

# Civil Unions: A historic moment

The introduction of civil unions is a historic moment in terms of social justice and equality



**Michael Briguglio**

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Today history will be written in Malta, when Parliament is expected to legalise civil unions. Same-sex couples will have the same rights and obligations as married persons of the opposite sex, including the possibility to adopt children.

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When one thinks that until a few years ago, Malta did not even allow divorce, one can only conclude that this is a historic moment in terms of social justice and equality.

When the Malta Gay Rights Movement (MGRM) was formed at the turn of the century, it started to articulate discourse for equal rights in terms of sexual identity. Small progressive movements – Moviment Graffiti being one of them – immediately supported MGRM's calls.

Eventually others joined in, including Alternattiva Demokratika – The Green Party, Zminijietna Voice of the Left and a rainbow of new NGOs speaking up in terms of LGBT and Civil rights, such as Auditus and Drachma. Opinionists and journalists from media outlets such as Malta Today played an important role in articulating discourse along the lines of MGRM. An informal, fluid and broad alliance – a chain of equivalence – was formed around the demand for equality.

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During the 2013 general elections, the Labour Party realised that Maltese society was different from the same society that opposed the introduction of divorce just a few years earlier. Besides, certain influential elements within the Party managed to articulate effective discourse in favour of LGBT rights.

Muscat's Labour supported the LGBT movement and the calls for equality became legitimised across mainstream society. A hegemonic formation was formed.

It is interesting to note that social theorists such as Kenneth Wain and John Baldacchino (in their book 'Democracy without Confession') had already noted that issues based on civil rights would define main political antagonisms of our times.

Labour has now taken the lead of the civil rights situation. Joseph Muscat's selection of Helena Dalli as Minister responsible for the introduction of such policy was a strategic masterpiece.

“ The Nationalist Party is making a strategic mistake in not supporting the proposed civil unions legislation...

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Of course, various policies introduced by Labour in certain areas – ranging from cash-for-citizenship to the environmental onslaught – remain what they are, namely neo-liberal policies which I cannot support. One can also argue that Labour is not ‘hurting’ any major economic powers by legislating in the field of civil unions. Yet, this should in no way diminish the historic moment in question.

Others, through their relative silence, electoral paranoia or conservatism, seem to be out of synch with the civil rights political imaginary of the current moment.

The Nationalist Party is making a strategic mistake in not supporting the proposed civil unions legislation, and seems not to have learned from its strategic blunder following the divorce referendum, which, arguably, was one of the defining moments of the demise of the previous PN hegemony.

I believe that Simon Busuttil must be in a difficult position in trying to balance out the liberal and conservative wings of the Party, and one must appreciate this. But, in the final instance, the Party is giving a message that it is not supporting such a defining moment in Malta’s political history.

On a personal note I am proud that I have always publicly supported the introduction of full equality in terms of LGBT rights, even though I would have preferred the legislation to refer to ‘marriage’ rather than ‘civil unions’, as marriage has a greater symbolic effect for those who opt for it.

At times, even within progressive movements one finds those who oppose egalitarian proposals. But this only strengthens the resolve of those who believe in social justice and equality. Likewise, such resolve can and should be articulated in the antagonisms yet to come. The struggle against precarious employment is one of them.

*I dedicate this article to Ernesto Laclau (1935-2014), who has just passed away, and whose political and social theories are of great sociological and political influence to me.*



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