

## When Can. Paolo Pullicino was appraised ... or censured?

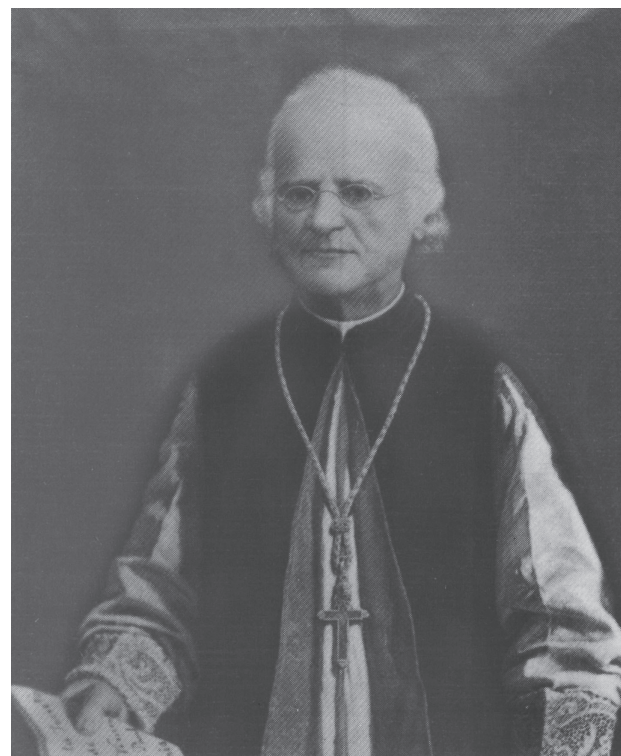
*George Cassar*

Before the British acquired Malta and added it to their growing world empire, the local population was generally illiterate. It had no stable schooling system and those who managed to get an education, did so because they could afford to pay for their instruction either in Malta or abroad. Along the rule of the Order of St John, there were very few schools, but had there been more this would have made little difference to the poor inhabitants who would still not afford an education. Under the British, things began to change, also prompted by what was happening in the sphere of education in Britain itself and on the European continent. Philosophers and politicians were pushing for the introduction of a stronger programme of schooling and education for the common people; as ignorant people are much less productive than those who have even an elementary standard of education.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, schools could be vehicles to form people into what their leaders desired them to be. Loyalty towards the Sovereign and the Mother Country was a matter that could be inculcated into the subjects, but to do so the coloniser needed to set up schools, train teachers, and draw up syllabi and curricula. The British sought a loyal, diligent workforce; they required obedient subjects. H.M. Government hoped to have a colony which could be relied upon all the time, every time. For this reason, it would be much more beneficial to the Empire were Maltese children schooled and thus lifted from their illiteracy and utter misery. This would diminish unruliness, improve communication and understanding, bring

about more respect towards those who provided them with their daily bread and butter, and the colony would be run more smoothly and with less effort.

With this in mind, especially from the 1830s the colonial government began to offer some form of elementary schooling to those who wished to learn something. Many families of course found it hard to send their children to school. Some would allow their very young children to attend for a year or two but as these got older and stronger they would seek employment to get those very much needed extra pennies to help feed their numerous brothers and sisters.



*The Director of Education Canon Dr Paolo Pullicino*

In 1843, the colonial authorities appointed the first Director of Primary Schools in the person of the Rev. Dr Fortunato Panzavecchia. He resigned in 1848 following particular criticism. After a short and disappointing spate by the second Director, the Marquis Ramiro Barbaro di San Giorgio,<sup>2</sup> the direction of the Primary Schools Department passed on to the third appointee. In 1850 the colonial government chose Can. Dr Paolo Pullicino to try his hand at directing the primary schools. The cleric at once set himself to create, practically from scratch, a schooling system that could bring some educational order where there was practically none. He opened schools in the various towns and villages, began to give a formation to prospective and aspirant teachers, encouraged them to seek training in the methods of imparting learning, and encouraged them through the prospect of promotions. For the first decade or so Pullicino was allowed to plan, introduce and strengthen his schools. However, with time people started to look more closely at his work.

The first years of the 1860s may be considered as an indication of things to come. From 1860, in fact, the Director began to receive more direct challenges regarding the processes and procedures in the Primary Schools Department which he managed. The Maltese press aired what people, influential persons, began to dispute. One such significant member of Maltese society was Dr Francesco Torreggiani, who formed part of a group which Governor Le Marchant had styled 'the Four Lawyers', all involved in local politics. The other three were Dr Ruggiero Sciortino, Dr Pasquale Mifsud and Dr Filippo Pullicino.<sup>3</sup> Can. Paolo Pullicino was Filippo's elder brother. These four lawyers attacked the colonial administration and the Governor on much of what he did. When criticism on the educational system began to emerge, Torreggiani took up the issue. Le Marchant asked the learned gentleman to delve deeper into what was being claimed by the opponents of Can. Pullicino's methods. If we keep with the

description supplied by Rev. Henry Seddall, Le Marchant could not do otherwise. Seddall had observed that, "Sir Gaspard was every inch a soldier – honest, straightforward and candid. He was anxious to promote in every way the good of the Maltese people ... his bluntness of manner never degenerated into rudeness, and his authoritativeness mien never expressing itself in any tyrannical act or word."<sup>4</sup> If one may interpret the Governor's actions as being triggered by his anxiety to see progress in the life of the colony, then, he could not allow criticism on the education system in his colony to go unheeded. Being "straightforward and candid", he did not have any choice but to address the problem directly and without hesitation. And his "bluntness of manner" and "authoritativeness" moved him to order an investigation of Pullicino's work within the schools under the prelate's direction.

This decision put Pullicino in the front line. Without his own doing he became embroiled in political matters, which later on would be the cause of his replacement. It was however still early and the Director had yet another score years to go before real politics finally caught up with him. Le Marchant launched an investigation, which the Director came to know about through an official letter. Pullicino was informed that the Hon. Dr Francesco Torreggiani was "to suggest improvements that might occur to him as practicable under existing circumstances" in all the educational establishments run by the Government. These included the Primary Schools, but also the Lyceum and part of the University. Pullicino was specifically instructed to "be good enough to afford that gentleman any assistance he may ask for...."<sup>5</sup> It was evident that Torreggiani had an axe to grind against the Governor more than against Pullicino himself. This lawyer, along with his colleagues, formed a concerted opposition in the Council of Government to Le Marchant's administration. Being his critics, the Governor felt compelled to give



Governor Gaspard Le Marchant (1858-1864)

these lawyers as free a hand as possible. And it seems that Torreggiani did not keep back in his efforts to investigate as minutely as possible the educational situation. Such liberties tested Pullicino's patience to the limit. Torreggiani, accompanied by three preceptors from the Lyceum, visited the Valletta Primary School for three uninterrupted months. He initiated "a most capricious and irregular examination of all the pupils," and gave orders to the staff of the school without even referring to Pullicino. The Director reported that this investigating lawyer "even went so far as to make personal remarks on myself, and disparaging remarks on the system adopted in my schools...." All this he did in front of teaching staff and pupils "causing a great scandal in this school by such conduct."<sup>6</sup> Pullicino found it quite strange that three

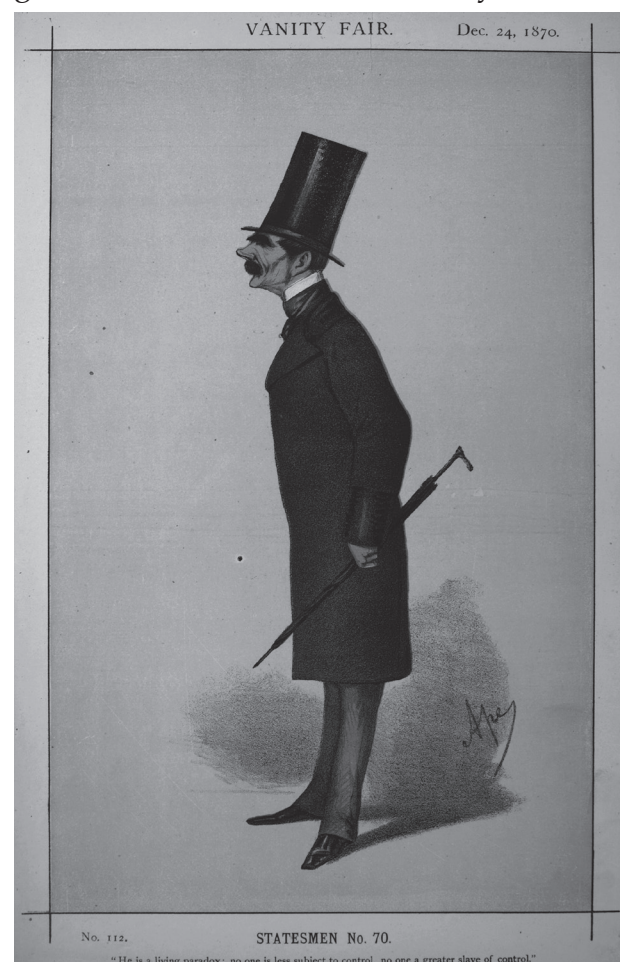
members of the Lyceum teaching staff were accompanying Torreggiani on these daily visits when it had been announced that the Lyceum was also to be scrutinised by the politician. This of course seemed rather suspicious and it somewhat justified Pullicino's airing his doubts regarding Torreggiani's real intentions. The Director felt constrained to remark that, "what the Hon. Dr. Torreggiani is doing is beyond his instructions, and is a mode of acting tending to demoralise the schools under my direction."<sup>7</sup> Pullicino suspected that Torreggiani's intentions were aimed at destabilising the system and the politician's actions seem to confirm such intuitions when he refused to send in a report of his findings and suggestions for improvements as had been expected in line with his original brief.

This episode was an initial shake to Pullicino's authoritative grasp on his educational domain. As if to tend a supporting hand to the Director, the paper *Il Difensore Maltese*, shortly after this scuffle subsided, came out praising the "*gran progresso dell'insegnamento esistente nelle Scuole Primarie del Governo*" [the widespread progress made in the teaching carried out in the Government Primary Schools], emphasising that these schools were under the direction "*del Molto Rev. Can. Capit. Dr. D. P.P. Pullicino*."<sup>8</sup> The paper underlined the good methods used in the schools which contributed towards the wellbeing of the children from the poorer classes. The columnist announced that now these children could become literate, an achievement the paper attributed to the abilities of Pullicino.<sup>9</sup> This positive and rosy appraisal, however, clashed starkly with another letter which appeared in the same year. This anonymous letter attacked Pullicino and his system of education, accusing him of injustices, dishonesty and of being amateurish in his work. The Director was indicted with incompetence in the improvement of the same system he had instituted.<sup>10</sup>

This line of criticism reflected further comments that would be levelled at the Director throughout the remaining years of his directorship. As if to temper the negative feelings which had developed throughout his tenure of office, on the eve of his departure from Malta, Governor Le Marchant, issued a letter of thanks to the Director. Le Marchant conveyed "the expression of gratification at the progress made during the period of his administration, and the existing satisfactory state of that branch of Educational Establishment" under the immediate control of Pullicino.<sup>11</sup> Even so, the Governor had to point out that, "On a question, the great principle of which all admit, but in the application of the details of which, opinions do vary, it is not H.E.'s object now to enter...." This referred to the ongoing criticism of the system which was becoming ever more evident. What the Governor saw as being positive was, "the steady and gratifying progress" regarding the number of schools and the amount of pupils attending. Le Marchant noted that, along the six years of his governorship of Malta, nineteen new schools had been opened and an increased average of 1000 pupils attended daily. The Governor concluded that this was to the merit and due to the ability of Pullicino. In fact he stated that these figures were "so practically illustrative of the zeal and success, with which you [Pullicino] have prosecuted, the important interests confided to you...."<sup>12</sup> Though a formal and conciliatory letter, which is normally expected from a high official leaving his post, yet it underscored particular points of Pullicino's Directorship which Le Marchant considered to be too positive to bypass.

However, what some saw as positive, others may not have given it much credit, if any at all. Complaints on the educational situation were arriving loud and clear which prompted the colonial authorities to, once again, embark on an investigation into the 'realm' of Can. Pullicino. It was a time during which the colony was experiencing

the handing over of power from one governor to the next. Le Marchant had now been replaced by Sir Henry Storks. After the turmoil created by Le Marchant in various sectors in the colony, the new governor chose different tactics to contain the backlash. He "threw oil on troubled waters," to ease the feeling of irritation that would reflect negatively on the image of the Mother Country. Storks "suited jagged nerves and became the idol of the erstwhile opponents of the Government."<sup>13</sup> The calming down exercise adopted by Storks aimed to pacify the emotions and the grumbling over the educational system; in this way he aimed towards a smooth-running administration. He communicated with the Director of Primary Schools. Departing from the premise of, "feeling a deep interest in the progress of public instruction in Malta and being desirous of ascertaining what is the precise nature of the educational system given in the Government Primary Schools"



*A caricature of Governor Sir Henry Storks published in the magazine Vanity Fair*

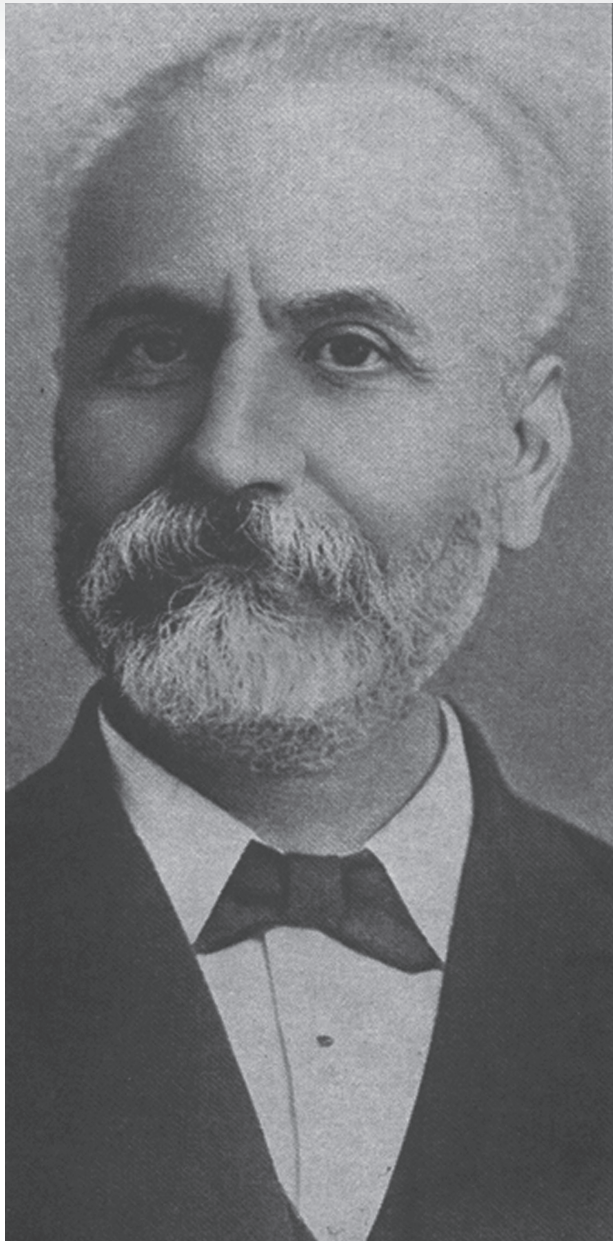
he appointed a Commission to look into the matter. The Governor made it clear that the three appointed members had no connection with government schools, which according to Storks, would put them “in the best possible position to give an independent and unbiased opinion” about the workings of the educational system. Pullicino was requested to give these gentlemen all his co-operation and was instructed to get in touch with them himself.<sup>14</sup>

Empathising with Pullicino’s state of mind, it may reasonably be assumed that he was not at all happy with this development. Events seemed to be repeating themselves. The previous Governor had already irritated the Director when he imposed an ‘inquisitor’ to pry into his Department’s affairs. Torreggiani had disrupted his system through his meddling tactics and his gross criticism. That affair over, two years later another Commission was to intrude again into the workings of his schools. Being the Director, and taking into consideration his firm character and the manner of running his Department, nothing positive could be seen in this new investigation.<sup>15</sup> Basing oneself on his reaction to the Torreggiani affair, Pullicino would have found this decision

difficult to swallow. It must have done little towards convincing the Director that: “His Excellency’s sole objective appointing this commission being to obtain an accurate report and to carefully consider any suggestions that may be made with a view to improvements in the important branch of public instruction under your control.”<sup>16</sup> Just saying the words “with a view to improvements” was, one can safely assume, an affront to a director who had given his complete self to a system of public instruction which had been practically inexistent when he entered the scene. He would have felt justified to point out to one and all that he had already opened many schools all over Malta, had created a corps of teachers from nothing, written tailor-made syllabi for Maltese pupils, introduced methodology training for the various levels of the teaching staff, brought teaching resources into the classes for better teaching, and above all introduced a culture of schooling in a largely illiterate colony. Admittedly, one could not expect the system to be perfect, but one needed to take into consideration that his project was work in progress, and improvements were part of a process that did not need inquisitors but a hard-working manager who knew his metier.



*Maltese society in the nineteenth century was dominated by poverty and very few people had been exposed to any form of education – the artist Vincenzo Fenech depicts the poor in some of his drawings from that time (Courtesy: Malta National Library)*



*Sigismondo Savona –  
a future Director of Education*

Notwithstanding any considerations, three Commissioners were indeed appointed to carry out the Governor's instructions. These were Col. Romer R.A., Emilio de Baroni Sciberras and Benjamin B. Baker LL.D.<sup>17</sup> The three, it seems, embarked on the job with great zeal. In Laferla's words, "The Commissioners set about their work in a most extra-ordinary manner. They entirely ignored the Director and rushed from school to school."<sup>18</sup> Even though Pullicino was not consulted, Romer, Baker and Sciberras, did remain open to the opinion of others. These

included such persons as Sigismondo Savona (who would later occupy a similar post upon which he was now giving his views). In a letter to the Commission, Savona came forward with a number of "remarks on the necessity of educating the people, in the hope that you will be pleased to take them into consideration." Such remarks included ideas on how, according to Savona, teacher qualifications might be improved, how the whole educational sector could be centrally administered, how the teaching of the English language may possibly be consolidated, and much more. Specifically on the Primary Schools, Savona thought that these were not up to standard. He made it clear that, "with the view of securing the permanent efficiency and gradual development and extensions of the Primary Schools" an Inspector needed to be appointed for these schools. This officer would have the duty "to inquire into, and report upon, the state of each school, and to suggest such improvements as may tend to spread the blessings of a good education among the working classes."<sup>19</sup> Savona's remarks give the strong impression that he was criticising Pullicino's level of management. Savona wanted to secure "the permanent efficiency" of the schools, making it understood that this did not exist. Otherwise, why mention it?

The Commission also received the comments of Ramiro Barbaro. These came by way of the newspaper *Idee E Fatti* whose editor was Barbaro himself, and were sent to the Commissioners as his contribution to their inquiry. Through his columns in the newspaper, featured for a number of weeks starting from the issue of 7 February 1865, Barbaro criticised the actual state of education in Malta. About the Primary Schools Department he made it clear that this did not prepare students for the secondary school level. According to Barbaro this was the case because each of the two levels fell under the charge of a different person. All level, he maintained,



The journalist Ramiro Barbaro

should fall under the direction of a single official.<sup>20</sup> This suggestion tallied with that of Savona who, in his first suggestion to the Commission, had stated the same vision for the education sector signifying “one central authority.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, who should this central authority be? Could it be that Barbaro had the Rev. Pullicino in mind? His comments clear this query at once. Regarding the actual Director, the editor of *Idee E Fatti* emphasised, “*speriamo vedere rimosso dal posto che occupa, nel bene dell’istruzione nel paese*”<sup>22</sup> [let us hope that we see him removed from the post he occupies, for the good of education in this country]. Such was the regard in which some held Pullicino.

Yet, the three-man Commission did not base its assessment of Pullicino’s Department only on the comments of those who had come forward to offer their opinion. The appointees went around the schools of Malta and Gozo and examined what they

found. This is what they were supposed to do and this is what they did. An interesting comment which attracts the eye, included in the covering letter to their Report which they sent to the Governor states that, “We have pleasure in stating that we have received every attention from ... the Director of the Primary Schools.”<sup>23</sup> Such a statement was objectionable to the Director who, on his part, retorted that, “the Commission acted in the Primary Schools, and with regard to them, hardly without any reference to me.” And the Canon further asserted that when the three Commissioners visited the Valletta Male Primary School he happened to be there “and where not having been appealed to by them in my position of Director of the Schools, I assisted as a stranger at what was going on....”<sup>24</sup>

From what it found the Commission drew quite a negative picture of the schools and their Director. Romer, Baker and Sceberas acknowledged the Director’s zeal for the way he had managed to organise his schools and the discipline he had introduced into the. However they lashed out that, “it is to be regretted that in his laudable anxiety to uphold the credit of these schools, he should not have published for general information reports and programmes which have tended to raise expectations in the mind of the Public that he has not the remotest means of fulfilling....”<sup>25</sup>

Naturally these accusations could not go by unanswered. Insinuations of falsifying reality are quite serious and Pullicino in his reply to this stressed that he considered such a statement as “very uncourteous and uncomplimentary” to him. The prelate held that his reports were a statement of “the simple facts relative to the period to which each Report belongs.” He further added that the educational programmes he enacted were never given to the general public as these were intended for the teaching staff to regulate their teaching.<sup>26</sup>



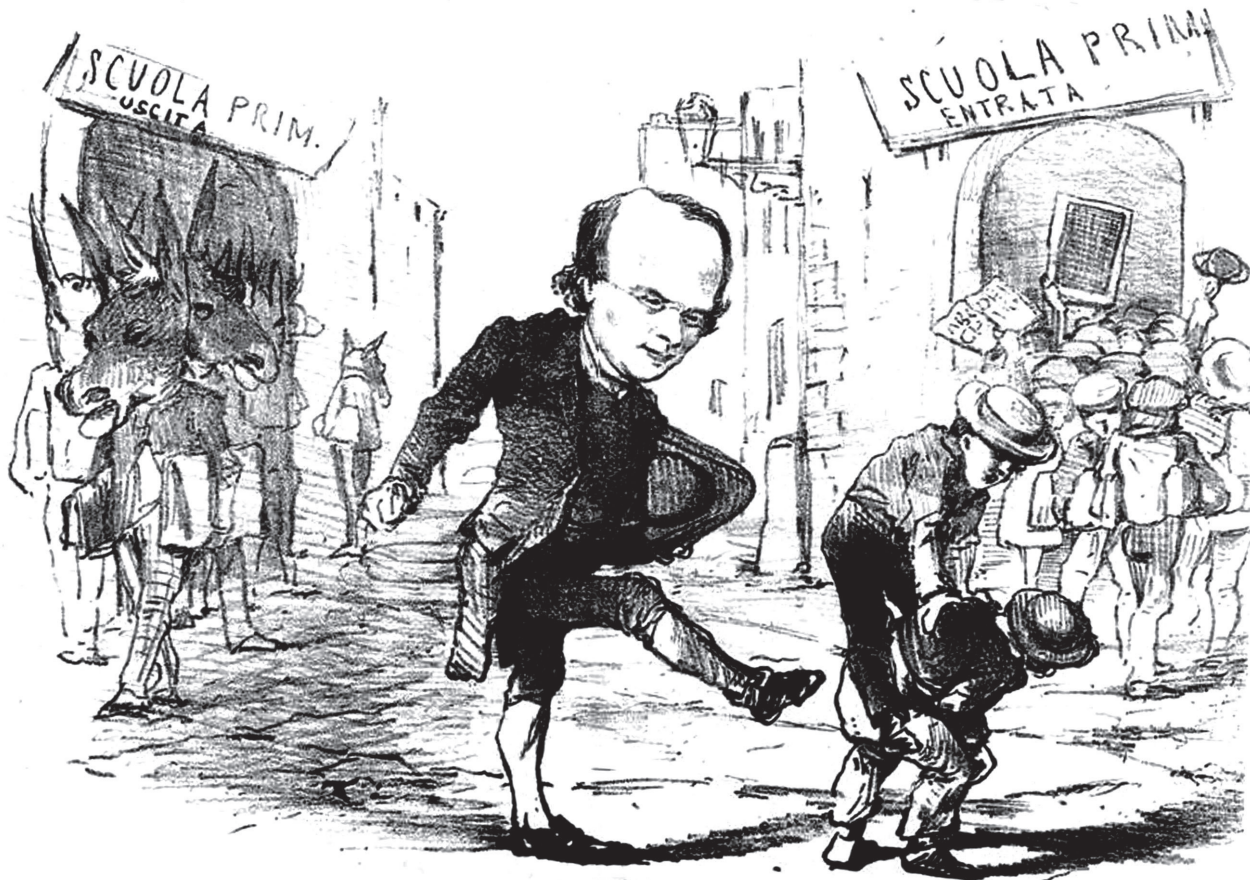
*The government primary school in Floriana was one of the earliest schools built by Pullicino specifically for the purpose – most schools were normal houses used as classes but these lacked the needed features for the efficient delivery of education*

Further criticism was levelled at the Director and his schools when the Commissioners complained that the quality of education in the primary schools was so low that even the older pupils were inefficient in all areas of scholastic work such as reading, orthography and conjugation in the Italian and the English languages as also in arithmetic. They referred to one instance concerning seven primary school pupils who were being examined for entry into the Lyceum while two of the Commissioners were present. The Commissioners pointed out that all seven had been rejected “though the standard of knowledge required (perhaps the lowest in any country in Europe) was nearly that of writing legibly and correctly five or six lines in Italian, under dictation, and working a sum in division by two figures.”<sup>27</sup> In defence to these and other attacks on ‘his’ pupils and

their level of education, Pullicino claimed that their comments were the result of the Commissioners’ “great hurry with which the work of the pupils was verified.” The Director insisted that his teachers had informed him that many more pupils had worked correctly the arithmetic questions given to them than the Commission had claimed. He thus declared that the information given to him “is correct as it is in perfect concordance with the knowledge I possess of the real actual state of the schools.”<sup>28</sup>

Canon Pullicino could not let such criticism to his schools to go unchallenged. He chased after evidence that could indicate what he considered to be the correct situation in his Department. He followed the itinerary of the Commissioners and claimed that “many of the statements of the Commissioners





MIRABILISSEMI EFFETTI D'UN METODO (Ghiribizzo di VAMPA)

*A caricature taken from the newspaper 'Don Basilio' criticising Canon Pullicino's methods used in government schools which, according to the newspaper, were ineffective and unproductive*

with regard to the Primary Schools are, I regret to say, incorrect."<sup>29</sup> This he stated in another communication following his first reaction to the published Report. The Director hoped that the additional information he collected and forwarded to the Governor "will lead Your Excellency to a right conclusion on this important subject, in placing my statement and that of the Commissioners in juxtaposition."<sup>30</sup> And Canon Pullicino pretended that what he had presented to the Governor should be published for everyone to see. He wanted public recognition for what he felt was proof to confute what he considered to be unjust criticism by the Storcks Commission. He made clear his pretensions in a letter to the colonial authorities when he expressed his surprise that the Governor had not published his additional remarks, dated 1 August. Being the determined person

he was, on 11 August Pullicino insisted with the authorities that what he had written should be published. When this was not done, he asked his superiors to disseminate his observations through the official Government organ.<sup>31</sup> He believed that, "The public would have also more complete information before arriving at a conclusion with regard to this very important subject."<sup>32</sup> It is evident that this affair had shaken Pullicino from the roots.

It was an experience that was the worst yet, not only with respect to his personal credibility and integrity, but also to what concerned the Director's security of office.

## Notes and references

- 1 Cf. for example, G. Cassar, *The Emergence of a Maltese Teacher Corps: From modest origins to strength in unity 1800-1919* (Malta, 2012), Ch. 2.
- 2 Cf. J. Zammit Mangion, *Education in Malta* (Malta, 1992), 18-9.
- 3 A.V. Laferla, *British Malta*, I (Malta, reprint 1976), 222-3.
- 4 As quoted in A.E. Abela, *Governors of Malta* (Malta, 1991), 32.
- 5 NAM, CSG04/8210/1862, vol.34, Chief Secretary to Government to Chief Director of Primary Schools (28.vi.1862).
- 6 NAM, CSG01/9980/1863, Chief Director of Primary Schools to Chief Secretary to Government (5.ii.1863).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 *Il Difensore Maltese*, no.13 (20.iii.1863), 3.
- 9 Ibid., 3-4.
- 10 N.N. *Confutazione del Discorso del Can. P. Pullicino* (Malta, 1863), quoted in J.J. Camilleri, 'Paolo Pullicino's educational legacy', R.G. Sultana, (ed.), *Yesterday's Schools: Readings in Maltese educational history* (Malta, 2001), 115.
- 11 NAM, CSG04/12198/1864, A/Chief Secretary to Government to Chief Director of Primary Schools (22.x.1864).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Laferla, 228.
- 14 NAM, CSG04/849/1865, Chief Secretary to Government to Chief Director of Primary Schools (9.iii.1865).
- 15 Cf. J. Fenech, 'Laying the foundation for cultures of teaching', *Education*, IV/2 (1991), 2-8. Cf. also the various reports and other instructions written by Can. Pullicino himself during his thirty-year directorship.
- 16 NAM, CSG04/849/1865 Chief Secretary to Government to Chief Director of Primary Schools (9.iii.1865).
- 17 Col. Romer was at the time Inspector of Army Schools. Baker had been Director of the College at Corfu and then Registrar of His Majesty's Court of Appeal in Malta. Cf. *The Malta Government Gazette*, no.2210 (11.ii.1865), 49.
- 18 Laferla, 232.
- 19 NAM, CSG01/1586/1865, Sigismondo Savona to Education Commission (20.v.1865).
- 20 NAM, CSG01/1586/1865, R. Barbaro to Giunta d' Inchiesta dell' Istruzione, attachment, *Idee E Fatti*, no.23 (17.ii.1865), 1.
- 21 NAM, CSG01/1586/1865, Sigismondo Savona to Education Commission (20.v.1865).
- 22 NAM, CSG01/1586/1865, R. Barbaro to Giunta d' Inchiesta dell' Istruzione, attachment, *Idee E Fatti*, no.24 (24.ii.1865), 1.
- 23 *The Malta Government Gazette*, no.2229 (8.vii.1865), 233.
- 24 *The Malta Government Gazette*, no.2235 (8.viii.1865), 265 & NAM, CSG01/1816/1865, Chief Director of Primary Schools to Chief Secretary to Government (20.vii.1865).
- 25 *The Malta Government Gazette*, no.2229 (8.vii.1865), 235.
- 26 *The Malta Government Gazette*, no.2235 (8.viii.1865), 267 & NAM, CSG01/1816/1865.
- 27 *The Malta Government Gazette*, no.2229 (8.vii.1865), 267 & NAM, CSG01/1816/1865.
- 28 *The Malta Government Gazette*, no.2235 (8.viii.1865), 266 & NAM, CSG01/1816/1865.
- 29 *The Malta Government Gazette*, no.2239 (28.viii.1865), 285.
- 30 Ibid., 287.
- 31 The newspaper *The Malta Times and United Service Gazette* also featured all the correspondence published in *The Malta Government Gazette*. Cf. *The Malta Times and United Service Gazette*, no.1165 (13.vii.1865); no.1166 (20.vii.1865); no.1169 (10.viii.1865); no.1170 (17.viii.1866); & no.1172 (31.viii.1865).
- 32 NAM, CSG01/2025/1865, Chief Director of Public Schools to Chief Secretary to Government (11.viii.1865).

**George Cassar** is Senior Lecturer in the Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture (ITTC) of the University of Malta. He is a historical sociologist whose main research interests include the History and Sociology of Education; the Pedagogy and Andragogy of Heritage, Heritage Interpretation, the History of History Teaching; the Study of the Order of St John (SMOM); the History and Culture of Malta; Heritage and Culture; Cultural Tourism; and, the Culture and Sociology of Food. He is the author or editor of numerous books and academic journals, and has published numerous papers in journals and chapters in books related to his areas of interest. Comm. Dr Cassar is a member of the Research Coordinating Committee of the V.18 – Valletta European Capital of Culture 2018 – representing the University of Malta. The Grand Master of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta conferred on him the award of 'Commendatore pro Merito Melitensi'.