

**SPEECH DELIVERED ON 4TH APRIL BY H.E. DR GEORGE W. VELLA
ON HIS INAUGURATION AS PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF
MALTA**

Hon. Prime Minister

President of the House of Representatives

Chief Justice

H.E. The Archbishop

Hon. Ministers

Colleagues, Presidents Emeriti

Excellencies

Distinguished guests,

It is not easy for me to explain and convey the feelings I am experiencing on this occasion.

In all honesty, the overwhelming sentiment is that of profound humility in the face of the onerous task you have entrusted me with, and the daunting responsibilities that it entails.

My thanks go to the Hon. Prime Minister who nominated me for this position, and my gratitude to the House of Representatives for accepting this nomination and placing its trust in me, by consensus, in the name of the people of Malta.

I feel truly honoured at the prospect of joining the list of prominent personalities who, before me, fulfilled this role and carried out extraordinary work, in the best interest of the Maltese and Gozitan people. I cannot fail to pay homage to the memory of those amongst them who passed away , and wish every blessing and good health to those predecessors who are still with us today. I pledge to take

onboard all the good they have done, and build, whenever possible, on their accomplishments.

Allow me too, at this stage, to salute the memory of my parents, and of all those who educated and guided me throughout the years, by instilling in me the ethical values and sound morals, on which I based my life throughout.

My special appreciation goes to my wife, Miriam, and my children who have enriched my life, and gave me great satisfaction.

Above all, I want to thank The Almighty, who led me to this day, and ask Him to keep me and our country under His protection.

The reasons that led me to accept this high office are many.

The predominant one is of course that of guaranteeing the well-being of my country and of all fellow Maltese. More importantly, we should aim to achieve the just and equitable distribution of the fruits of this well-being, and see to it that the burdens of leadership and social responsibility are shared by everyone, depending on the possibilities of each individual.

The classical concept of charity barely has a place in contemporary society. I am firmly of the belief that help is to be provided by way of right, and not as an act of charity or favour.

At the same time, we cannot allow ourselves to think that, thanks to our country's remarkable economic performance, there is no material poverty among our citizens.

This is indeed a challenge, and I take it upon myself to keep up the attention placed on those in need, by my predecessor H.E. President Emeritus Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca.

It is my belief that the best interests of the individual, the safeguarding of social rights, and the quality of life should prevail – for both Maltese and foreign workers – as well as for the migrants we are under obligation to welcome among us.

The Presidency will continue to lend a sympathetic ear to those facing difficulties, and provide refuge to all those who seek it.

As a President with a medical background, I will be taking a keen interest on the development of the health sector in our country. I will be doing so by following closely and encouraging the implementation of advancements in this field, which are so vital to a healthy population.

I hope to continue witnessing the respect that has been shown thus far towards the ethical and moral bases of the medical profession – above all – respect for life, from its very inception to the individual's very last breath. It is none other than this respect for ethical, moral, and social values that elevates the dignity of, and respect towards, the individual in our societies.

While we rejoice at seeing our elderly enjoying longer lives, and encourage them to remain active, we have to take every possible measure to ensure that the economic situation of our elderly does not oblige them to lower standards and the quality of the dignified life they deserve.

We proudly- and rightly so - boast of a multicultural society, one that is more liberal and espouses values beyond our traditional ones. We should, however, be equally proud of the fact that our society is far from amoral.

Our society continues to be caring, understanding, supportive, and generous. Of this we have ample examples.

During my Presidency, I will engage myself on another sector that is equally very dear to me: Education – both academic and vocational.

Without education there can be no social mobility. Likewise, without education there can be no economic development or the development of those capabilities needed to plan a better future.

I here refer to holistic education, not only one that leads to employment, but one that is enriched and deepened by an appreciation of the arts, culture and crucially, by a sound knowledge of the world beyond our shores. .

The term Education to me also implies personal investment in the wide-ranging competencies required in the sectors of industry, the economy, the variety of services, technology – not least information technology – and the range of tools afforded by social media, which are evolving on a daily basis.

I will be doing all I can to urge our youth to embrace these capabilities, through which they will be able to grasp opportunities that emanate from the widening and strengthening of professions that one expects to find in today's and tomorrow's employment sectors. .

To each and every one of our youth, we need to give the possibility to develop the talents they were born with and nurtured while growing up.

The political aspect of the protection of the environment was my first interest when I was first elected to Parliament in 1978. So many things have changed in the world since then. Yet the size and resources of our country remain unchanged. One major change was the pressure being placed on our natural environment, and the increasing challenges to sustainability. The threat of the 'built-up' environment as opposed to the 'natural' environment is all the more evident, and is becoming more apparent..

During the course of this Presidency, I will be recommending rigorous adherence to regulations and scrupulous decision-making in the interest of sustainability, and our ultimate obligations towards future generations. This will not only apply to the built-up environment, but also to air quality, marine pollution, and other measures that counter rising global temperatures.

On top of these priorities, during my Presidency I promise to work unceasingly to address with absolute attention - the strengthening of national unity.

This unity does not come about by merely wishing for it. We have to work hard to achieve it. There undoubtedly remains the need and space for different and divergent opinions, but in the same fashion, there needs to prevail a genuine and reciprocal respect. Our exchanges and discussions have to be dignified, based on civic and correct demeanour, and never result in attacks of a personal nature. We need to continue reinforcing those civil liberties for which we have striven over the past years, and eliminate all forms of discrimination. We need to fortify women's position in society and in the workplace. In this particular field, we have

to guarantee those rights, which remain elusive to women to this very day, and without which gender inequality will continue to prevail.

Much as I value the outstanding contribution made by social media to human exchanges, also in support of freedom of expression, I yearn for less abuses on these means of communication, where I have the impression that norms and restrictions otherwise implemented on printed media and broadcasting do not always apply.

This definitely does not contribute to national unity.

In the context of the evolution of Maltese society along the years, national unity also includes dialogue between the State and Ecclesiastical bodies, as well as between the different creeds observed by us Maltese and foreigners amongst us.

My sincere call goes to our Members of Parliament, whom I urge during their debates especially with their adversaries, to retain a vocabulary, tone, and content that befit the highest institution of the country.

I have always believed in leading by example.

We need to introduce anew, a genuine respect towards our national symbols. Respect towards the Maltese flag, and everything it represents. Respect towards our national anthem. Respect towards our national language. Respect towards our history and cultural heritage. Respect towards our Constitutional structures and our laws. Above all, respect for the Supreme Laws governing our country as embodied in the Constitution of Malta.

These are the foundations of national unity.

This unity can only be reinforced when there is consensus, when respect for each other is the order of the day, and when no civil tensions and industrial disputes threaten our daily lives.

Over the decades, we all have – some more than others – contributed to the development of the splendid country we have today. We are far from perfect, and still have a lot to contribute to leave a better place for upcoming generations. We still have our differences on the way our institutions work and operate, about the rule of law, the powers of administration, and about executive structures.

We still carry on our national conscience the black stains of atrocious acts such as the murders of Karin Grech, Raymond Caruana, and Mrs Daphne Caruana Galizia. All of this does not befit the peace-loving character of us Maltese.

This is the main challenge to which I will dedicate all my energy during my term, and I solemnly vow that, with the cooperation of each and every one of us, I will leave no stone unturned to eradicate these divisions.

For unity to reign, there has to be a sense of security in our society.

By this I am referring to security that requires constant vigilance and watchfulness against both domestic and foreign factors.

I therefore wish to take this occasion, on behalf of all of you, to thank and salute those involved in the safeguarding of our society and our country, for their daily sacrifice which enables us all to sleep serenely at night.

In the name of the people of Malta and Gozo, I express my appreciation and respect to our law enforcers, the Armed Forces of Malta, the Malta Police Force, the Civil Protection Department, doctors and paramedics, as well as volunteers who help out and provide their input whenever it is called for.

To all of these I say – Thank You.

Security is also felt when there is economic stability. These favourable scenarios do not grow out of thin air, and when they materialize they should not be taken for granted. Such a reality is always the result of the work and the efforts made by investors, entrepreneurs, commercial operators, administration structures, and most of all, is the result of the labour of Maltese and foreign workers who pull up their sleeves every single day.

To these too, I say - Thank you.

This is exactly how I wish to see our people – united – to celebrate important anniversaries such as those we will be commemorating this year: 55 years of Malta's Independence, 45 years since the establishment of the Republic, and 40 years since the declaration of Freedom. These are historical events and political achievements that made our country what it is today.

Apart from these, this year will also mark the hundredth anniversary of the 'Sette Giugno' events of 1919.

As President, I expect this first expression of unity and political maturity, to manifest itself in the coming weeks, as we hold elections for the European Parliament.

I make a heartfelt appeal for this democratic exercise to be conducted calmly, with full respect towards voters and candidates alike, and in a demonstration of political maturity that is worthy of every mature democracy.

In my capacity as President, one of my foremost duties will be that of guarantor of the Constitution, even if I should point out, that our Constitution at no point mentions or describes specifically the duties linked to the Office of President of the Republic.

My duty is to preserve the Constitution and see that it is respected. The same applies to our Constitutional structures that are so necessary for the fulfilment of democracy and rule of law. These are tools that we need to protect in a modern, democratic, progressive, and economically-dynamic society. It is only through the proper use of these instruments that we can pre-empt and counter the deterioration of democracy.

When we identified lacunae, or realised that guarantees in place were not enough, or felt the need to upgrade some elements, there emerged the urge to introduce changes to the Constitution to rectify these shortcomings. This desire has been transformed into concrete work already by a Steering Committee under the lead of President Emeritus Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca.

The exercise, while still in its early stages, has already been enhanced by several contributions in the form of advice, suggestions, and other pertinent input.

I have to acknowledge the fact that over the last days, there have been considerable developments towards the implementation of the Venice Commission.

As President, I long for this process to be taken forward with due thoroughness, in close consultation with experts in the field, advice from academics, input from the political class, civil society, voluntary organisations, interested members of the public and more broadly, from all walks of life in our society.

This needs to be as widespread a process as possible, one that is based on mature and well-informed discussions, so that we reach agreement on what needs to be changed. This way, we will bolster our Constitution for the better.

In ensuring that this exercise remains as open as possible, there is the likelihood that it will eventually lead to the holding of a Constitutional Convention.

While the need to reform in earnest is being felt, I hold that we need to be diligent and cautious in our approach. While efficiency is paramount, we should not rush with unnecessary haste.

Ultimately, what matters most is not what we agree upon or jot down on paper, but the will to observe and respect what has been agreed, in the interest of better serving our people.

Respect does not come our way unless we ourselves show mutual respect.

I will, during my term of office, strive to reduce and if at all possible eradicate, the tensions – some more acute than others – that still exist amongst us.

This applies particularly nowadays, when the political debate in Malta is not any longer the direction that the country should take, but rather consists of a healthy race to decide who can best provide economic success and enhanced quality of life to our citizens.

Today's world is a better one.

I do not have enough time on this occasion, to list in the detail they deserve my many fears on the direction that the international community is taking. Fears that range from the negative effects brought about by populist movements, extreme right politics, relations between world powers and economic blocks, climate change, organised crime, the desperation linked to irregular migration, and a thousand others.

I strongly believe that Malta has a constructive role to play both in European and in the international contexts. Ours is a country that is small in size, but one that knows how to be effective. We can be influential in the same way we were in a number of instances in the past.

In the international arena, we can only move ahead if we are respected. We are neither a military nor an economic power. We do not have the political clout to impose. But we can be respected and relevant if we are credible and competent.

This is what happened in the past, when Malta pioneered initiatives on a global level.

We have an important role to fulfil in Euro-Mediterranean relations, in bringing Europe closer to the Arab world, in the future development of the African continent, and in inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

In international fora, we ought to be clear in our appeal for peace and the cessation of international and regional conflicts.

We need to keep insisting on the safeguard and protection of minorities, displaced persons, occupied peoples, and those whose basic and fundamental rights are still being denied.

Equally clear should be our condemnation of the exploitation of foreign workers hailing from developing countries. Let us not shy away from speaking up against the lack of controls on the manufacture, sale, transportation of weapons, armaments and ammunition. Against trafficking in narcotics and of people by criminal organisations.

We should take pride in stating that, even in foreign relations, morality should guide our actions.

We will be able to do this more vociferously when, as I very much hope, Malta will be elected to take up a non-Permanent Seat at the UN Security Council in the years 2023-2024.

In a neighbourhood that is so sensitive, it is in our country's and our region's interest, for Malta to act as a centre of peace, and inter-cultural, inter-religious dialogue.

Before I conclude, by way of appreciation, I wish to salute all the members of the Maltese communities in the Maltese Diaspora across the globe, and assure them of the respect I have for them. I am convinced that they too, have a contribution to make to the objectives I highlighted today. I know for a fact that our diaspora

boasts of talents and competences that can be put to excellent use for the benefit of Malta's enhanced reputation.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,

On this occasion, where you endorsed me as our country's President and the President of each and every one of you, I felt obliged to speak frankly and share with you my vision on what I wish to see happening during my Presidency. I also promised you that I intend to undertake several initiatives for the good of our country. This will not be possible without the backing and support of each and every one of us.

Following the example given by those who held this high office before me, I sincerely aspire to be the representative and repository of the much-desired national unity in Malta.

My Presidency will be a silent and impartial one, serving as a moral guide towards the attainment of our country's national unity.

I will do all it takes to be worthy of the trust you have placed in me, and will be representing all the people of Malta and Gozo with no exception. I will be the mirror that reflects the needs felt by Maltese people at every level, and an instrument for these needs to be addressed. I will be the voice of those few who feel that their voices are not strong enough, and a shelter for those who feel shunned by society.

My wife Miriam and I will be doing our utmost to represent the people of Malta and Gozo with the dignity they deserve.

For us to succeed, I ask for God's guidance and for the support of each and everyone of one of you.

Viva Malta Repubblica.