

repubblika

19 February 2021

The President of Malta
The Palace
Valletta

Mr President,

Conference on National Unity

Repubblika appreciates your initiative to host a discussion on 'national unity' in Malta.

We start by confessing outright that though we prefer peace over conflict, agreement over disagreement, and polite exchange over loud protest, we do not think there is a right moment to suppress outstanding disagreement on matters of national controversy to replace it with artificial appeasement or complicity with realities we do not accept should be permanent characteristics of life in Malta.

Moreover, we believe that a level of disagreement on views, opinions and options, exercised with openness, honesty and respect for different views, is essential in a healthy democracy and an indication of a responsible citizenry that the State ought to cherish and promote.



There are urgent matters that require the immediate attention of this community, all too often oblivious to the serious haemorrhages it is letting.

We would not only be betraying our mission as a civil society organisation campaigning for the rule of law, for democracy, civil rights and media freedom, but we would be betraying our country if we were to knock down our priority list issues such as, but not limited to:

- a. The impunity enjoyed by organised criminals who have infiltrated and seem to be controlling all aspects of life in Malta including politics, the administration, institutions, the media, business and sports;
- b. The erosion of public space, the destruction of the natural environment, the deterioration of the quality of the urban environment, the brutalisation of the landscape, and increased pollutants in our soil, air and water, all as a foreground to climate change;
- c. The domination of ethically questionable activities in the economic fabric of our country with a national dependence on tax avoidance, complicity in tax evasion, online gambling, and the collaboration with the dubious activities of the hyper-wealthy by hiding their identity;
- d. The failure of the State to prosecute and secure the conviction of the people connected with the murder of a journalist;
- e. The systematic racism in public policy, public administration and political decisions with respect to migrants, particularly, but not exclusively, Africans or people of African descent. Many persons who live here are prevented from feeling they can make this country their home;
- f. Rising economic inequalities with greater numbers exposed to the risk of poverty and some suffering deprivation from basic needs including shelter, food and sanitation;



- g. Inequalities exacerbated by nepotism and clientelism in place of meritocracy and fairness.

These are some of the causes of the disunity within our community. In our view, they are a reflection of an underlying erosion of values that are required for a democracy to be worthy of that name and for a community of people to live at ease with itself.

Certainly, not all signals are consistent and there are indeed moments of shining brilliance in acts of solidarity, mutual understanding and social cohesion. We, however, also perceive an underlying cultural attitude that favours profit over any other consideration: over fairness, over equality of access, over environmental sustainability.

That cultural erosion is led by the example of political leaders who in the past few years have been exposed for participating in illicit activities, have sought to justify those activities and have so far avoided any material consequence as a result of being discovered.

We need to address a number of key and urgent issues:

- enforcing the law without fear or favour, in proportion to the crime, not the privileges unfairly enjoyed by the perpetrator;
- restraining construction and the misleadingly named 'development', pushing for changes in economic and personal behaviours, and transforming the economy towards sustainability;
- conserving the natural environment;
- transforming our economy into one founded on sound ethical principles;
- apportioning responsibility for the causes, the execution and the aftermath of the killing of Daphne Caruana Galizia;
- redefining the meaning of being Maltese to open up to and embrace the racial and cultural changes that result from migration;



- Improving the machinery of democracy by separating powers and guaranteeing the independence of institutions;
- augmenting the work of the State to restructure our framework for social and economic solidarity and the welfare of all.

Addressing these issues would be controversial, would almost certainly attract harsh disagreement and conflict, and would likely not immediately satisfy the noble aspiration of national unity.

But ignoring these problems, or even postponing our duty as a community to face them together, guarantees their indefinite extension and the irrevocable deterioration of cohesion in our society that this conference proposes to find ways of reversing.

Not that we think the President's conference is asking us to, but it should be clear to one and all that in our commitment to the well-being of our community, we will not tone down our effort to bring about these changes.

If anything, we will continue to seek any means available to an organisation committed to the respect of the law, to escalate and spread further our message. And we will continue to hope we can persuade as many people as possible, beginning with the first citizen of this country, the President, whose statements and gestures set the standard for understanding and potential unity for the community.

The enclosed contribution, therefore, puts forward our vision for a "united country" in which we would be happy to live.

There is no eschaton that can be achieved in our lifetime.

Perfection – economic, institutional, social, political, personal – is impossible. Change is a constant for a democratic community worthy of that name. But that does not mean we can have no aspiration for improvement, to climb towards, as the Americans call it, a more perfect union.



We do believe we can be better than we are and we certainly agree all of us have a responsibility to work towards a more cohesive, more understanding society, with a deeper commitment of its members towards each other.

In this sense, we are grateful for your initiative because it encourages us all to think about what we could be, demand the impossible and find ways with which we can work towards it.

We want to give our contribution. Our thoughts are being attached to this letter.

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to participate in a discussion about how we can grow closer together.

May it never end.

Respectfully,

Robert Aquilina
President

Alessandra Dee Crespo
President-Elect

Sammi Davis
Secretary General

Emanuel Delia
Executive Officer

Encl. (2)

repubblika

A CIVIL SOCIETY MOVEMENT

Conference for National Unity 2021

Written Submissions



First, let us seek the truth

A community can call itself such when its members recognise themselves as belonging to it and have enough shared currency to be able to relate to each other and understand each other without having to explain all the background.

There is no scope in this exercise to examine what some called 'imagined communities' that share largely invented traditions or an artificial but reserved code that allows a group of people to distinguish themselves from outsiders.

Let us leave aside for the moment questions such as what it means to be Maltese and what the Maltese nation is and whether proper and contemporary answers to those questions are shared in the collective memory and imagination of Maltese people.

At this stage, we are putting forward an even more fundamental consideration and therefore a largely universal question.

Any community – Maltese or otherwise – will need to agree on basic fictions and accept them as shared realities. Compare this with monetary currency. A €50 note is a colourful piece of paper. But in a country where the euro is accepted as currency, a shopkeeper would be willing to part with objects in exchange for a piece of paper that in and of itself, without regard to its symbolic face value significance, is worth much less than €50. The shopkeeper is confident that when they deposit the piece of paper in a bank account, the bank will recognise its face value, not the cost of printing a paper note.

The buyer, the seller and the bank agree and accept the value of €50 without having to explain to each other how currency works and why they should trust it. That unspoken knowledge prevents conflict between the buyers and the sellers. It makes the simple commercial transaction smooth.

This is a metaphor for all transactions in any society. It also shows that when the members of a community no longer share an unspoken knowledge about the underlying fundamentals of their relationship, conflict is bound to ensue.



We perceive an eroded appreciation of what is true, how to recognise it, how to distinguish it from a lie, and how to act and decide on the basis of a genuine grasp of reality. We underline this is not a uniquely Maltese problem. The rioters at the US Capitol at the beginning of this year accepted as real the lie that their political candidate had won an election and that they were being disenfranchised. As far as they were concerned rioting was a moral duty because it rested on their understanding of what is true.

It is not a uniquely Maltese problem. But it is a Maltese problem too.

On 2 December 2019 supporters of the government gathered outside the Labour Party headquarters in Ħamrun to show support for the prime minister. Konrad Mizzi, who had just resigned in disgrace a few days earlier, showed up at the protest and was feted and celebrated as a hero. The incident echoed celebrations held by supporters of the Labour Party in June 2017 outside Pilatus Bank which would later be shuttered for industrial-scale money-laundering.

Those supporters behaved that way because they believed it to be true that Konrad Mizzi had been a victim of some political conspiracy and that nothing outside the febrile imagination of a “Nationalist journalist” happened at Pilatus Bank. They were fed a lie and did not have the means and the ability to be able to recognise it as such.

More importantly, this is a country whose inhabitants cannot agree that killing a journalist for doing her job is wrong and that that judgement is only reasonable if made without qualification and reservation. Testifying at the Daphne Caruana Galizia inquiry, Joseph Muscat spoke three years after Daphne had been killed about how he suffered because of her writing. Many members of this community continue to believe that being criticised by a journalist is more harrowing than being killed by a car bomb. That is because the judgement is based on the lie that Daphne somehow, or at least in part, deserved her fate.

The non-acceptance of the truth, or the reluctance to acknowledge it, is the root of the extreme polarization within this country. We feel that it is time to face the dire reality this fundamental disuniting factor has given rise to, and the consequences of hatred and blind rejection it has fomented.



The Maltese State fails when it covers up the truth to accommodate the political or personal interests of those that happen to be governing it.

The State has the duty to honour those who die in the service of the community. A journalist killed for revealing corruption should be held up as a heroic example to inspire future generations to seek to serve the community with their commitment and engagement.

In the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia, the Maltese State remains hostile to her work and her memory and ambiguous and halting in its qualified condemnation of her assassination. Inevitably, this other failure of the State is in itself a cause for division.

When the State actively ignores the killing of a journalist as a direct consequence of her investigations into corruption at the highest ranks of government, then the State is contributing to this division.

No doubt it is admirable to hope that we can disagree more politely, speak with greater restraint, and find gentler ways of pointing out the error of someone else's ways. But it should be clear that the real concern here is not how impolite conversation is but how far apart we can be before and after we can possibly argue, within the framework of democracy, about what goes on in our country.

There can hardly be a half-way compromise on the question of whether killing a journalist is excusable or isn't.

The value of right and of good needs to be understood without the need of debate, for debate on policies offering the 'how' to protect right and punish wrong to have any utility, never mind an air of civility.

Next, let us restate our values

It is not for Repubblika to determine right or wrong and to hand it down to the rest of the country as if ours is inspired revelation. Many of us grow up with the teachings of religions, and all of us at some point in our lives relate to our internal ethical compass,



though it is a remarkable feature of the human condition to surprise ourselves with our ability to ignore it.

But a conference on national unity would no doubt want to recall our more glaring collective foibles.

It is a cliché to recall that our colonial heritage conditions us to think of any space outside our doorstep to be outside our individual responsibility. That we can take away from the common good without remorse and without restraint because in principle it belongs to no one.

Another cliché is that our Mediterranean culture requires us to live by different ethical codes in our private and public lives. Our family demands our personal sacrifice, our fullest commitment, an infinite swell of altruism. Life outside the family on the other hand is a lawless race, its success measured only by the gain in wealth and status. The destination of the race of public life is to secure the interests of one's family in pursuit of which everything is fair and nothing is forbidden.

Beyond clichés, when the discourse on national unity turns away from self-criticism and soul searching, the tendency is to find comfort in alternative old chestnuts. The "Maltese" being generous because they break yearly records at fundraising telethons, is perhaps the most obvious example of collective self-praise and smug national satisfaction.

We find this ironic because we consider the dependence on telethons as evidence of the failure of our community to provide welfare services for the needy as a matter of right rather than a matter of condescending charity. A fraction of what financial criminals siphon off the country's wealth would go further than any of the telethons could ever raise.

As with truth, the challenge of restating values is not, as we see it, a particularly "national" challenge. It is universal, as indeed the values themselves are.

We often apply the adjective "national" to "interest", justifying departures from ethical intuition on the back of some higher moral obligation to serve our country first. 'Country first, right or wrong' claims a higher moral standing than 'Family first, right or wrong'. On



the basis of this moral hierarchy, “national” interest rises above compassion, solidarity, commitment, sustainability, generosity and engagement.

If we were less inspired by “interest” and driven more by the single ethical compass we are familiar with, whether that code is guiding our personal, or our family, social and international relations, we could find that the biggest change in our attitude would be to understand that other people do not merely exist to take things away from us.

Politics of “interest” justify, for example, racism. A recent illustrated publication distributed in households by the ministry responsible for national security only carried a single image featuring black people. They were being pushed onto a plane to be forcefully repatriated out of the country.

The action was portrayed as serving the “national interest”. Having fewer black people in our midst, apparently, is how the national interest is better served unless that interest is being served by having them “working in the sun” as a former prime minister called it or using them as scapegoats during a pandemic for which they are not to blame. That value underlines racial prejudice and the vehemence and violence with which it is openly expressed in actions ranging from institutionalised discrimination to physical and verbal abuse in the street.

Symbols are but symbols

In some religions, the faithful are warned against mistaking artistic representations of deities for the deities themselves. The secular cult of national symbols is vulnerable to the same risk.

A ‘national unity’ conference will likely exhort us to respect the national flag, stand tall to the national anthem and bow to the institutions of the State.

As our name suggests, Repubblica does not under-estimate the importance of this iconography. At every one of our public gatherings, proceedings conclude with the national anthem; the national colours and the flag feature prominently and symbols were and are treated with respect and dignity.



That is not because the symbols deserve dignity in and of themselves. They have no value in and of themselves. They are representative of the republic and the values we believe the republic should be endowed with and to which we aspire. Indeed, for us singing the national anthem does not stop at “pride” in our republic. It is also an act of “protest” because we believe our republic is not today what we hope it should be.

We reject the suggestion that this notion is somehow disrespectful or inappropriate in a ‘united nation’. A republic is truly democratic and ‘united’ if dissent and protest within it can be freely and openly expressed without retribution or punitive consequence. That value – of open debate, of dissent and protest – stands higher than anything national symbols might represent. If that ranking is reversed – if the symbols become more important than the right to disagree and to protest against the State those symbols recall and the actions of those who run it – we would not be securing ‘unity’. We would be exalting ‘oppression’.

Although it is right for a country to recognise itself in its flag, its national anthem and its symbols, fetishizing these is not merely distasteful. It is dangerous.

The place for the Constitution

Symbols may be easier to recognise and to be familiar with, but at the heart of a functioning republic is its law, and supreme in that law, its Constitution. Codified there is the covenant between the community and those chosen by it and from within it to govern it. The contract defines delegated power by setting out its limitations and consequences if it is exceeded or subverted. And the most explicit limitation is the set of inalienable rights enjoyed by every human being – not merely every citizen – that for any reason is faced with the wielding of that delegated power by the authorities of the Maltese State.

For being so crucial to our democratic life, the relationship of the Maltese community with our Constitution is remarkably ambiguous. Most school-leavers are unfamiliar with its basic tenets. Changes to it are handled relatively casually with little to no national reflection and debate.



This is a standing disappointment for us. The Constitution should be our basic law on which we all agree. It is the glue that binds together in one community majorities and minorities. It ensures that minorities feel that the decisions taken by the majority are taken also on their behalf and in their interest. Far more obviously than flag or anthem, the Constitution should be the comfort to all minorities of opinion, even a minority of one.

But a constitution that lives up to this mission needs to be owned by the community it governs. They need to know it, understand it, and to be able to drive changes to it so that it keeps up with the time.

The process of Constitutional reform, therefore, postponed in fits and starts for several years now, is frustrating and a repeatedly missed opportunity to have a nationwide discussion on how this community wants to be governed.

In 2019, Repubblika made proposals for a transparent and open national debate on Constitutional changes. We invested our attention in the process, making recommendations on the broadest possible public participation and taking the discussion about reform outside the smoke-filled rooms of inter-party horse-trading and out into Malta's public square.

Instead, changes to the Constitution have been since implemented haphazardly, excluding any material public consultation – let alone participation – in undignified displays of amateurism. We remain stunned that in July 2020, MPs unanimously voted for Constitutional changes decided minutes before the vote was taken and which they only saw in the written form several days after voting.

That contempt for our basic law, and the lack of decorum in the way it is treated by political leaders, take away from the toolkit of our community its most valuable means of codifying the basic rules that we all agree on and within which all debate and disagreement must peacefully exist.



The nature of our debate

Polarisation is the process of coalescing all possible points of view into two stark, mutually exclusive and opposing positions. Our two-party system ensures this happens in our politics but it is a reflection of how much of our national activity is conducted. Most things come in twos: rival band clubs, rival fireworks factories, rival football clubs. This dialectical clash has the advantage of being simple, easy to follow and relatively easy to choose one favourite from two possible options. But it also often risks over-simplifying more complex and more nuanced questions.

In order for either one of two options in a debate to gain sway, it has to smooth over those nuances, push lingering doubts aside, refuse to consider alternatives and, when it risks losing an argument, prefer to stick to drum-beating and flag-waving than to allow its own position to evolve.

Polarisation is the enemy of pluralism. Though pluralism, at face value, seems more fragmented and with more opinions on the table, choosing and deciding can prove harder than if only two paths were available. A discourse which doesn't only come in black and white gives more space for subtlety.

If it is true that it is not political disagreement we have a problem with, but the intolerant vehemence with which two sides of that disagreement promote their position, then a plurality of options and of voices, with differing agenda, emphases and considerations can be expected to make for a more civil debate.

This will require a national transformative effort to think beyond the narrow views provided by two political parties. It requires critical thinking, political participation that is neither narrowly interest- or sector-based, nor serving the interests of either political party. It requires space for public participation, even with tools that were fairly standard in the past but which have been dropped over time such as green and white papers, open-ended public dialogue meetings, effective public hearings and so on.

These processes can be heated but the debate that emerges from structured exchanges that do not have 'winning' and 'losing' as the only two possible outcomes for



their participants is just the sort of disagreement that makes a community grow together.

Without public participation in decision-making, a large minority in the country perceives the structures of the State as permanently stacked against it. No matter how right they might feel, there never really is an opportunity to get their views aired and to have the ability to perhaps persuade the ruling majority to allow its decisions to change.

This engenders mistrust, detachment and the feeling that civil debate – with arguments, evidence and a sincere attempt at persuasion – is futile. The only alternative is the relative satisfaction of displaying anger through insults and eventually outright hatred.

We do understand the President's reasons for insisting that the conference he is hosting avoids discussing party politics. These reasons have much to do with his Constitutional position and also with a genuine desire not to be seen to suggest that there should be no political disagreement.

It is, however, our deeply held view, that the methods used by political parties to conduct their business are a major cause for just the sort of verbal, psychological and material violence the President wishes his community to outgrow.

We are not restrained by the President's Constitutional limits, which is why it is easier for us to challenge the methods of our political parties.

The language we use

We share the President's concern about the deterioration of the language openly used in reference to other human beings that suggests people think of other people as less than human. The dehumanisation of Daphne Caruana Galizia is the most dramatic example of this, particularly because as was heard by the inquiry into her killing the effort to strip her of human dignity was led by agents of the State. It was logically followed by the effort of stripping her of her very life.



Though Daphne's case is the most extreme, it is not the only one. It has become a matter of habit for people to call for the torture or killing of other people on social media, statements that should objectively be horrible and attract opprobrium but that we have become largely desensitised to.

As with Daphne Caruana Galizia's case, the example is often first given by opinion formers and opinion leaders.

We share in an annexe to this document, the inspiring example of the "Assisi Charter" co-authored by the Italian Federation of Journalists' Organisations (FNSI), Amnesty Italia and representatives of churches and denominations.

The Charter is a document that works as a manual for people who write, whether as professional journalists or as individuals participating in the community's conversations on blogs, comments boards, social media and so on. It may prove a useful contribution to the final outcome of the conference deliberations.

The obvious targets

The Assisi charter has a broad scope, but a close look at the text (see Annexe) shows particular sensitivity to the language used in formal discourse, in journalism and in social media by commenters, with respect to migrants, or people belonging to ethnic, racial or religious minorities.

Multiple references to Maltese identity, traditions, culture, language and way of life, risk contributing to this delineation that separates and builds walls between people who rightly belong to the same community.

This sort of mellifluous, self-referential and smug discourse about picture-book Malteseness is replete with accommodating inaccuracies.

There has never been a time when "being Maltese" meant something immutable. The ethnic stock of the population of the Maltese islands is a layer cake of generations of immigrants, colonisers, settlers and seafarers.



Malti is much younger than the history of the islands and it has changed as layers of influences changed its syntax, its vocabulary and its utility. It has never been the only language spoken in the country or the language preferred by all of its inhabitants.

The cults and symbols of its identity as a nation are as young as the “invented traditions” and the “imagined communities” of 19th-century European nations and re-imagined by the anti-colonial sentiments of the 20th.

This is not to suggest that the Maltese language, idiom and literature, and Malta’s folklore, its kitchen, its popular expression of faith, its indigenous art, its vernacular architecture and so on are anything short of a patrimony, a priceless heritage it is our duty to conserve and renew for future generations. This is a responsibility bestowed on us as a community by our ancestors and our contemporaries that we take very seriously indeed.

But we are concerned that this heritage is used as a baseless excuse to exclude the endowments of novelties to the culture of these communities out of some misguided sense of purity or worse a nostalgia for an inexistent golden age in the past. Too often in official and popular discourse, the plurality of race, language, culture and creed is projected as a form of degeneration or degradation of some sort of pasty white purity that exists only in our imagination.

On the basis of this effort to preserve that which has never really existed, atrocious discriminatory policies inflict pain on people that would cause an outcry if it had been inflicted on people more obviously perceived as “Maltese”.

It would be unimaginable for the Maltese government to order the army to stand down and ignore for days a distress call from souls at risk of drowning in our search and rescue area if those souls belonged to people surnamed Borg, Muscat or Camilleri. A covid-lockdown would never fly as a pretext for allowing a 17-year-old Joseph Borg to be left to drown beyond an attempt at rescue.

If a Maltese-Australian descendant of migrants to Australia, a backpacking teenage woman in our example, was caught working in a San Ġiljan bar without a permit after her tourist visa expired, it would be unthinkable for the authorities to throw her into Safi Barracks indefinitely. A photograph of her in handcuffs dragged up by two burly



immigration officers into an Air Malta plane to force her repatriation would cause outrage. Any reports that she may have been tortured while in detention waiting to be forced out, would create waves of pressure to have the matter properly investigated.

The point being made here is that public policy is both drawn up and executed on the one hand and tolerated and applauded by the public on the other, purely because the subjects – we would say, the victims – of those policies are black.

Blackness, racial, linguistic or religious otherness, as distinct from a popular and archaic shared understanding of what qualifies one for the label Maltese, and therefore eligibility to the exclusive privileges and protection granted by the Maltese State to those who qualify is an official basis for discriminatory policy and distinctiveness over which the Maltese State refuses to bridge.

Consider, for example, migrants who have been in Malta since the mid-2000s, have worked and paid tax and insurance in all that time, have made a life for themselves and had children here who know no home but Malta. They have done so with official recognition under Maltese law and in full respect of it.

At the end of 2020, with a 4-week notice, the government exercised its discretion to withdraw that formal recognition unilaterally. The impacted residents were required to provide impossible evidence to justify their continued stay, effectively being told they were no longer welcome and that they needed to leave. After 15 years here, many of them learnt the local language, had children, moved up from menial jobs to apply for positions they were academically qualified for. It seems to them that when they graduated from collecting rubbish or falling from great heights on building sites, they were told to make their way out of the only country their children know as home.

In all the time they lived in Malta they were allowed here on borrowed time though they didn't know it until they were told it had run out.

In spite of words spoken to tick boxes at the Council of Europe and the European Commission, there is no politics of integration to speak of in Malta.

There's some confusion about what is meant by integration. We can suggest things it is not.



It is not assimilation, a one-way transaction where immigrants are required to forget who they are and where they come from, to be subsumed and anonymised into an official and unchanging idea of what it means to be Maltese.

It is not tolerance that builds a soft but temporary wall around immigrants as though their presence is by definition temporary and, for as long as it lasts, alien and by virtue of being different from the official idea of being Maltese, within Malta necessarily foreign and inferior.

It is not qualified, whether through formal discrimination or consequential unfairness. Consider the imposition of the requirement of the Maltese language for jobs that do not in practice require the skill, introduced as an enabling filter and an excuse to exclude perfectly eligible immigrants.

It is not revocable. Exile is not a punishment that is legally meted out to people perceived as Maltese, no matter how heinous their crimes. Exile is, however, a punishment added to standard punitive measures where the convict is “foreign”, however deep their attachment to Malta is.

It is not reduced. Migrants remain excluded from democratic and public life no matter what other rights they are given. They are presumed to be ineligible to have a leading role in the localities where they live or in the community at large. They are not allowed to vote. They are not allowed to exercise their fair share of influence on public affairs.

Any talk of ‘national unity’ that ignores the plight of migrants and excludes them from the possibility of participating in and contributing their share of influence to the community at large, becomes in and of itself a basis for exclusion, division and separation.

Though migrants are not the only victims of the vicious language and violence the President is concerned with, they are the most frequent, longest and hardest suffering victims of that language and violence. Many have lost their lives. Most are under a constant threat of State action that would deny them stability and dignity that all humans are rightly eligible to. All are discriminated against as a matter of course and insulted and assaulted habitually.



Much as it is true that racism is led by the example of political leaders, the fight against racism must start with conversion in their conduct.

The common good

Political leaders must also make another paradigm shift. Instead of serving private interests on the basis of who can better afford to pay to influence their policies, political leaders must recall that in a republic their function is to protect and promote the common good.

Testifying at the public inquiry into the killing of Daphne Caruana Galizia, former prime minister Joseph Muscat justified his relationship with Yorgen Fenech – the man charged with masterminding the assassination – as a “normal” manner in which government is conducted.

It is “normal”, the former prime minister argued, for people in political office to hold a direct, friendly and close relationship with business leaders. “Normal” sounds like a mitigating justification. But Joseph Muscat wanted to represent this as a job requirement, a best practice model for any good government. Earlier, he even boasted that he engaged “a person who understands business rather than a social worker” to serve as his chief of staff.

Whatever views we might have about a prime minister’s choice of guests for his social gatherings, our objection to this oligarchism is grounded in the fact that the relationships ministers keep with business interests appear to explain how policy decisions in the country are taken to serve the interests of people in this “normal” friendly company of political leaders.

Naturally, the matter goes well beyond dinner guest lists. Moneyed-interests fund political parties and the campaigning of candidates. They enjoy a disproportionate influence on decision-makers. Indeed, decision-makers depend on donors’ continued favour to retain their post. Should for whatever reason, politicians break their ties with their donors, the moneyed elite moves to a different crop of political serfs.



Over time this has led to the erosion of the common good, the privatisation of what should rightly belong to all: clean air, the sea, open spaces, public land, the landscape, the countryside. By influencing legislation and administration, Malta's elites apply a veneer of legality to the most flagrant plunder of the common good.

This is most obviously experienced in the shadow of the construction 'industry'. People have lost visibility of the sky and the sea; they have had open space in the countryside or in towns taken away from them. People walking or pushing prams and wheelchairs have been elbowed from the pavements by wider roads and commercial encroachment. Trees have been replaced by cars. Vernacular architecture has been replaced by unsightly monuments to avarice and mediocrity.

The intrinsic value of the natural, historical and architectural heritage, which we were expected to guard and curate for future generations, has been cheapened for quick monetisation, with the profits reserved for the very few who could drive politicians to decide on their behalf.

Sometimes some notable historic monument is preserved while cityscapes and landscapes are destroyed. And to add insult to injury, people's ongoing impoverishment is trivialised as a minor inconvenience in the context of a booming economy by those making hay while the sun shines on their profits.

A national unity that accepts this reality, that allows it to go on without protest and without seeking to reverse it, that submits to the will of a moneyed corporatized elite, would congeal an inherent injustice, an inequality of which the most suffering victims are the weaker members of society and those not yet born.

Putting a price on citizenship

We find the amoral monetisation of the tangible heritage – open spaces, the countryside, the foreshore, the landscape and so on – to have a parallel in the amoral monetisation of our intangible heritage that we are all entitled to as "Maltese".



This argument also follows from an earlier point we made about the remarkable indifference this community appears to have to its Constitution.

The sale of Maltese citizenship to people with no connection whatsoever – past, present or future – with the country and its community and with no material qualification except their extreme wealth, dilutes the value of the citizenship of the rest of us who are entitled to it by birth or naturalisation.

The conference will likely frequently be told that no matter what our differences might be, we are not merely Labourites and Nationalists, for hunting or against it, for more fireworks or for less, or whatever other transient cleavages that emerge between us. We are beneath all and above all “Maltese”. *“Ilkoll aħwa Maltin”*.

We have argued why popular and populist definitions of being Maltese along ethnic, linguistic, racial, religious or cultural lines are inaccurate and in and of themselves divisive. The notion of ‘nation’ is political and in our case stuck in colonial times for being anti-colonial.

The logical extension of that argument is that beyond nationhood, being Maltese is about citizenship: a secular endowment which transcends ethnicity, language, race, religion or culture. Citizenship is about the contract between an individual who lives in a community and the rest of that community; the sovereignty that is inherent to that individual but that is shared in a code of duties and rights that allows power to be delegated but exercised in the interest of the individual and the community.

In this sense, the entitlement that comes with citizenship of people who live and work here, who contribute their creativity, energy, loyalty and labour to the wellbeing of the country and the protection of its weaker inhabitants is being unfairly equated with the entitlement and the privileges extended to people who have no interest in the country whatsoever.

This matter may not be foremost on many people’s minds but it is one of the causes of disunity. Citizenship is denied to people who have lived here for many years, worked and paid their taxes and made their families here. Their contribution is deemed insufficient to recognise them as citizens of Malta. We take from migrants their work and their taxes but we would not consider sharing with them even the formal and symbolic



but deeply meaningful status of membership in this community. We happily give away our citizenship though, to people wealthy enough to purchase the title.

That policy ranks citizenship beneath nationhood, instead of the other way round.

Richer is not necessarily better

We have no ideological hostility to wealth, entrepreneurship, personal ambition and economic freedom of choice. We understand the contribution this spirit makes to the wider wellbeing of the community though we fear this is often overestimated and economic statistical growth alone is expected to reach everyone's pockets automatically as if the profit-motivation of an individual would miraculously take care of the community's needs without anyone asking.

Another frequent over-estimation is in the expected correlation between wealth and happiness. We have earlier argued how the monetisation and privatisation of public space has taken away from the community the innate privilege of enjoying one's environment and health.

We know this conference is concerned with highlighting growing social and economic inequalities that are now concentrating wealth in fewer pockets and leaving greater numbers living in the risk or the effective consequence of material deprivation from basic shelter, food and sanitation.

We aspire to a national unity that affirms a consensus that the primary responsibility of a community is towards the poorest, weakest and most disadvantaged within it and that the facilitation of wealth generation and economic activity is not an end in itself but one of the tools to achieve that primary responsibility. In order to affirm that consensus we must come to terms with the fact that we are failing at this primary responsibility and we must do more to achieve it.

Poverty does not disappear when we address the challenge of shelter, food and sanitation. Poverty manifests itself in inequality of access to opportunity, to education and health, to mobility and to high-quality urban and natural environment.



Over time, we have evolved the misguided dogma that lower taxes are necessarily better than higher taxes; that a smaller government is better than a government that intervenes more to adjust imbalances in the community; and that revenue justifies itself no matter its provenance.

We would argue that richer people should pay taxes at higher rates than poorer people and contribute more to the national expense of ensuring community solidarity. We argue that taxes should be a policy tool to discourage unfair and harmful behaviour such as taxing private car use to encourage a modal shift to other means of transport or to discourage allowing properties to remain vacant to accumulate value instead of allowing the supply side of property to keep prices within reach of a greater number of people.

We argue that our economic and development model should not be based on profits from complicity in the avoidance of tax or on taxing vice but should be instead driven by economic development based on innovation, science, environmental and ecological sustainability and inclusiveness.

This shift will be necessary not merely for ethical reasons but even for hard-nosed reasons we cannot escape. It is unlikely that after the pandemic, the governments where clients of Malta's tax avoidance industry live and operate their businesses would be amenable to continue to tolerate "tax structuring". That economic reality will not be helped by the political reality that Malta's reputation in this sector has suffered massive harm as a consequence of the political and criminal incidents of the last few years.

Having said that, the ethical considerations in choosing what economic activities to pursue as a country are not unrelated to the ambition of encouraging unity because they raise questions on the causes of disunity: unfairness, uncertainty, exclusion, deprivation and injustice.

Systematic injustice

Unfairness, uncertainty, exclusion, deprivation and injustice are, as we have argued, causes for disunity. Brushing over them will not solve the problem. It will make it worse.



Once again we understand why the present conference will want to restrain discussion on the conduct of politics in Malta and once again we feel that doing so would be brushing over an important problem.

Clientelism is encouraged by the administration. Government ministers direct their state-salaried staff to cold-call constituents asking them “if they need anything”. Officially, this is proactive customer care. In practice it short-circuits public services provided fairly on the basis of rights and within the provisions of the law without regard to the identity of the beneficiary beyond their eligibility and entitlement according to pre-set and objective criteria.

Public services are instead granted on a transactional basis, given against pledges of partisan or personal loyalties and patronage. Necessarily, the consequence of this is that eligible beneficiaries are denied their rights or in any case relegated behind loyalists who secure services in personal conversations with the Ministers serving the constituency in which they live.

Much of this exchange of transactions has material and harmful consequences. Once again, this is most evident in planning and construction. While large scale projects are permitted as a result of the corrupt relationship between moneyed-elites and the politicians they fund, smaller scale permits that cannot be objectively justified or the failure to enforce planning breaches, is attributable to personal favours granted by Ministers to their partisan supporters.

We could amplify with specific examples of these, but in any case all are in the public domain and often hardly contested.

Patronage by local politicians extends to irregular recruitment in the public sector, the hiring of an army of “persons of trust” in positions where short-circuiting Constitutional rules on recruitment to the public sector has no justification whatsoever.

This has a double consequence. Unfairness in and of itself is divisive. People that are excluded from these informal advantages are given a choice: to get into the “game” and compete for favours outside the law or to stay outside the game in protest and resentment.



The second consequence is that public service positions are not filled by the most capable candidates but with the candidates that best serve the partisan interests of the Ministers who hire them. In this way, the public is short-changed. It is charged for services through the levying of taxation. But the services are delivered at a lower quality than they could be because they are given by less capable people.

Because this does not happen in certain specialised sectors, one can see more clearly the consequences of where it does happen. It is not likely that the government will hire, say, an unqualified but a partisan favourite as a heart surgeon. But it is likely that the government will hire a police chief on the basis of their partisan loyalty. The position may not be so obviously life threatening but it is consequential nonetheless.

In the last few days, the public learnt that a 19-year-old university freshman with no specific professional or academic experience that demonstrates special qualities, has been appointed as governor of the public agency that promotes Malta's financial services industry on the international stage. The financial services industry is in real and present danger and requires all hands on-deck if it is to have a chance to survive. And yet the government was prepared to fill the position with a person whose only apparently discernible quality is that of being an effective campaigner for the Minister making the choice.

This is but the most recent example of thousands of appointments that have come to be known as "iced buns" in everyday parlance.

It is a grotesque simplification to attribute the resentment created by these appointments as the product of politics of envy. Most people who might complain about the appointment of an unqualified person to govern the agency promoting financial services, would not consider themselves as suitable candidates for the post. But they are perfectly capable of the entirely reasonable concern that the appointment of an incompetent crony might have a negative impact on the financial service industry (or might fail to achieve the desired positive impact) that could ultimately hurt their well-being.

A 'united' community cannot subsist on the basis of privilege or if it is ruled by an elite that grasps the means of exercising power simply on the basis of belonging to that elite. A united community must be a fair community. And a fair community must necessarily



be governed by people chosen on the basis of merit: that they would be the best women and men for the job.

We do not have that.

The partisan abdication of public broadcasting

“Iced buns” handed out in the public broadcasting service fail to have the desired positive impact and have a negative impact on the community’s ability to come together. This is particularly true but not exclusive to positions in the news department of the public broadcaster.

TVM news was until recently headed by an editor who is one of the interlocutors of the present conference. He openly testified at the Daphne Caruana Galizia inquiry for having habitually coordinated with the government the agenda of his news agency. His successor has continued the practice to an extent that, if anything, is even less subtle and inclusive than anything before her time. She works for another interlocutor at the present conference who has not delivered any visible initiative to bring TVM closer to fulfilling its mission as a public broadcaster.

As a public broadcaster, TVM has the mission of incarnating the national culture, providing opportunities for dialogue, a genuine and civilised consideration of alternative opinions and tastes, and to provoke change and growth in our national discourse and cultural landscape.

It fails at this mission. It perpetuates the pure duopoly of opinion in the country, presenting the public with the impression that if something is not said by either political party then it is necessarily not worth knowing.

We would refer to the manner in which TVM covered the events of November/December 2019 when near-daily civil society public protests forced out the government of the day. For whomever TVM was their only source of information on the events in the country, they would not have known of the protests until after Joseph Muscat announced he would resign as a result of them. This recalls the coverage on



official TV stations in the Soviet bloc as the communist regimes of those countries collapsed in the late 1980s.

Outside the narrow realm of politics, TVM perpetuates myths of national identity along the conventional and divisive limitations described earlier in this document. Audiences and participants are only eligible for the open broadcasting space if they are willing to do so exclusively in the Maltese language. Migrants or their native descendants, their contribution to Malta's economy and culture, and their full entitlement to participate in the public sphere is ignored by TVM which casts migrants as aliens without voice and without opinion, without culture and without the ability to offer anything to the Maltese community to which they rightly belong.

TVM and its manifestations in various media including the online space fails in the mission of public broadcasters to educate and empower citizens, to provide them with the information they need to judge their politicians and their administrators, to act as a locus for criticism and healthy lack of deference to political power.

In spite of the undoubted individual talents of journalists working for TVM, investigative journalism that could have the effect of in any way irritating politicians is strongly discouraged and suppressed.

The public is presented with an appeasing reality that for many seeking information from elsewhere proves dissonant with even the most cursory assessments of reality. That creates mistrust and division with another subset of the public that is comforted by the fact that TVM methodically confirms their prejudices and unfounded assumptions.

TVM also fails to provide an exemplary forum for mature debate. On the contrary, it often represents in the starkest way possible the accepted model for irrational confrontation, superficial argumentation, grotesque over-simplification and tribal goal-scoring. Topics of national importance are ignored if they are not the topics that it is convenient for political parties, particularly the ruling party, to discuss on the day. Views which are more nuanced than the views of either political party, are discarded as distractions.



This too is a failure in elevating the quality of national debate. It confirms the idea that there is nothing in between slavish adulation of the political heroes of one's tribal side and mudslinging in the general direction of the opposition.

No one ever sees anyone on TV allow themselves to be persuaded by any argument they did not already agree with before the discussion started.

This standard of superficiality is set for the way the population thinks.

Desperately seeking that which divides us

The example given by political leaders, the way this is covered by the public broadcaster (and in an even less dignified manner on the TV stations owned and controlled by the political leaders), the quality of their debate, the polarisation on issues, the oversimplification of complex and nuanced choices, reflects on and is reflected by the quality of our public debate wherever it manifests itself.

The State fails in its duty to promote the values that should be at the heart of our democracy: loyalty to the truth, commitment to the community, respect for the rights of all humans, honesty in holders of public office. If these values were to be taught in schools, restored to the centre of political discourse and the standards that holders of public office live up and hold themselves to, we would be making steps towards the unity the President desires for our country.

As our politics is polarised, we, as a people, are often unable to consider the value of moderation.

By way of example, views may be polarised on the subject of fireworks. Those in support of the activity are overwhelmingly passionate about it. They consider it inherent to Maltese culture, as indivisible from national identity as living in Malta itself. They dedicate every waking hour to raising funds to pay for, manufacturing, displaying and watching fireworks burn. Detractors complain of noise, road closure, pollution, cost and hazard. There is little space in Maltese discourse for an Aristotelian mean. Perhaps



fewer but higher quality fireworks' displays – less loud, less frequent, for less hours in the day – might end up satisfying both sides of the debate enough to allow coexistence.

Less fireworks, less construction, less hunting, less days of road closures around festas might be examples of the value of moderation in our thinking and arguing that could help bring us closer together.

This doesn't always work. In matters of life or death, there is no compromise.

There can be no compromise on our absolute intolerance to the killing of journalists, their intimidation or the intimidation of public servants at the hands of criminals and corrupt people in power. This would place us at a polar end of a harsh debate that continues to rage in this country and we give no signal of any willingness to compromise.

Unity, after all, is an aspiration. It is a desire of living in a more perfect union, knowing that we can hope to be more perfect but that we will never be perfect.



Annexe

‘Words Are Like Stones’

The following is a loose translation of the 10 principles that summarise the Assisi Charter.

Do not write about others what you don’t want written about you.

Writing is communicating. Communicating is understanding. Hostility is an impenetrable wall blocking out understanding.

Do not be scared to correct yourself.

Information should always be correct. Always be honest with readers. Do not be scared of writing a correction when you realise you have made a mistake.

Give a voice to the weakest.

Remember to give a voice to those who own nothing but their lives. By all means, defend your identity. But respect diversity and difference.

Learn to give numbers.

When writing, always remember to fold into opinions all the data that is relevant to provide correct information.

Words are stones. Use them to build bridges.

Remember that when wrongly used, words can hurt, injure and kill; your blog or your website should not carry messages of death; denounce the keyboard warriors and seek to build bridges that rise above the walls of censorship.



Become the guardian of truth.

Make yourself the spokesperson of those who thirst for peace, truth and social justice. When a journalist is threatened by a mafia, walk in their shoes and never leave them alone.

Don't think you're the centre of the world.

Do not believe the Universe revolves around you. Try instead to use what you write to shine a light on the peripheries of the world and the edges of the soul.

The internet is precious. Use it in the right way.

Remember the Internet is a revolution, but what you write is a revelation of what you truly are.

Be in touch with people.

The ultimate aim should not be to have a network of wires and cables, but a network of brothers and sisters.

Bring your message to the new digital squares.

St Francis's revolution was to bring the message out of churches and into squares. Remember today to bring about a new revolution, bringing your message from the squares to the new online agorae.