, for it may well reduce the leeway for governments to prioritise their party faithful. And finally, it also matters for those who to date seem to have been above any form of governance. For them, some of the proposals threaten to close a number of avenues currently open to wield influence.

So once we get past the phase of knocking the document because of the source, I'd like to see the proposals receiving some proper discussion: Which of them are doable? Which less so? Do any of them have unintended undesirable consequences? Where does cross-party consensus exist? What's missing? How do we track follow-up? What kind of evidence is there that these proposals will work? The *process* of introducing good governance rules itself is an opportunity for our political parties to show us what they can actually do about good governance.

Desmond Zammit Marmara

The Labour Government has already enacted several good governance measures which had been neglected by previous Nationalist administrations – the Whistleblower Act, the Financing of Political Parties Act, the law removing prescription on acts of political corruption, and the Bill on standards open public life.



However, I think that the PN document is full of laudable recommendations for good governance; for example, democratic scrutiny, the appointment of the President of the Republic and some other top public posts by a two-thirds majority of the House of Representatives, propositive referenda, full-time parliamentarians, electronic voting, emphasis on the distinction between political party and government, transparency in all government operations, the need to ensure impartiality in all government decisions affecting citizens, prevention of wastage of public funds and proper usage of public property, the ethical behaviour of public officials, the way public appointments should be made, the absolute impartiality of the State media, provide full public access to government information, ensure respect for the law and the rights of the citizen, promote social dialogue, and the empowerment of civil society.

Finally, I have these observations to make: 1) Is this really a bold step in the right direction or just another document that will be left on the shelf if and when the PN is in power? 2) How will one change the mindset of the people who will be affected by the reform? 3) How can progress be registered when the PN is still boycotting the Constitutional Convention just because it is being coordinated by Franco Debono? 4) Does the negative past track record of the PN during its five years in power inspire confidence in its sincerity to change?