

President Vella's Speech during Working Luncheon with Resident Ambassadors

Verdala Palace, 22 July 2020

Introduction

I welcome you all warmly at Verdala Palace. I am truly pleased at this opportunity to host you all.

We have all come to appreciate that such events are not to be taken for granted, and I am sure you are as glad as I am to be able to meet physically, not virtually, in one collective gathering.

The reason behind this invitation is to first of all catch up with you in an informal setting – hopefully to turn over a new leaf.

At the same time, I also wanted this to be an occasion for us to reflect together on the effects that the pandemic has left on the world as we know it, on the way our countries addressed this challenge and finally the effectiveness of existing systems of international governance.

These were not easy months for my Presidency, as the machinery naturally had to slow down. From constant engagements and meetings with the people, my wife Miriam and I were confined at Sant'Anton with a very reduced schedule and no access to our friends and loved ones.

Malta too looked so different, quiet and subdued.

From the hustle of daily lives, our vivid interaction, open-air and sometime loud discussions on anything and everything under the sun...to the eerily, empty streets of our beautiful capital, Valletta and Sliema as well.

In times like these one appreciates more than ever the sense of purpose that a good day of work brings with it, the value of family, and the security of having a routine.

I wish to convey my thanks to those Heads of State who along these months expressed sentiments of support and solidarity with me and the People of Malta. I was very pleased to see that our contacts could still be maintained and nurtured despite the obvious obstacles.

Only a year ago, we would not have imagined what lay behind the corner.

The rumblings were, however, already there.

I have regularly questioned whether the global health system in place are equipped well enough, and whether they have enough foresight to prevent such a dramatic scenario.

We have traditionally restricted our focus on political threats to stability and neglected the obvious impacts of global health-related matters.

We have also, for decades, overlooked the work that remains to be done to eradicate centuries-old diseases such as leprosy, malaria, tuberculosis, viral infections and finding the causes and cures for cancer.

I pointed this out during the Lecture I delivered at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow in the first few days of January of this year. On that occasion, I referred to the ever-increasing threat of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR), as a possible global threat to humanity, which is

an ominous and serious threat to global public health that requires attention and action across all Government sectors and society.

This is threat the effective prevention and treatment of which is a must. More and more bacteria are becoming more and more resistant to known antibiotics.

Only a few days following my speech, we started to learn of the devastating spread of the COVID 19 pandemic.

In a matter of hours, we faced a global public health crisis, global economic upheaval and widespread uncertainty. The pandemic blindsided international organisations, prompted individual states to take unilateral actions and ushered in a new chapter of rivalries.

Above all, the virus spared no one and touched everyone one way or the other.

I for one, was very fortunate when one considers that I could make it home safely after my trip to the United Kingdom in March, only a couple of days before obligatory quarantine was enforced.

I was all the more lucky that following my very pleasant encounters with His Royal Highness Prince Charles, and Prime Minister Johnson in the same 24 hours during that visit, I was happy to have a clean bill of health!

Joking aside, even when the worse is over, things will not return completely to normal. We are living through a transformative event, that will change the lifestyles and choices by us all.

We need to pause, take stock of where we are and plan carefully where we intend to go.

Malta's record of how we dealt with the pandemic, I state with pride, was **excellent**.

Only nine deaths were registered, all with underlying chronic conditions. The meticulous, diligent planning that the Health authorities laid down, coupled with a sense of discipline, and above all trust by the general population, resulted in an impressive rate of success.

My heartfelt thanks, once again go to our health workers and their families for the sacrifices they endured. We were very fortunate that we did not have any deaths among our health workers, in the same terrible way some of our partners had to endure.

The same sentiments of appreciation go to the hundreds of other front-liners who kept us all safe, at the risk of putting their own lives in danger.

The general public too, all of you included, did their part.

I thank you and the members of your Missions for having cooperated fully with Maltese authorities and for participating in this national exercise of both discipline and civic maturity.

Cooperation and trust were key to this success.

From my meetings with stakeholders, a particular point struck me, but did not surprise me. I was told that the majority of Maltese employers - even in the sectors that were worse-affected like tourism - were

ready to consider selling their assets rather than doing away with their employees, to keep the business afloat.

This goes to show, in a significant way, how Maltese society remains rooted in human values of generosity and compassion.

This is the Malta I have always believed in, and the one that has unfailingly overcome hardships, without losing its soul.

Lessons Learned

Amid the disruptions and fears, COVID has also brought with it a number of lessons we should learn. The one that springs immediately to my mind relates to the fundamental importance of technology.

From a tool of innovation and research, technology turned into a tool of survival.

This is how we worked, this is how we taught our children for months, this is how we shopped and this is how we kept in contact with our loved ones.

In the longer-term, the international community, and individual Governments will need to invest more heavily in innovation techniques. We simply cannot, even remotely risk that the world comes to a standstill.

It remains to be seen how the pandemic has revolutionised our traditional patterns of schooling and work. Very interesting observations have emerged from the way we managed to adapt to a more restrictive environment. I mention teleworking as one example. In the Maltese context at least, but I am sure in your own countries too, shifts to online work, where circumstances allow, is a new reality that seems to be here to stay.

Changed International Dynamics

On the global level, it is clear that we need to introduce some fresh and creative thinking to this whole issue and the multifaceted impacts it is bound to have on our lives, and possibly also those of the next generation.

This uncertainty goes beyond fears for our health.

The structures we have invested in and rested upon, nationally and internationally, for decades are not enough.

Not one individual country can do this alone and that no country can consider itself immune. Gross Domestic Product, economic growth rates and individual financial wealth meant nothing in the face of a virus like COVID.

The European economy has been hit harder than previously expected. It has been described as the worst drop in GDP since the Second World War and will be affecting different countries differently depending on when lockdown was enforced, if ever, and on different economic structures.

Ultimately, we were made to realise that we are all equal human beings, and we are all exposed to one and the same danger. This is very much an existential wake-up call, that the artificial differences we perceive, or have purposely created, mean just nothing.

Studies and theories are presently, and justifiably so, abounding on the long-term effects of the crisis. We still do not know if it is over yet, and if it will ever be, unless an effective vaccine is identified and distributed universally.

This all depends on whether the viral infection produces long-lasting immunity or not.

One of the most pertinent questions to pose at the moment, relates to the effects of the virus on global sustainability. The full-scale effect of COVID-19 on **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) efforts at the national, regional and global levels is yet to be determined.

The SDGs, with their universal scope, interlinked nature and drive to leave no one behind will be more essential than ever during and after this crisis.

Their relevance in these circumstances has been multiplied. All our countries have to increasingly investment in critical public goods and the provision of basic services like health care, clean water and education which help to build resilience and resistance.

Most recent estimates indicate that some 3 billion people are without basic handwashing facilities at home.

If anything, therefore, the SDGs will become more important in the months ahead. The goals and targets set in 2015 are precisely the areas where progress needs to be made to build resilience and guard against future crises and where we will need to work to build back after the immediate tragedy subsides.

Let us also not underestimate the effects that the pandemic has had on the **international environment and climate**. The worldwide disruption caused resulted in numerous impacts on the environment and the climate. The considerable decline in planned travel has caused many regions to experience a large drop in air pollution.

Across the globe, lockdowns and other measures resulted in substantial reductions in carbon emissions. The shifts in societies' behaviour, caused by the coronavirus lockdowns – like widespread telecommuting and the use of virtual conference technology – may have a more sustained impact beyond the short term reduction of transportation usage.

Our tired, exhausted planet has responded.

We now cannot turn our backs on this evidence and get back to our usual polluting habits, in full defiance of these positive results.

One further aspect we need to reflect upon is that national borders are useless when it comes to dealing with problems that necessitate action beyond national or State limits. There are no national solutions to this pandemic, and even less so, 'patriotic' solutions.

What is required is a strong multilateral system, EU, UN and WHO included - that might very well need to adapt to be more relevant and responsive – but that are indispensable nonetheless.

We need more, and not less, multilateral cooperation.

It is my hope, as I am sure it is yours, that on the basis of effective multilateralism, the emerging partnerships between science, medicine and the private sector are closer to making a medical breakthrough in finding the vaccine and in identifying methods for preventing the occurrence or recurrence of the virus.

Food for Thought

Before I conclude, I wish to pose a few questions that I hope we will be able to discuss in more detail over lunch.

The obvious one in today's context is how the world of diplomacy has changed due to Covid – for the better or for the worse. Visits have stopped, meetings have been held online, missions were operating only virtually. Yet the world kept turning, and contacts were still kept. Are we looking also at a silent revolution of centuries of diplomatic practice?

Are we expecting COVID to have far-reaching social effects on globalisation? Many have argued that the pandemic will lead to

intensified nationalism, causing countries to turn from the global community.

I am also keen on listening to your own experiences, here in Malta and with your capitals. How did you manage to go about your daily business, especially when it came to consular matters like repatriations of your nationals. And, has COVID altered your working patterns in the Embassies and in your Ministries, for the longer-term?

These are all part of the jigsaw that we all need to put together to be able to plan ahead. It will be very interesting for me to listen to your first-hand experiences and, why not, also projections for the future.

I am happy that agreement has been reached at EU level on the post-COVID recovery funds. I only hope that this money is put to good use to satisfy the needs of national recovery plans.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, as the virus continues to take over our headlines and absorbs most of our energies and focus, we cannot lose track of the other problems and challenges around us.

COVID did not stop conflicts, poverty or people fleeing their homes and countries to escape violence and destitution. Minorities are still being mistreated and millions continue to live on the brink of starvation. Armaments and ammunition are still flowing being sold and smuggled.

As we invest our resources in combatting the pandemic, we cannot possibly diminish our commitment to resolving the other pressing realities that continue to militate against global peace and stability.

This could be one of the greatest trials in global post-War history, and it is one we simply cannot fail.

We all need to double up our efforts and pull our weight, collectively and together.

I thank you for coming today and for listening to my thoughts on the arduous times we are living.

I now wish to celebrate a new beginning.

I ask you to raise your glasses to your good health and your families, as well as to the mutual respect and friendship between our countries and Peoples.

Thank you.