

Address to the Nation by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta on the occasion of Republic Day 2018, 13 December 2018

Introduction

On the 10th of December 1948, the United Nations brought into being the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is a special year, which commemorates the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration being promulgated. This is an event which has been of such momentous importance, to the whole of our human family.

This historical moment and its commemoration must remind us, and the entire world, that universal human rights are not the privilege of the few.

Universal Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms belong to all of us, whoever we are and wherever we come from.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

During this year of the Republic, we have the opportunity to review and evaluate whether, as a nation, we are sufficiently informed and educated about these rights. We also have the opportunity to measure our successes and deficiencies, against the benchmark of the Universal Declaration.

Fundamental Human Rights represent the foundations, upon which the fullness democracy and peace are built. Indeed, these are the strongest roots of our Republican Constitution.

I believe that the Universal Declaration, alongside our Constitution, must always be the cornerstone of the ways in which we live together, and how we treat one another.

I am convinced that, when we have the necessary understanding and respect towards the Constitution, then our behaviour, the quality of our lives, and the social environment of our country will become stronger.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is universal, which means that these rights have no borders and are not limited to any nation.

For this reason, we must insist that the rights of visitors and newcomers to our islands, including migrants, must be upheld in their fullness, without complacency or favouritism.

The effective observance of human rights can only take place when democracy is also respected in its totality, because this is what guarantees equitable access to the sources of dignity in society.

The various statements by the political leaders of our country and the measures that they have taken over the years, alongside their assurances of further measures, are all an indication that our country is committed to address social injustices.

Such injustices are delaying our efforts, towards the fullness of democracy.

In this way, we will also be avoiding the risks of social tensions while strengthening our Republic.

This is why:

- If a single child leaves school without learning basic skills;
- If one person waits an unacceptable number of years to receive justice;
- If one worker is subjected to precarious work;
- If a single person must wait to access dignified housing;
- If one family is not lifted out of relative or absolute poverty;
- If one person is a victim of human trafficking;
- If one woman is being exploited and subjected to violence;
- If a single woman is discriminated against, in terms of the difference in wages earned by men and women;
- If the representation of women in Parliament remains minimal;
- If clientelism continues to triumph over meritocracy;
- If these injustices persist;

then we will not be enjoying the fullness of our democracy and the safeguarding of our human dignity.

Furthermore, no economy can celebrate human dignity, unless the needs of the most vulnerable are kept at the heart of its operations. For this reason, the vulnerable must receive all the support that they need.

An economy that truly upholds human dignity is one which ensures that nobody is pushed to the peripheries of our society.

It is through this essential understanding, which forms part of the early political history of the people of Malta, that we have created a social welfare system that has protected thousands of Maltese and Gozitan citizens from the threat of poverty and social exclusion.

I appeal for this social welfare system to remain a priority, above and beyond the pursuit of economic advances. The past has shown us that, even in the absence of economic abundance, it is possible to protect those of us who are most in need, **because this is the right thing to do.**

I urge for this period in our history, of exceptional and unprecedented economic growth, to also be a time in which we work together, to strengthen and develop a culture of permanent social solidarity.

With the utmost conviction, **I once again appeal** for the values of social justice to enlighten our path and to inform us, as a nation.

Without social justice, I am convinced that there cannot be the fullness of democracy and long-lasting peace.

European Parliamentary Elections

In today's world, we are witnessing the results of what takes place, when governments abandon the social contract in favour of excessive private accumulation of profit. People not only lose hope in the established political class, but also, they seek reassurance in populist ideologies.

It is useless for us to urge our peoples to disregard populism during the European parliamentary elections.

Unfortunately, there are millions of people in the Member States of the European Union who are experiencing deprivation and who feel irrelevant, because they have been excluded from socio-economic and cultural life.

When "social Europe" is becoming more of an "economic Europe", it is unacceptable that 1 in 4 Europeans is living in poverty, and is thereby excluded from the services that used to make Europe so proud.

Modern Technology

A strong democracy depends upon the people having the necessary knowledge, to fully participate in fostering the common good.

I am glad to see that our country is at the forefront in applying innovative technology, and it is rewarding to see thousands of people from all over the world gather in Malta to discuss the workings of this technological progress, through which we are creating new niches in our economy.

However, **I believe** it is also the time to assess the knowledge and the potential of our people in this area. We must ensure that, in the process of this necessary and important technological expansion, we do not create a new social exclusion, the so-called "digital knowledge divide".

On the other hand, it is essential for us to ensure that our democracy is not manipulated, from behind the scenes, by corporations that transform the intimate details of our lives into a commercial product.

A manipulated democracy is false and dangerous, because it distinguishes between a superior class with knowledge at its disposal, and a sub-class that carries on a lower quality of life, because it lacks the necessary knowledge.

Constitutional Reform

I welcomed with enthusiasm the nomination of representatives, from both of the main parties in Parliament, to form part of a “steering committee” on constitutional reform.

After so many years of assurances to begin a process of constitutional reform, pledged repeatedly by both political parties, this much-anticipated process now appears to be moving from words to action.

The initial work of the steering committee will be to propose the way forward, regarding how the process of constitution reform will be conducted. These developments have given me the hope that there is the political will to implement constitutional reform.

Let me also take this opportunity to reassure everybody that the process of constitutional reform will be an exercise in participation, for all of the people who wish to be included.

Nobody will be excluded, because the Constitution is a legitimate instrument for everybody, and all of our people must feel encouraged to make their contributions, to render our Constitution more relevant in today’s world.

In fact, **I urge** all of us to seize this historical moment, and to make constitutional reform an educational exercise and a democratic participative process, as one united people.

There is the need for the people to bring forward their aspirations, to create the desired transformation in our society, and to invigorate our democratic institutions. In this way, we will be assured of the necessary tools and mechanisms to develop a Constitution that is relevant in the 21st Century.

This process must be an essential component, of our efforts to strengthen our democracy.

Public Life

I was pleased to be informed of the establishment of the Office of the Commissioner for Standards in Public Life. This Office means that not only do we accept the necessity of such standards, but that there will be a Commissioner who focuses on the standards that must be embraced by people in public life.

I believe that all people in public life should be ethical individuals and a good example to our people, while also promoting the good name of our country.

When this is not the case, a great deal of damage is done to the reputation of the Maltese, and our country.

Without pointing a finger at anybody, **I believe** that we need to examine our conscience and to ensure that everyone who enters public life understands their responsibility, to offer a genuine service to our people and our country.

The people of Malta deserve to have principled individuals in public life, so that the people and the country will receive genuine services and the highest esteem.

Means of Social Communication and the Media

In a full and effective democracy, the right to freedom of expression is sacred.

However, this does not mean that we can abuse this right.

The ethics of those who make use of social media, and of those working in the diverse sectors of the media, have become more important, in an ever changing world. Modern technological progress has led to real time news reports, which are available from everywhere on the earth.

Today, anyone can presume to be some kind of journalist, by passing on his or her views through modern means of communication. Unfortunately, some individuals abuse these means of communication, without taking into account the consequences of their actions. The media, therefore, shoulders a higher responsibility to report the truth.

Fake news has become the order of the day, with the risk that people will believe it and be alienated from the truth.

I therefore urge those who use social media, to be respectful in the way they communicate their diverse views.

I also urge all of those who are in public life to continue to be measured and respectful in the ways that they use such means of communication, because it is their responsibility to set a good example.

On the other hand, **I encourage** the professional members of the media to continue strengthening their services, by working together. This is essential, to maintain the highest levels of journalistic ethics and to overcome the challenges being posed by sensationalism, prejudice, half-truths, and outright lies.

From the Perspective of Social Justice

For another year of the Republic, from the perspective of social justice, I am pleased to note important developments in the healthcare sector. In particular, there is good news of international recognition, with Malta achieving 9th place in global indicators regarding the sector in general.

In the social sector, I must acknowledge statistics that reveal a reduction in the risk of poverty in Malta.

However, we cannot forget all of those individuals and families, who have not yet overcome this social inequality.

In education and training, I note with satisfaction the reduction of early school leavers in national indicators.

However, we cannot forget the 2 out of 10 young people who leave school, without basic skills.

I am also pleased to note the reduction of absenteeism, an increase in people committed to lifelong learning, an increase in students furthering their studies at a tertiary level, and greater access to vocational training.

In the area of housing, the publication of the White Paper brought hope to thousands, who are in a precarious position because of rising rental and property prices.

Although work has begun, there is more that needs to be done to address concerns of social housing.

In the sector of Human Rights, I applaud the decision taken by the authorities, to assist those individuals whose claims for refugee status were rejected. The launch of the national strategy for integration represents a significant step forward, to achieve effective social justice.

In the area of industrial relations, I have noticed with satisfaction the positive conclusions of several sectoral and collective agreements, including, for the first time, the agreement with the unions representing the members of the disciplined forces.

I am particularly pleased by this development, because I have always believed, that those who work so hard to protect all of us, deserve the best conditions and the utmost respect.

Children and Young People

Our children and young people remain central in my considerations and my thoughts.

While we have many reasons to be truly proud of the achievements of so many children and young people, in areas of academic, artistic, sporting, and cultural achievement, I remain concerned about what they tell me in their schools and on other occasions, when I have met with them.

The question of the environment in our country remains a cause for concern to our children and young people. They require us to be far more prudent and ethical, regarding the ways in which we treat our natural environment. Their thoughts about the important need for green spaces, and their concerns about what is happening to the Maltese countryside, remain prominent in the dialogue that we have together.

Difficulties of stress and challenges of mental health are also among the issues which are often highlighted by children and young people. They are concerned about an educational system that is still too stressful, even though positive measures have been undertaken to address this challenge.

Over the past months, I have been pleased to note new efforts by student groups, and organisations of young people, which are taking initiatives to address the stigma that surrounds issues of mental health. They are also encouraging an important sense of social conscience and support, towards all those who are experiencing challenges of mental health.

I will never forget the many times I have heard our children and young people speak, with growing urgency, about the issue of bullying.

I will never forget one particular young girl who, with a broken heart, spoke to me in front of her schoolmates, about the way she was being bullied. Her bullies went so far as to say they hoped that she gets cancer. I will never forget the tears in the eyes of her friends, as she shared her narrative.

Freedom of expression cannot mean that we say anything, in any way we want. Such freedom brings with it responsibilities, and cannot be abused. We must learn, from a young age, that respect towards one another is the only way for all of us to live in a full democracy, and in peace.

On the other hand, I am pleased to acknowledge the recent enactment of the new legislation, Vote 16, which is giving 16 year olds the right to participate in the election of the country's leaders.

However, I must also state that I do not understand how, while we believe that such young people have the ability to choose our leaders, they do not have the right to participate in positions of leadership themselves.

The participation of our children and young people is necessary. Above all, it is their right, which emerges from the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The need for greater emphasis on the participation of our children and young people was further reinforced by a Position Paper, that was recently published by the National Institute for Childhood, within the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society. I am pleased to say that this position paper will, in the coming weeks, be presented to Parliament.

For this reason, while I urge the inclusion of our children and young people to become a structural part of our ongoing processes of democratic participation, I also appeal for us not to drag our feet any longer, to legislate a comprehensive Act on the Rights of the Child, which will enforce the full mandate of the Convention, which our country signed and ratified in 1990.

Next year, in 2019, we will commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Therefore, **I urge** our authorities to celebrate this historical milestone, by ensuring that the rights of our children are fully protected by national law.

Let me also take this opportunity to **encourage** our children and young people to enter into the voluntary sector, to achieve certain necessary skills at the earliest possible age, namely, the skills of critical thinking, active citizenship, and leadership.

This appeal is also linked to the latest indicators from the EuroBarometer on Youth, which state that the participation of Maltese young people in the voluntary sector has decreased by 4 percentage points.

Senior Citizens

Our senior citizens deserve all of our respect, because they have given so much to our Maltese Islands.

From the conversations I have had, with many senior citizens, I often hear their concerns about the challenge of loneliness. However, I am glad about the many initiatives, being taken by our authorities and civil society, for our senior citizens to remain active.

I urge our authorities and civil society to use the skills, the experiences, and the desire which so many senior citizens express, to continue contributing towards the common good and prosperity of Malta.

I also encourage our educators to create opportunities for intergenerational encounters, between senior citizens and our children and young people.

In this way, the values that our senior citizens have developed, to build a resilient Maltese society, will be passed down to our younger generations.

Educators

I have always spoken about the great importance of obligatory education. In this context, let me commend all of the teachers who are educating the people of Malta. I appreciate the great complexity of your work, for the benefit of our younger generations.

Therefore, **I appeal** to our authorities to ensure that educators receive the best resources, and have access to high quality systems of support in the best interests of our children and young people.

I also urge the people of Malta, to show the due respect towards the teaching profession, and I urge our young people, to consider education as an opportunity to be of service to their country. Let me commend the educators who continue to teach our children, beyond obligatory education.

Thank you for the work that you do, for the socio-economic benefit of Malta.

Gender Pay Gap and Gender-based Equality

Statistics from the Structure of Earnings Survey, published by the National Statistics Office, show the drastic difference in pay between men and women. It is of serious concern that the more education a woman acquires, the greater the gender pay gap and the disparity in income.

As we all believe that increased education brings greater access to opportunity, it is worrying to note that more education could mean more discrimination.

Our country must strive harder, in the field of gender equality.

It is my hope that in the years to come, through affirmative action, this gap will not only close in terms of pay, but we will also see a greater presence of women in positions of leadership in our country.

This will contribute significantly to help all of those individuals, most of whom are women, who are caught up in abusive and violent relationships.

We require greater impetus, to move forward from our excellent legislative framework against gender-based violence to an effective action plan, which addresses the patriarchal culture that, unfortunately, still exists in our country, to the detriment of both women and men.

We must work with our children and young people in their schools, to ensure that respect for one another forms the basis upon which our mutual relationships are built.

We can never have a full democracy, or peace, if, amongst us remains any person who does not yet respect human dignity.

Conclusion

Democracy is the best means that we have, in today's world, to celebrate human dignity and to safeguard the observance of human rights and peace, in our communities and in Maltese society.

This is my last speech as President of Malta, on this beloved feast of Republic Day.

I must admit that I have felt privileged and honoured to have this opportunity to be able to share with you, as one of you, these reflections about the things I truly believe in.

This has been a privilege, bestowed upon me thanks to the representatives of the people through Parliament, where for the first time the nomination of President of Malta was reached through unanimous agreement, both by Government and Opposition, notwithstanding my coming from the Government benches.

I hope this consensus will continue for my successors, because the President of our nation should have no party but should serve the people, with loyalty and with a conscience that goes beyond any desire for popularity.

Therefore, before I conclude, I wish to express my gratitude to the Government and Opposition who received my criticisms with respect, and accepted a number of the proposed suggestions.

I wish to commend all of the workers, in the diverse socio-economic sectors, for their tireless services, which they give to our country thanks to their efforts.

I wish to commend all of those who are creating dignified and quality employment in our country.

I also wish to commend the business community of Malta and Gozo, who are taking their corporate social responsibility seriously, for the benefit of Maltese society.

We must strengthen the partnership among workers, professionals, and the business sector, to ensure that our nation creates a dignified and prosperous future for our children.

Above all, I wish to thank the entire people of Malta and Gozo for the respect and support they have given me.

My gratitude also goes to those among us who have criticised me, perhaps at times in haste and with lack of forethought, because I have learnt from the experience.

I learnt from everyone, especially when I was amongst you.

I learnt from our children and young people.

I learned most keenly about how we are capable and competent in our capacity as individuals, but even more so when we are united, and mindful of one another.

Today, more than ever before, **I believe** that we, as a nation, have the ability to be unique.

We have the ability to ensure that nobody is left behind.

We have the ability to strengthen unity, and moreover, to nurture peace among the nations.

Our children want us to be united, and they want Malta to be a country in which nobody is made to suffer or to feel excluded.

Our children want us to respect one another.

Our children do not want conflict, rather, they want our country to welcome them and give them peace of mind.

Dear young people of Malta and Gozo, **I urge you** to be activists for a Malta that is valued for its genuine work, for an inclusive and resilient people. God willing, you will be worthy to become the ethical leaders of our country, in the future.

Dear brothers and sisters of Malta and Gozo, I assure you that all the experiences we have lived through together will remain engraved in my heart, with love and tenderness.

Long live the Republic of Malta.