

Republic Day 2015

The Republic of Malta has gone through another year. Similar to previous years, this year, has been an eventful one, with its fair share of experiences that were completely unexpected, of occurrences that gave us great satisfaction, and of others that saddened us. It has truly been a year filled with a kaleidoscope of events. These twelve months have seen us, as a people strive through the highs and lows of everyday life.

While the main platform for our actions has been our country, the two international events held here in the past weeks have reminded us, that our vocation as an oasis of peace, and as an intercultural bridge in the centre of the Mediterranean, is not merely a set of metaphors expressed exclusively within the local context.

Conflicts and Terrorism, and our Security

The conflicts and acts of terrorism taking place in our region and in countries further away, lead us to understand even more clearly how our vocation, as a nation that cherishes and treasures peace, should go on determining the work that we do for our people, for the nations around us, and for the whole of humanity.

On the other hand, our own safety and security should remain important priorities, high on our national agenda.

I appeal to our political leaders, and to all the people of Malta, to unite and not waste time in unnecessary bickering, that divides us, and which make us susceptible when faced by events and situations that require our resilience.

With this in mind, I will share with you some reflections on the themes that have dominated this year and that affect us closely as a nation.

The Presidency

On a personal note, I must confess that working closely with thousands of people of goodwill, has given me great satisfaction. It has provided me with the courage to go on with my ambitious programme aimed at bringing together diverse groups of people working in areas ranging from research, conferences and speeches to community work, philanthropy, and projects aimed at promoting solidarity and empowerment.

For me, this year has been a journey of love that focused on what is essential in life, rather than on what is frivolous and superficial. It was the Maltese people themselves who persuaded me, through their own words and experiences that this Presidency should be much more than parades, laying of bouquets and wreaths, and ceremonial speeches. Many were those who asked me to be, in my role as President, their voice and a shoulder for them to lean on. I accepted this duty, with all the consequences that this decision entails.

While I accept the fact that time is the greatest of teachers, and that details may change, my work as a President, inspired by solidarity and social justice, will remain unchanged till the end of my tenure.

Equality

The Republic was born within an economy where women's employment, mainly in the textile industry, was a determining factor for the economic well-being of our country. This historical fact, which is neither well-remembered nor duly celebrated, puts women in the centre of the economic development of Malta. It reminds us that women's role in the economy, set within the context of equality in the upbringing of children, is indispensable.

Unfortunately, in spite of all the progress in the field of equality that has taken place over the years since Malta became a Republic, there is much more to be done for women in Malta to be more present and visible in our country's public life. I also note that the success of women in education in Malta, proved empirically by both international and local studies, is not leading to a more equitable status in our country, both in public or in private management roles.

European indicators show that Maltese women are still to be found at the periphery in areas of important decision-making. We need to address this social injustice and this democratic deficit with more energy and more haste.

I firmly believe that with a stronger presence of competent women in managerial posts, our country would be able to make decisions that will respect the interests, realities, and, above all, the rights of a wider spectrum of our population. At the same time, I am convinced that the further away women are kept from leadership roles and from the areas of power, the greater will be the possibilities of abuse, exploitation and reduction in the quality of people's lives.

Meanwhile, the news that Equality will be on the European agenda for the next year and a half, through three consecutive Presidencies, including Malta's, should afford us some hope in this regard.

Domestic Violence

This year, I have had several occasions to share in the joy of people who are in wonderful relationships, but I must also express my deep personal sorrow at the increasing reports of domestic violence. We are right to worry about terrorist acts but I find it very strange that we seem not to want to engage in conversation regarding the situation of Maltese women and men, many more women than men, terrorized within their homes, everyday and in complete silence. Domestic violence is a social disease that needs immediate attention.

The fact that it is women, who are mostly the victims of this aggression, leads me to conclude that domestic violence is not simply a personal disorder, but a symptom of a social condition – patriarchy – that is eating away at democracy in our country.

The United Nations campaign – the HeforShe – of which the Maltese Presidency is a privileged partner, aims to put across the message that men have to be protagonists in the process of building up societies that are more equitable, inclusive, engaged in dialogue, just and free from violence. While I expect more concrete and immediate action in this field, I wish to express my heartfelt solidarity with the victims of every type of aggression.

Verbal Violence

We often hear that there is strength in unity. It will be impossible for us to build a strong Republic if, as citizens, we do not recognize that verbal violence is on the increase in our country. When the microphone and the internet were made accessible to all, it was believed that democracy would be strengthened.

It is clear, however, that the educational deficit in the ethical use of the means of social communication is leading to break down, rather than building of our society.

Humbly, I ask whether we have reached a point where insults and verbal aggression have become so normalised, that we have accepted this as a way of life. If my suspicions are, in fact, correct, I can understand why a number of valid individuals are keeping away from public life.

I realise that there are not many who are ready to be insulted for all they do and profess.

Meanwhile, it is our Republic that is going to pay dearly for the alarming deterioration in the way we speak to each other.

This situation brings to my mind the many children and young people, who spoke to me about their experiences of bullying, and the impact of such experiences, whether they were the victims of bullying or the bystanders who witnessed such episodes. Therefore, I appeal to us all as adults, to keep constantly in mind that our example is a compelling force.

Education

Educational research has given us further indicators regarding the Education sector, which is of paramount importance for our country. In Malta, almost six percent of the gross domestic product is spent on this sector. In spite of the many efforts, throughout the years, the results in education do not yet reflect the efforts and financial investment of both past and present years.

I must also acknowledge the outstanding work that has been done, and is still being done, by thousands of workers in this field. However, the facts speak for themselves. We still have too many children, young people and adults who do not view education and training as an integral part of life.

More worrying is the fact that, although the rate of early school leavers has decreased over the years, there is still a considerable number of children and young people who leave compulsory education without having obtained basic skills.

As the research carried out by the President's Foundation for the Well-being of Society indicates, many of these young people are condemned to a precarious life, lacking the fulfilment that life can give. They live in a state of material deprivation, social exclusion and poor physical, emotional and mental health and wellbeing.

The same research shows us that there is a considerable social divide when it comes to the results obtained in education. The students who are least successful mostly come from the lower socio-economic strata.

Here I agree with Professor Carmel Borg, one of the foremost researchers in the educational field, who described our country as the island of the two Malts.

A society with a wide divide in the educational sector is a society with a social and economic split. We cannot say that we have a democratic society when there is no equitable access to the basic tools of democracy and to the fruits of the economy.

Rather than personalizing the problem, we all need to understand that the roots of failure in education lie in the shortcomings of social action. The challenge is enormous. Therefore, if we seriously want to address this problem, we cannot merely address the individual. We need to move beyond education itself.

I appeal to all those who work in the social field to make assertive and holistic efforts, together with schools, with families and with the community, to break the intergenerational cycles of dependence, apathy towards life, fatalism, inferiority complex and low aspirations.

Children and Young People

Children and young people need to be heard.

They have a right to be heard.

It is our duty to listen to them, to examine carefully what they say and to act accordingly.

I must stress the need for our country to develop the necessary structures to give this right to our children and young people, not occasionally, but regularly, as part of the decision-making process.

Besides, I would like to refer to other rights that our children are still deprived of, despite the fact that Malta has, ever since 1990, been a signatory of the United Nations Convention for Children's Rights.

To date, we are still without a comprehensive legislation about the rights of children and moreover, without the Child Protection Act (Out-of-Home Care).

Consequently, I encourage Parliament without delay, to put in place the necessary legislation that would give Maltese children the means whereby they become effective citizens of our country.

Poverty and Inequalities

The studies carried out by the President's Foundation for the Well-being of Society and the meetings of the fora within this structure, clearly show that precarious working conditions and poverty are among the biggest hurdles to lifelong learning and social mobility. Members of the community, local researchers and various documents, both local and international, remind us that poverty is still knocking at the door of our society.

I must remind you that a considerable number of those on the threshold of poverty are the working poor, or pensioners, who cannot cope with the cost of living or guarantee a quality of life for themselves.

One hopes that the measures taken in September of this year, with regard to poverty among children and young people, and the measures which will be coming into force in January of next year with regards to some pensioners, will bear the much-desired fruit. We also wish to keep on emphasizing that in our definition of a Republican democracy based on work, we underline the rights and dignity of the human person, without which no Republic can flourish. Poverty threatens human rights and the dignity that every human person deserves.

This is the most opportune time for our country to address not only poverty but also the well-being of Maltese society, in the wider meaning of the word. Malta is registering a significant economic growth. It is interesting to note that, while a means for measuring economy has been devised, there is as yet no fully effective index to measure our well-being. I encourage us all to take the opportunity to develop appropriate tools to measure the well-being of society.

Institutions and the Constitutional Reform

The behaviour of our politicians has been a recurrent theme during this year which is approaching its end. The political parties have disagreed about all aspects of life. They did this in a most public of ways, and at times in the most aggressive of ways. No party emerged victorious in this battle. Malta was the loser!

In the meantime, trust in the highest institution of the country continued to deteriorate. Those who wish the best for the Republic, yearn to see an improvement in the behaviour of politicians, both inside and outside parliament. There is an urgent need for politics to recover its good reputation.

It can only do this through exemplary and ethically correct behaviour. What applies to politics holds true also to other institutions, many of which have been in the news during this year.

Within this context, it is undoubtedly clear that the Constitutional Reform is all the more urgently required. I urge all of us to rise above partisan politics and unite together to revise and strengthen those institutions, on which the safeguarding of our democracy and the rights of our people, are built.

Civil Society

With great satisfaction, I can observe a civil society that is more visible, assertive and concrete. I would like to reiterate my conviction that civil society is a strong and necessary pillar for democracy. Civil society works with, and for, our communities, and its experiential and professional wisdom are indispensable elements for the well-being of society.

Sustainable Development

This year we have heard a lot about sustainability. Regretfully, I look back over the years and note that economic development has not always respected our environment.

Natural resources have been destroyed, biodiversity and wild life impoverished. Water, a basic right, is threatened; public spaces have decreased.

The doctoral study of Peter Fsadni also reveals that even some of our schools are dangerous environments for the health of our children and young people. This is part of the result of long years of unbridled development that enclosed us within limited spaces that are making us ill, a process that seems to be endless.

Faced by this environmental impoverishment, I insist that we cannot preach to the world if we remain architects of destruction in our own country.

I am making this heartfelt appeal on behalf of Maltese and Gozitan children and young people, who often speak to me about their sincere wish for Malta to offer them an environment free from anxiety and that provides a sense of well-being. This is precisely why I appeal to all our Parliamentarians to come together and develop a national environmental vision and policy, for the sake of our children and our young people.

The Mediterranean

At the same time, I see our shores are still surrounded by a sea of shame and death. Thousands of fathers, mothers and children have been engulfed by this very sea that should have saved their lives. I salute the memory of our dead brothers and sisters, and express my sincere disappointment that the main interest of the powers, seems to be to keep away people from the European shores, rather than to bring to an end the abuses in those countries that could sustain the lives of millions of human beings.

Conclusion

Finally, I firmly believe that a Republic based on compassion never stops preaching humanity before profit, human dignity before frontiers, and human rights before occasional charity.

We are not always being successful in making the right ethical choices.

Decadence is eroding our society and drawing us away from those values that held us together during the most difficult moments of our history.

I would like to believe that we are still in time to imagine a moral Malta, different from the one that it is becoming, and this, with respect to ourselves as adults, to our children and young people, and to our future generations.

To conclude, I would like to express my sincere wishes for a new year in the life of our Republic, more ethical, more equitable and more just to all.