

**ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE ANĠLU FARRUGIA, SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, ON THE OCCASION OF THE *SETTE GIUGNO* – FRIDAY, 5 JUNE 2015**

Prime Minister,  
Leader of the Opposition,  
Presidents Emeriti,  
Speakers Emeriti,  
Honourable Members,  
Former Members,  
Your Excellencies,  
Distinguished guests,

Every year we convene to commemorate the *Sette Giugno*, which undoubtedly remains a special day associated with an event of great importance. This is a day which is deeply associated with parliamentary democracy, when we remember that on 7 June 1919, the Maltese and Gozitan people acted in unison in a manifestation of national unity to further their cause and assert their rights as a Maltese nation.

The link between the events this monument reminds us of, and the history of the Maltese Parliament brings me to the first point which I would like to raise during this speech. I refer to a request received on the 18 of March of this year from the National Festivities Committee, for the Chair's opinion on the relocation of this monument, the work of sculptor Anton Agius. I wish to immediately declare myself in favour of this monument being relocated to the immediate vicinity of the Parliament building. Thus the intrinsic link between this monument's significance, which we are commemorating today, and the Maltese Parliament will also be reflected physically and visually.

It is always interesting to study in greater detail what happened exactly at the time, and I would therefore like to share some new interesting facts which I managed to discover from my own research and from writings by other authors who have delved into this subject. I would also like to share with you extracts from a goldmine of documents which I came across, consisting of investigations which were ordered following the riots of the 7 of June. The prevailing message from this research is the great importance of continuing to strive, without fear, to enhance transparency in our work.

I start by referring to the first inquiry ordered by the British Military Court, which reveals that the authorities carried out an investigation with the intention of justifying their actions, by alleging that the first shots were fired by the Maltese against the British soldiers. In fact, the inquiring commission stated the following in its report:

*“That shots have been fired [by the Maltese] is borne out by the evidence of Major General Hunter Blair, Colonel Saville, one soldier and by two civilian gentlemen.”*

This evidence was suspect from the outset, to the extent that an anonymous letter was sent to the Colonial Government alleging that Hunter Blair had fabricated a lie. While all newspapers at the time were muted by censorship and fear, the political group known as the *Comitato Patriottico*, which persistently refused to cooperate with the Colonial Government and promoted the Maltese people's right of self-determination, rightly insisted on having a

new public inquiry which would reveal the full truth of what actually occurred and not the reason leading to such events.

The new Governor Lord Plumer, who assumed office on 10 June 1919, in an effort to quell opposition by the councillors, appointed a commission to reinvestigate the events, but without consulting the members of the Council of Government. This was yet another mistake which drew strong opposition from the elected councillors since it was clear that there was a lack of transparency and that everything was being done with one intention. In this context, it is worth noting that Sir Mikelang Refalo, who was Crown Advocate and also a Member of the Council of Government, asserted that the incidents arose due to incitement by politicians. He seems to have had no other choice. The Nationalist party of the time also alleged that Judge Alfred Parnis, who was leading the commission appointed by Governor Plumer, harboured ambitions for the Presidency of the Court of Appeal, and was therefore compelled to accept and abide by the Governor's instructions. It was also pointed out that one of the members of the commission, Magistrate Luigi Camilleri, was appointed judge one month following his nomination to the commission.

The truth is that that various factors contributed to the riots, including the threefold increase in the price of bread over a short period of time, and the soaring price of potatoes, which in 1919 had become the second staple food in Malta after being introduced to the Island by the British. Besides the steep rise in food prices, other contributing factors included mass redundancies, in particular for dockyard workers. In fact, on 22 April 1919 Governor Methuen sent a letter to the Colonial Government, following a meeting with the Imperial Government Workers Union, requesting an end to dockyard redundancies:

*"I apprehend that if the general discharge of workmen from his Majesty's Dockyard is allowed to proceed while trade is still slack and emigration is beset by great difficulties, it might result in aggravating seriously an already difficult and anxious position. ...*

*It does not seem unfair to urge that every effort should be made to avoid cessation of work when cessation entails, as it now must, destitution to many."*

The fact remains that although – so to say – officially there were these two versions of events, the Maltese people became more united and remained so united up to the first few years following the riots. Acting Governor Hunter Blair believed that the riots were instigated deliberately by an anti-government and anti-British movement. The Military Inquiry Commission even started pointing fingers at Nerik Mizzi as the promoter of anti-British propaganda and activities. This was a time when Nerik Mizzi was being described by the same inquiry as *"a man of abnormal views"*, and that his acolytes were *"semi-imbeciles or hotheads"*. In the meantime we find that while the *Unione Politica Maltese*, also known as *"Panzavecchia's Party"*, was supporting Governor Plumer who seemed reluctant to provide his version of events in connection with *Sette Giugno*, the other two parties, namely the Labour Party, through Ġuże Orlando, and the Democratic Nationalist Party, led by Nerik Mizzi, were practically working in tandem criticising the two inquiry reports.

In fact, Ġuże Orlando claimed that the inquiries and official reports distorted the events to such extent that they amounted to little more than a vile act of contempt. On the other hand, the Nationalists insisted that the reports were infused with *"subtle anti-Maltese poison"* (*"sottile veleno anti-Maltese"*) and *"false Italo-servilism"* (*"servilismo italo falso"*).

The truth of the matter is that those who genuinely wanted progress for the Maltese people were the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party. It is also true that although tragic, the *Sette Giugno* riots and the ensuing events led to the 1921 Self-Government Constitution, better known as the *Amery-Milner Constitution*.

Furthermore, on taking stock of the situation at the time, it appears that the events which unfolded following the riots of 7 June 1919 undoubtedly had a major bearing on the people's perception of the new Governor, Lord Plumer. I am referring primarily to the way in which Governor Plumer immediately addressed one of the most hard-hitting problems for the Maltese people – the soaring price of bread – to such extent that the price of a loaf weighing one rotolo (approximately 800 grammes) was reduced from five-and-a-half pence to four-and-a-half pence. This was a significant step because the previous Governor, Lord Methuen, had become very detached from the Maltese and was literally isolated from everyone, to the extent that in April 1919 he requested to resign from his post. Following Governor Methuen's departure, the person appointed in his stead as Acting Governor was Major General Hunter Blair, namely the same person who had, so to speak, manipulated the military inquiry. He remained in office for a brief period until Lord Plumer was appointed Governor.

It is worth mentioning that Lord Plumer, who had served as General in the First World War, was a remarkable character. He was gifted with the art of diplomacy, endowed with a charismatic and endearing personality, and had the ability to engage in dialogue with politicians. In fact it seems that Plumer's charming personality was instrumental in achieving self-government in 1921, our Parliament's point of departure. This was stated clearly by Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies Leo Amery, who was entrusted with the drafting of the 1921 Constitution, when in the House of Commons on 19 November 1919, he announced the granting to the Maltese people "full responsible control of their purely local affairs".

*"It is upon the advice Field-Marshal Lord Plumer and with his complete concurrence, that his Majesty's Government are taking this step and undoubtedly, their confidence in his judgement both of the military and political aspects of the question has played a considerable part in influencing their decision."*

At this point I would also like to refer to other events which took place during that period. Besides the fact that it appears that the inquiries carried out did not reveal the full truth concerning the event which left four dead and many injured, the British were keen on driving home the point that they were the victims. This is evident from the proceedings filed against many Maltese persons who were indicted in Court and imprisoned following the *Sette Giugno* riots, simply because they happened to be in Valletta at the time of the riots and uttered some words. A particular case I found involves a man called Ċensu Arpa who, on seeing one of the British marines shoot on the Maltese, tried to calm down the crowd and quell panic by shouting the words: "That was a shot in the air." On the basis of these words he was accused of inciting the riot and was convicted to one year imprisonment with hard labour. Another case concerns a person who on 23 September 1919 was convicted by the Martial Court to five years imprisonment with hard labour. This was a man named Ċikku Debattista from Ħal Qormi, a coachman aged 33, who was convicted for being present and not doing his utmost to stop the riot. This shows that the authorities were not seeking to establish what really happened, but to shift the blame unto the Maltese people. It is indeed disgraceful that the Maltese people had to endure such treatment.

This underlines the importance of our presence here today; so that history may guide us to improve our ways and be better representatives of our people. The Maltese people deserve democratic leadership where the truth is told and which is characterised by a transparent legislative mechanism. Our work must always be performed in an open manner, and I am satisfied that during the past year we have taken important steps in this direction. 4 May was an important milestone; following the move to the new premises, which are equipped with modern facilities allowing Parliament to operate in a more transparent manner, Parliamentary sittings started being broadcast live, audiovisually and in real time, on Parliament's website and on television.

This was an important step, but it is not sufficient. The next objective is for Parliament to have its own free-to-air television station, so that all those who want to exercise their right to follow parliamentary democracy in action would not be dependent on a TV subscription. Consequently, the Parliamentary TV Channel must also be available on a free-to-air basis since the right to follow parliamentary democracy in our country should not be conditional. The infrastructure already exists, the free-to-air platform operated by GO is in place, a television channel is available, and therefore this channel should be assigned immediately to the country's highest institution in order to further consolidate the level of transparency of parliamentary democracy in our country. I therefore appeal to the relevant authorities to ensure immediate access to this facility which, I repeat, our people should have as a matter of right.

Last year, during this activity, I had mentioned that on 21 May 2014, exactly the day after the First Reading of the Bill on Standards in Public Life was moved and adopted in Parliament, the Chair tabled a report on Parliament's administrative autonomy which was drawn up by an internal commission which I had personally appointed on 16 April 2014. This report was accompanied by a Parliamentary Service Bill which was intended as a basis for discussion for a legislative act in this regard. Both the Parliamentary Service Bill and the Standards in Public Life Bill are imperative for Parliament to continue moving forward. It is necessary to persevere in our efforts to further strengthen our credibility as Members of the House, since the credibility of the country's highest institution is a reflection of the credibility of each and every one of us.

In this regard I would like to state that our Parliament has not held back on this matter of transparency and accountability, even in international parliamentary fora. I am referring to my participation in the 66th GRECO plenary session – GRECO being the Group of States Against Corruption within the Council of Europe – where with the assistance of Attorney General Dr Peter Grech and Deputy Attorney General Dr Donatella Frendo Dimech, I had the opportunity to reply to a number of questions while examining what measures can be adopted for the prevention of any type of corruption by Members of Parliament.

During the course of this I have also, in my role as Speaker of the House, participated in a conference dealing with how the Commonwealth can remain relevant in present times. In this regard, during an activity held at the UK Parliament on 4 February of this year, I argued that:

*“As part of a wider Commonwealth reform, to which I will return shortly, I feel that for this organization to be a true promoter and guardian of the rights of its citizens as set out in the Harare Declaration, it requires a centralized organ responsible for ensuring the respect of these set of core values across all its territories. Two models come to my mind namely:*

*One based on the United Nations human rights Council which would be responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of Human Rights in the member countries and for addressing situations of human rights violations and make recommendations on them; or*

*based on the Council of European Court of Human Rights, with which individuals or group of individuals could lodge their complaints against Member States on breaches of Human Rights issues not satisfactorily resolved in the home country.”*

This is a clear example of how the Maltese Parliament speaks on behalf of citizens in international fora with the aim of investigating mechanisms whereby citizens' right to redress may be strengthened.

Much remains to be done to continue improving the level of transparency and accountability of each and every one of us towards the people we represent. For instance, I believe that the time has come to address issues which arise when citizens feel aggrieved by statements made about them in Parliament, and to establish a mechanism which grants citizens a right of redress. This obviously needs to be done without impinging on Parliamentary rights and privileges, since these are intended to allow Members of Parliament to speak without fear. On the other hand we must ensure that this privilege is not abused of in the country's highest institution, and in this regard I believe that the time has arrived to start looking at models which address this issue. Furthermore, within the framework of the ongoing exercise to review the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives, we need to ensure that we introduce regulations which bestow greater dignity to this Parliament, even in which each Member addresses the House.

With the move to the new Parliament building, designed by the renowned architect Renzo Piano, we have made a positive step forward in the relationship between Parliament and the public. This is due to the fact that when meeting people from all walks of life who come to visit this new building, we are taking the opportunity to explain to them the work carried out by their representatives, both in plenary and committee sittings. We are encouraging people from all the sectors of society to come closer to Parliament, by providing an area where they can exhibit their work. In fact the first exhibition, which is still ongoing, was set up by residents of the Corradino Correctional Facility. The aim of this exhibition was precisely to show that the Parliament building is open to all, while also sending a message to the inmates that they still form part of society.

During this week Parliament also contributed towards supporting inter-parliamentary work by hosting in Malta, in conjunction with the UK Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the 5<sup>th</sup> Westminster Workshop for public accounts committees within the Commonwealth. The theme for this Workshop was 'Effective, Independent & Transparent Public Accounts Committees for Robust Public Financial Oversight'. It is worth adding that this was the first time that this Workshop was held outside the United Kingdom. The theme addresses a very important function and role of a parliament in a democratic country, namely that of scrutinising the Executive's operations, in particular in connection with government finances. The Commonwealth Association of Public Accounts Committees (CAPAC) was also set up during the same Workshop, following a resolution adopted in 2013 by the Commonwealth Heads of Government, calling for the strengthening of public accounts

committees within the Commonwealth as recognition of the importance of good governance within a democracy.

We have achieved significant progress, but we can still do much more. We have no reason to feel discouraged; we need to continue exploring ways to constantly improve our work. Each Member of Parliament and all those who work for this institution are duty bound to continue giving their contribution so that the Maltese Parliament can satisfy the ever-increasing hopes and expectations of the Maltese people.