

THE *SETTE GIUGNO*

Translated from the original text delivered in Maltese
7 June 2010



It had surely never crossed Manwel Attard's mind, this young barber of 28 years from Sliema, that in responding to the popular call to converge on Valletta on the 7th of June 1919 while the National Assembly was convening for a second time, a rifle shot from the foreign soldier would hit him in his cheek as he was crossing Old Bakery Street in disobedience of the orders issued, and abruptly cut his life short.

Attard formed part of a crowd bearing the Maltese colours, white and red, like those which Ġużè Bajada from Gozo had wrapped around him when a bullet fatally wounded him in his side in another shooting by the soldiers of the British colonial forces who, on that day, were asserting their authority over the Maltese.

Wenzu Dyer, from Vittoriosa, another protestor wearing the Maltese flag around his neck, and a white and red cockade on his cap, could be easily identified by the soldiers who shot him, and then observed staggering towards the Main Guard, dropping dead right in front of the place where, a few years later, the first Maltese Parliament was to meet in 1921.

The next day, a bayonet stab to the stomach killed Karmenu Abela from Valletta as he called out to his son to leave the group that had entered Francia Palace.

Ċikku Darmanin and Toni Caruana died later in hospital from their wounds: the tally was six dead and around fifty injured – some of these injured later being taken to the offices of the *Giovine Malta* where the meeting of the National Assembly was in progress.

The Maltese leaders of the time were demanding a Constitution for our people because they understood, as the history of our country has since confirmed, that only by managing our own affairs could we carry out the necessary economic and social development for this country. That

day, on the 7th of June, the Assembly unanimously approved a motion proposed by Notary Salv Borg Olivier and put to the vote by Filippo Sceberras, whereby the British Government was asked to immediately grant political and administrative autonomy for Malta.

The supreme sacrifice of Abela, Attard, Bajada, Caruana, Darmanin and Dyer paved the way, along with the unceasing political pressure exercised by the Maltese leaders, for the British Government to grant Malta its 1921 Self-Government Constitution on the basis of which the Legislative Assembly, made up of four deputies elected from each of eight electoral districts, was set up, run by a Speaker and Deputy Speaker, and by means of which a Prime Minister and a Cabinet of Maltese Ministers, as well as a Senate made up of seventeen members, some of them representing specific groups, were appointed.

One can stifle for a time the people's craving for freedom, as had happened during the 1848 revolutions in Europe, so swiftly halted by Metternich's, the Monarch's and autocrats' bayonets, and as had equally happened on the day that we are commemorating today. Eventually, however, the will of the people becomes irresistible, forcing its own way ahead through all obstacles that those in power place in its path.

The 1921 constitutional amendments signalled the beginning of a long path which continues to this day and which we, living in our times, are called to keep up steered in the right direction. To do this responsibly and in the right spirit, we must never forget that those liberties and powers that we enjoy today in our parliamentary democracy, including those linked to the daily work of the House of Representatives of the Maltese Parliament, have been won through the struggles and bloodshed by our forefathers in our land, as well as by means of the parliamentary revolutions all over Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, we must not forget that there are still peoples who are oppressed in our century, and we are duty-bound to offer them our solidarity inasmuch as we must also value and protect the hard-won rights we enjoy today.

We are therefore duty-bound to safeguard these rights and responsibilities, and exercise them in a way that honours those by whose merit we enjoy them today. It is surely proper to express this respect by erecting monuments to remember people and events and to continue to carry out due commemorations. However, the best and finest expression of respect and appreciation towards those who strove and even sacrificed their lives to enable us to enjoy the rights and liberties that we have today lies in the exercise of our parliamentary democracy today, in respecting the free expression of the people, as well as respecting the authentic and genuine will of the Members of Parliament who represent the people in the Parliament of Malta.

In honour of those who lost their lives in the fight for freedom during times of intense political and social upheavals, as the people of Malta we are called to continue to shape that sense of Maltese citizenship nurturing what unites us and what makes us one people and one nation – history, language, the rule of law, deference to the rights and ultimate sovereignty of the people. It is only on such foundations of unity amongst the Maltese of today and tomorrow that Malta can truly find its fulfilment as a Member of the European Union.

As parliamentarians, it is our duty to patently demonstrate respect towards one another which, of course, does not imply that we are always of one mind but rather that we are always ready to listen to each other, irrespective of whoever constitutes the Government of the day. In this way, we provide due dignity to the Institution which is the highest in the country by the mere fact that, in our system of parliamentary democracy, it reflects the opinions and the will of the Maltese people as a whole.

As we approach the coming year when we will be celebrating the 90th anniversary of the establishment of the Maltese Parliament, in honour of these our Maltese brothers whose supreme sacrifice we are remembering today, let us together focus on how we can truly strengthen our Parliament, and, with due dignity, how we can keep it relevant, effective and intimately linked with the political, economic and social progress of our country, separate from the Executive and from the Judiciary, with a particular identity and personality of its own.

Much has been achieved, but much more still needs to be done.

First of all, we need to highlight the significance of the work of the Maltese Parliament, distinguishing it from the role of the Executive. We have to communicate this distinction more clearly particularly in view of the fact that, contrary to continental systems which are characterised by a clear-cut separation of powers, in our Westminster model system of checks and balances constituting our parliamentary tradition, the Executive is integrated within Parliament itself, and although the distinction most evidently exists, it is not as easily understandable. That is why, in this model, it is essential to strengthen, better define, and maximise the appreciation of, the role of the Parliamentarian.

With regard to the new seat of the Maltese Parliament, I wish to highlight one clear message which can be deciphered from the cacophony of opinions expressed in the public discussion: that there is no adequate appreciation of what exactly takes place in Parliament, of the work of each Member of Parliament committed to parliamentary life. In this debate, I find it particularly disappointing that, ninety one years after the *Sette Giugno*, forty six years from our gaining Independent Statehood, and thirty six years from our transformation into a Republic, there are some who still harbour doubts as to whether our Parliament should be given its own home.

This should spur us to work harder to instil in our people a greater appreciation of parliamentary work. In order to avoid giving the impression that Parliament is just a battle arena for politicians, we must therefore communicate the true message that the overwhelming majority of laws are adopted in our Parliament by consensus. This consensus is achieved after the exhaustion of various stages of debate, including the Committee stage, where the required fine-tuning takes place so that better honed laws ensure a smoother regulation of Maltese society, which, in itself, can give us that competitive advantage in a globalized economy that is fundamental to jobs and prosperity. The message we have to continue to communicate must illustrate that while it is only natural therefore for debates to be lively and controversial, there are duly also moments of national unity where we move forward together.

We need to open up our Parliament – even though, initially, we must do this in a measured way – to all today’s media and not just to radio, by transmitting the Parliamentary proceedings in Plenary sessions as well as the meetings of the Parliamentary Committees, the latter carrying out valuable and useful work scrutinising laws and policies that are not only national legislation, but also those generated by the Institutions of the European Union of which Malta today is a party to, and which are the source of so much legislation brought up for consideration by the House of Representatives of the Maltese Parliament. These Committees formulate reports and studies of interest to our society, ask the questions that need to be put, and establish contact with the citizen and civil society, so necessary, along with the press and broadcasting, to keep the Maltese Parliament continually in synch with developments in our society.

This Institution, the Parliament of Malta, must assume not only its Constitutional role – that is already in place – but particularly within popular conscience in our country, within the soul and the spirit of the people who have to see it as it really is: the best expression of the people’s will for which the people therefore expect the very best, as is the case for the Parliamentary Institution in our fellow member states in the European Union.

We have a lot left to do to achieve this aim. First of all, we need to strengthen not only our physical infrastructure but also the information and expertise support infrastructure sustaining the Maltese Parliamentarian. For this reason, we need to embark on a capacity building exercise in the Maltese Parliament on the same lines carried out in the Executive before Malta joined the European Union. This would further the process of maturing of our democratic system in which the Legislative organ has that strength and autonomous identity necessary to maintain the required checks and balances which make a democratic system function in a continually better way.

This is also required since the Treaty of Lisbon gives a greater role to national parliaments within the architecture of Europe. Up till now, this Treaty has made no effective difference to the Maltese Parliament which remains insufficiently prepared to make use of the powers granted by the

Treaty. It has now become imperative that we take all necessary urgent steps to empower the Maltese Parliament for it to be able to carry out its duties within the context of the Treaty of Lisbon.

We have come to a stage where we need to take another quality leap from that which resulted in the many beneficial measures which strengthened our Parliament, not least with the introduction of the Standing Committees of the House of Representatives, which contributed greatly to change, to efficiency and to effectiveness, and which extended considerably the span and scope of the work of Parliament. In this context, one has to note that, in spite of limited resources, the work carried out by the Committees is truly impressive, and that there are many Members of Parliament who show true commitment, dedicating a long time in personal preparation for, and in active participation in, Committee proceedings. It is right and just that this be said.

Parliamentary duties however cannot just be performed in a professional manner and it is not enough to provide a proper supporting infrastructure. Carrying out well your parliamentary duties requires a passion for politics. A passion to achieve the best for your country and for the people. A passion for a legacy of a betterment of Malta for us and for future generations.

As the President of the House of Representatives of the Parliament of Malta, I render homage from the bottom of my heart to this passion for politics and the passion of politicians who commit themselves to make their contribution in the difficult life of politics in order to achieve true success and progress for Malta, our country. I also sincerely salute the political commitment of those who represent civil society who are with us here today.

On this National Feast of commemoration of the martyrs of the *Sette Giugno*, which is also a moment of reflection on the development of parliamentary democracy in our country, let us all renew our commitment to render homage to the memory of these martyrs through our daily commitment to strengthen the constitutional victories of Malta, our Mother whose name we bear, of whom we are true sons and daughters.