



Press Release

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**ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF MALTA MARIE-LOUISE COLEIRO PRECA ON
THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING OF THE THIRTEENTH LEGISLATURE OF
PARLIAMENT**

Mr President
Honourable Members of the House of Representatives

It is my pleasure to note that, at the beginning of this Thirteenth legislature, the Government, in the message which I am delivering as the President of the Republic, is not presenting the normal speech, which is aimed at giving a list of measures. Neither is it presenting a partisan speech.

This speech is going to be shorter than previous ones, and also, void of any controversies which can arise. This speech is intended to show the Government's direction for our country during this legislature.

In every democratic electoral process, the people are given the opportunity to choose a set of principles and a political programme for the next legislature.

We must admit that every electoral choice, in itself, creates a dividing line between one party and another. Therefore, this same electoral process, which is so important in a democracy, can unfortunately create division. We need to work together, as a State and Nation, from this House of Representatives and beyond, to bridge and close this gap.

Our country will thus be able to truly move forward, as one nation, through unity and in unity

NATIONAL UNITY

The choice which the people made on 3 June 2017 has to be respected. It is equally important that we respect the voice of those who chose a different programme, than what the Government has presented.

This is how it should be, if we truly value democracy

In a country with a population of a little under half a million, we cannot let ethnicity, being Maltese or Gozitan, living in the north or south of the island, or coming from a rich or poor background be issues which divide us.

We have to admit that we are living in a world of different realities

Attachments: none

Page: 1 of 7

The Government and Opposition must therefore work together to address these different realities, while at the same time, also carrying on with their political discussions, which our country needs.

This is what democracy demands

Democracy also insists that our attitudes are respectful and dignified. Insults do not pay tribute to politics.

However, the politicians themselves have to treat each other with respect and dignity. In this way, the people will follow their example.

Because actions speak louder than words

Therefore, the Government's first priority has to be to safeguard unity, and to work in order to unite our country, after weeks of intensive electoral campaigning, and after months of intense, and at times even destructive, debates.

We cannot expect this process of unity to take only a few days or weeks. We need a change of culture in our country, and of our mentality as a nation. A change which does not only depend on the Government and Opposition, but on the effort each and every one of us makes; including the media, civil society, and anyone who has any form of influence in our communities and society.

From now on, let us agree that every day will be a day of healing

This process should serve as a boost to our democracy, which, during this legislature, will also start the process which will lead to a Constitutional Convention.

A Constitutional Convention with the aim of modernising our national institutions, making them accessible and accountable to the people. Through the changes it proposes, the aim of the Convention, above all, will also be to unite our people.

The Constitutional Renewal, for the birth of a Second Republic based on national unity, will be part of the legacy of this legislature.

At this point, it is my hope, and that of the Government, that the Constitutional renewal will be an opportunity to encourage a participative space and process, in which our society will be instrumental to strengthen democracy and secure unity among us.

This government believes that the new Constitution can be the tool that unites our country and prepare us it for the challenges ahead.

ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT

During the past years, our country has made very positive economic advancements.

The economic rhythm our country has experienced over the past years was one which has to be sustained by a programme focused on financial sustainability - an economic rhythm which created

surplus in public finances, while at the same time, using the economic wealth to reach those sectors of the population which are most in need.

The aim of the Government will remain for the national wealth of Malta to exceed the European average, thus ensuring that the Maltese will have the same, if not better, standard of living enjoyed by citizens in other European countries. As such, the Government is aiming to sustain its programme, by maintaining economic and social policies based on diligence and consolidation.

This is where the Government's programme comes to the fore, by reducing taxes for the workers, while at the same time maintaining the Government's pro-business attitude, which will continue to simplify the processes for employers and create work opportunities. This will remain the crucial recipe so that our country will continue to create high quality employment for Maltese and Gozitan citizens.

At the same time, for our country to maintain its economic growth, the Government has to work on expanding new economic niches which will open horizons in sectors such as finance and technology, the digital economy, life sciences, and logistics, among other things.

This will be done while we make an effort to protect the financial and gaming services – which need to have the same climate of national consensus, which was beneficial to them over the years, and which has resulted in their playing such an important role in the Maltese economy.

On the other hand, a main priority at the beginning of this legislature has to be Air Malta. Even here, we need national cooperation among the political parties, the stakeholders, and the unions, to safeguard our national airline.

Our country's economic advancement should also be completely targeted to a situation where more people are employed and thus contribute to the country's economy. Our aim as a country will be for more people to be in employment, while we work to ensure that we address the gender wage gap.

This government's commitment is to have more women in a central role in the leadership of this country.

In this context, the Government will promote a bold change to introduce electoral quotas, which will ensure that there are more women in the leadership and the democratic life of our country.

This will come together with lowering the voting age in general elections, and the elections to the European Parliament, from 18 years to 16 years of age.

This legislature will continue working on developing more job opportunities, while respecting the quality of life.

More work means less people at the risk of poverty and less material poverty in general

The Government will also focus on a better quality of life, which includes more family time and ensure a better work-life balance.

Against this background, the programme which the Government has put forward will be proposing discussions to give back public holidays which fall on a weekend.

In a country which is advancing economically, the infrastructure and the appearance of our country have to be given due importance. Our islands' cleanliness has to top the list, so as to maintain a level worthy of a modern European country.

Likewise, this legislature wants to alleviate traffic congestion, by means of modern public transport systems. In this legislature as well, the Government will be promoting a work programme wherein all the roads will be upgraded, over a seven year period, to ensure we have the high quality roads expected in a progressive country.

The Government's programme also caters for Gozo's potential and identifies the importance of connectivity, both physical and virtual, such as including two roads which will help the island grow economically and socially. This will be done while protecting Gozo's character and natural beauty.

The Government will pursue the tunnel project between Malta and Gozo; and what had started during these past months will be carried out, through the launch of a fast ferry service between Gozo and the Grand Harbour.

The virtual connectivity also needs to be enhanced by means of the second fibre-optic cable, so that Gozo will have stronger Internet connectivity, which is nowadays essential for any business wanting to set up in Gozo. All this is envisaged through schemes laid out in the Government's programme to attract more job opportunities to Gozo.

SOCIAL ADVANCEMENT

It is important that our country advances economically.

However, if the economic advancement is not used to strengthen the social fibre of our nation, and reach more people, it will be of little use to our country and people.

The Government's programme will be aimed to help those most in need, so that the fight against poverty will remain at the very top of our national agenda during this legislature.

Thus the Government is committing itself to ensure that no one will fall by the wayside in our country. Reducing the number of families living in poverty will be at the centre of this Government's programme. Our main aim according to this programme is that there will not be one child at risk of poverty. Therefore, the Government is going to ensure that families with children will at least have more than what is considered a decent income.

To this effect, the Government is committed to increase the Childcare Allowance by €100 for everyone and by €200 for low income families. Every mother will receive a child bonus of €300 whether she gives birth to, or adopts, a child.

We are aware of the fact that couples who adopt incur large expenses; therefore, the Government's programme aims to help couples who adopt by giving them direct assistance up to a maximum of €10,000 and a rebate of the travel costs for the couples' overseas adoption.

It is also important for the Government to review the IVF law, to make it more realistic thus giving more people the opportunity of becoming parents.

Economic advancement can also result in new anomalies which the Government has to anticipate. It is for this reason that we have to identify why people are ending up socially excluded. The rise in the cost of rent is a case in point where economic advancement is negatively affecting those who are most in need of help.

Unfortunately, we are facing situations where the cost of renting a property is putting families at risk of poverty, to keep a roof over their heads, or else ending up on the street.

A priority in this area is going to be the substantial increase in social housing projects. The Government's main aim is to eliminate the waiting list for allocations, with priority given to families with children and vulnerable people.

The Government also has to ensure that there are no abuses in rent prices, by first and foremost introducing a legal obligation that every rental will be covered by a lease agreement, while a renting agreement for a main residence, has to be for a minimum of three years. At the same time we have to strengthen rent subsidies for those who need it.

The Government will also continue to strengthen the health sector during this legislature, first of all by keeping healthcare in hospitals and health centres free for everyone. We will also maintain continuous investment in our hospitals.

In its programme, the Government has identified the building of a new Outpatients department, the construction of a specialised Mother and Child Hospital, and the building of another hospital specialising in psychiatric care, within Mater Dei hospital itself.

In the meantime, the construction and modernisation of St Luke's and Karin Grech hospitals and of the hospital in Gozo will continue. This will strengthen the Health sector while the services remain free of charge. The Government will also carry out the projects relating to new Health Centres, and the modernisation of others, so that treatment will be closer to the patient in such a way that the burden does not fall on the main hospitals.

Education has to continue to be the key for the future of our country. Education paves the way to social mobility. All Governments have placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of education. Hence education should be kept out of partisan politics, so that our country can keep moving forward with a leap in quality, in this sector. This will reduce the number of children who leave the formal education system without the skills required for a successful life in today's world.

A focal point in today's education framework is how we can reduce our children's stress, so that education will be a positive experience, and a voyage which arouses their sense of curiosity for knowledge and information.

In view of this, our educators and the conditions they work in are crucial. Hence, the Government is going to start a process leading to an increase in the wages and salaries of teacher in all grades.

In its social programme, the Government shall continue with the process whereby the minimum wage will increase, as was announced in the last legislature, when there was a national effort to reach an agreement between all parties concerned. This successful effort is a model of how things should be done in our country. Furthermore, old age pensions shall continue to be strengthened.

People with disabilities will also be protected in the Government's programme, through specific measures with the intention of more persons with disability being in employment, while living an independent life in the community, and also receiving assistance to own their homes.

Our quality of life is also measured by the quality of the environment we live in

The Government's programme plans to introduce the protection of the environment, which includes the protection of public spaces, the right to clean air, environmental health, as well as the right for actions to be taken to protect the environment, included within our country's Constitution. In this spirit, the Government shall see that the protection of the environment is given weight in every major decision taken by the Government.

The setting up of a Court for the Environment, and the power which the citizens will be given for the preservation of sites which are found in the public domain, will give the people more power to protect our country's environment.

This legislature will carry on strongly addressing the delicate matter of waste management, which is a serious national challenge.

In the field of civil rights that will be introduced in our country, it has already been announced that among the first laws, will be that of equality in marriage, which this House of Representatives will be discussing on Monday.

Other reforms planned during this legislature are aimed to strengthen our society, as the State will protect the dignity of those who are most vulnerable, by working to get at root problems, rather than against victims.

A COUNTRY READY TO FACE THE FUTURE

Our country has to carry on making a leap in quality in every area. And it is for this reason that in this legislature the Government wants to keep on strengthening the institutions and structures which are the pillars on which our democracy is built.

The Government's programme talks about strengthening and renewing this House of Representatives, whereby it wants to carry on with the parliamentary reform programme under the guidance of the Speaker.

There is the need for in-depth discussions, including a focus on the possibility that elected Members of Parliament are given the choice to serve on a full time basis. In this context, and also to give the members of Parliament a greater sense of responsibility in their speeches, there should also be a discussion about the possibility of a reform of the so-called Parliamentary privileges and the removal of Parliamentary immunity. These reforms will be carried out by the Office of the Speaker.

Another reform which plans to strengthen the principle of accountability and meritocracy is the implementation of a law whereby people, who occupy high positions in regulatory authorities, and ambassadors, are scrutinised by Parliament.

During the last six months, Malta has led the European Union Presidency in a dignified manner. The organisation and the closing of a number of dossiers during Malta's Presidency left a very positive impression of our country. At the end of our country's first experience, the Government wants to ensure that it carries on building on the positive outcomes of the Presidency and leaves a legacy of skills and structures which will serve us both in our country's work in Europe, as well as on an international level.

In 2018, our country will have the opportunity of once again gaining international recognition through Valletta 2018, as the European Capital of Culture. Apart from Malta showing Europe and the world what it has to offer in art and culture, from this perspective as well, we will be leaving a legacy for future generations, through the progress made. In the coming months Malta will showcase the talents and beauty of our country.

CONCLUSION

The Government is committed to fulfil this programme in its entirety in a context of national unity, while at the same time knowing that it cannot reach a compromise on everything.

Having said that, a collective effort has to be made to ensure that everyone is respected

All these changes need to be laid down in the framework of a new Statute for our country, through the birth of a Second Republic. A new Constitution for Malta has to be updated, to reflect not only the present, but also to anticipate the future.

Constitutional reforms are a time of national unity. They are moments of maturity, when the people rise above all that divides them and embrace what unites them.

This is why this programme, which the Government is presenting, will not only leave concrete results which can be felt by everyone in the economic, financial and social sectors, but will also leave a new and long-lasting legacy, through the highest law of Malta, which will serve our country for generations to come.