

K O N F E R E N Z A  
**GHALL-GHAQDA  
NAZZJONALI**  
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Proceedings of the  
Conference for National Unity

Saturday, 27th February 2021  
VERDALA PALACE, MALTA



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## Contents

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Introduction	02
Speakers	04
Foreword	06
Opening Speech	10
Speeches: main panel	17
Other interventions	57
Social media comments read out during the conference	98
Closing speech	100

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## Introduction

## ***Conference for National Unity***

**Verdala Palace**

**27 February 2021**

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The Conference for National Unity, an initiative by H.E. George Vella, President of Malta, took place on Saturday 27th February 2021. Due to Covid-19 measures and restrictions in place at that time, the conference was presented in a hybrid format, with a small audience present at the Verdala Palace and a virtual audience following the live stream broadcast on the President of Malta Facebook page. The primary aim of this conference was to discuss – in a mature manner – the subject of national unity, referred to and discussed by the President ever since the beginning of his Presidency. A number of key speakers, all experts in their respective fields, were invited to lead the discussion and share their thoughts and experience in relation to the subject. Those present as well as those following the conference virtually, had the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions about national unity. This publication is a collection of speeches and interventions made on the day.

## Speakers

### ***Carmen Sammut***

Prof. Carmen Sammut is pro-Rector for Student, Staff Affairs and Outreach at the University of Malta. She is also a lecturer in the Department of International Relations and in the Media and Communication Department. She is also an experienced broadcaster and was appointed Chairperson of the Public Broadcasting Services a few months ago.

### ***Reno Bugeja***

Reno Bugeja has been an exponent of journalism for the past 44 years. In the last seven years of his career, he headed the news and current affairs department at PBS. He also served as editor of the national broadcasting station. He has won several honours for his journalistic work and is also a well-known presenter of current affairs programmes.

### ***David Xuereb***

Architect David Xuereb, is the President of the Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry. He has led various practices related to architecture, engineering, and management, and specialises in sustainable buildings for a low-carbon economy. He has also served as a lecturer in various institutions in Malta and abroad and is the author of several papers in his specialised fields.

### ***Andrew Azzopardi***

Prof. Andrew Azzopardi is the Dean of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing. He is a lecturer and researcher in the fields of inclusive education, sociology, and critical pedagogy, disability, and youth studies. In addition to international academic publications, he is a regular commentator on newspapers and a presenter of current affairs programmes.

### ***Mario Fava***

Mario Fava has been working in the field of Local Councils for the last twenty years. He serves as President of the Association of Local Councils, as the Head of the Maltese Delegation to the European Congress in Strasbourg, and as a member of the Maltese delegation to the European Committee of the Regions in Brussels.

### ***Simone Borg***

Prof. Simone Borg is an Ambassador for Climate Action. At the University of Malta, she heads the Department of Environmental and Resources Law. She is a lecturer in International Law at the Faculty of Law. Among other things she is also director of the Institute for Climate Change and Sustainable Development. And in addition to a number of publications, she also teaches at the International Maritime Law Institute and several other universities.

### ***Aleks Farrugia***

Aleks Farrugia is a writer and educator. He teaches Critical Theory and Politics at the University, and is Director for Research, Lifelong Learning, and Employability within the Ministry for Education. He has extensive experience in journalism, has published internationally, and is also the author of novels and short stories.

## Foreword

As I approached the two-year landmark of my swearing-in as President of the Republic, I felt the need to tangibly address those issues that keep us away from unity and create divisions between us.

I wanted to do this by giving an opportunity to all those who have an opinion on this topic, to voice their thoughts during a wide-ranging and most inclusive discussion.

I therefore called a Conference for National Unity. This event was open to all those who wished to participate, either by being present in the venue, Verdala Palace, or by participating virtually also due to the restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This publication is intended to convey, in a detailed and factual manner, all the points raised during the discussion. This includes speeches from speakers on the panel, as well as the questions, comments and suggestions received from the members of the public present.

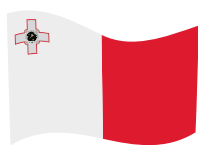
I must say that I am very satisfied with the outcome of this Conference as it has gone beyond what I, myself, expected at first. The arguments put forward were serious and showed maturity both in terms of content and interaction between all participants. The level of debate was high as the participants were prepared to listen and contribute. In this regard, I wish to thank all those who were pleased to contribute.

This is precisely the context in which I would like to see discussions taking place between us - without partisanship, without prejudice and without being personal and destructive in our criticism.

I am willing to continue listening, and to serve as a point of convergence and unity. With your support, People of Malta and Gozo, I will continue to take steps in this direction.

*H.E. George Vella, President of Malta*





K O N F E R E N Z A  
**G H A L L - G H A Q D A**  
**N A Z Z J O N A L I**  
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## Opening Speech

## ***H.E. George Vella, President of Malta***

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Good morning everyone.

First of all, I would like to start by thanking all those who were involved in the preparation of this Conference. I also wish to thank the panellists who agreed to be with us to discuss such a broad and complicated topic.

I also wish to thank all of you who have chosen to come in person to attend this Conference, as well as those who have chosen to attend this Conference virtually. Unfortunately, due to the regulations imposed on us by COVID-19, we had to reduce the number of people who could attend in person. I am sure that under other circumstances we would have had a different structure, and a much higher attendance. As you saw in the video, this theme of national unity has been lingering in my mind for years, especially during the last years of my political career and to this day, especially the last two years where I have had more time to reflect and express clearly how worried I am about this division we are living in our country.

The theme of today's Conference: "For National Unity", has generated much interest since we launched this Conference at the beginning of the month.

There were varied reactions – from those who said that it was a futile exercise, those who claimed that there might be a hidden agenda, to those who showed particular interest in discussing the subject.

Whoever wanted to be negative, assumed that this discussion is useless. Others have gone so far as to claim that this is being done to facilitate one partisan political motive or another.

Articles were written, there were letters in newspapers, social media was used and, as you know, all expressed their opinions. There were also those who presented very detailed and interesting documents.

I believe that everyone has a right to express an opinion. I also believe that discussing today's topic is, in itself, already part of the democratic exercise. This in itself was positive, because it was proof that we managed to spark a discussion.

I want to mention that there were even year four teachers in a school who asked students to discuss this topic and to come up with proposals, ideas, or slogans that

could serve as inspiration. I did not bring it here, but it is a document in which these schoolchildren wrote slogans, and made drawings that showed that they were also trying to show their interest in the subject. This fills me with courage because I truly believe that part of our campaign to make our country better must start with the education of our children.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the subject before us today is very broad and it would be unrealistic to think that with one conference, we will resolve everything. This is only the beginning of a process designed, first and foremost, to enable us to reveal and discover all issues that divide us, and to discuss this openly without prejudice and in a constructive manner.

No message was given that the discussion would be stifled, whatever the topic. We should be discussing all factors contributing towards renewing the division.

During the Conference, the panellists were given absolute freedom to talk about whatever they wanted to talk about and to say whatever they wanted to say. There were no restrictions and no conditions.

Some even criticised the choice of panellists. Irrespective of whom is chosen, one always finds a reason for criticism. What we wanted to ensure is that the speakers, and I hope even the audience members who will ask questions or make interventions, are only motivated by a constructive spirit, and I urge them to convey as much as possible what the people of Malta and Gozo really feel in the various areas of everyday life. At this Conference I wanted everyone to have a voice. As I already said, it was impossible due to the restrictions, but we tried to do the best we could.

I know that the causes of division that we can talk about are endless. Some of the issues are minor, and we can easily find a way to overcome them. But there are others that are deep-rooted and can even impact the foundation of what unity should be based on.

It is clear that the divisions that exist vary greatly – but there is no justification for not trying to redress minor causes, under the pretext that there are much bigger causes. I will not go into the merit of those fundamental issues, because I know that some of the speakers will talk about them.

I have already expressed – in a clear manner - most of what I had to say about the subject when we launched this initiative, during the Press Conference on the 6th of February. And I am not going to repeat it here.

I believe that, if by the end of this Conference, we will have at least agreed on the issues that divide us, we will have already taken a step forward. Irrespective of how small, it will be a step forward.

The second step would be that, in addition to identifying these issues, we will then be humble enough to agree on how we can do our best together to redress the situation. As I already said, we must be willing to address both small and large pits, if not ditches. But that is the challenge.

Having national unity does not mean agreeing on everything, but there are factors without which unity will never be possible. We can make up for this by looking for, and finding, what already unites us, and strengthening that bond.

Perhaps without realising it, there are actually many issues on which it is not hard to be united, or on which we are already united.

As already indicated, the range of topics is very wide and includes, among others, social justice, the administration of justice, the rule of law, environmental protection, social services, wealth distribution, economic policy, development plans, broadcasting, communication media, immigration and many, many other topics.

There is a lot to be said and questioned, and even debated.

I have already spoken about them when I launched this Conference, and without being repetitive, I ask you, Speakers and Participants, the following questions that still linger in my mind.

- Are there still symbols that capture the spirit of the Maltese people, or have these been allayed due to the diversity that Malta, like any other country, and as it should be, is embracing? When we refer to Malta, in our mind do we only include the Maltese or anyone who lives here among us and with us?
- Is society being exposed in the same way, to the benefits of institutions, to the distribution of wealth, and to services?
- Are social justice and economic growth really reaching those who deserve them and everyone?
- I also want to mention the environment – a subject which you are by now used to me talking about it. Are we looking at it as a collective responsibility, or is everyone pulling on their own rope?
- Last but not least, has the role of traditional and digital media become a tool for vilification instead of one of information and communication? This is a question many are asking.

I am very worried, for example, that we seem to have lost respect for each other.

Without respect we cannot appreciate each other enough.

We no longer tolerate opposing views.

We do not mind using derogatory, and sometimes abhorrent, terms on social media to attack others and those of opposing views.

It worries me that we seem to have lost trust in each other.

We have lost trust in all institutions.

As if everyone has become corrupt, suspicious, and untrustworthy. As if no one is competent. As if no one is honest.

This, as you know, is far from the truth.

If we want to start settling things between us, we must first admit where we are and roll up our sleeves to start fixing and building what has been broken.

What sense of unity are we passing on to our children and youth? Where is the sense of a united nation, albeit, as I said, with all its flaws?

We lead by example, and bad examples work against the good that can be done through the education of our little ones. It is needless to educate children if they then see opposing behaviour.

Education in the knowledge and appreciation of all that is Maltese, and all that makes us Maltese, is very important.

An education that teaches us who we are, and who we were.

An education that prepares us to face the continuous changes that our country, like small countries in a region with political upheaval, is expected to face in the future. How will we be able to address economic, political, demographic, and identity challenges, if we do not overcome the divisions between us? These are the challenges ahead and if they find us divided, it will be less easy for us to discuss them together and come to an agreement.

The more I think – the more questions come to mind. I hope that some form of answer will be given to some of them in this forum.

Let us talk in an open and calm manner.

Let us be realistic and pragmatic.

Let us not just point our fingers at others but try to identify what we can do to make things better.

I repeat. I am not expecting any miracles from this forum. I just hope that we will learn a lot from this exercise.

As we always say, the first step is always hard. Therefore, we need to work together on this project. We need to take small steps, but we also need to be determined to slowly get there.

I feel that this is our duty towards all those of good will who are upset about the situation. Towards those honest citizens. I feel that we have the duty to offer them a less divided and more united society. I also feel that we have the same duty towards future generations – to pass on to them a better country than the one we are in today.

Thank you.





Speeches:  
Main panel



### ***Prof. Carmen Sammut***

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'Divide and conquer', divide et impera, is one of the oldest political strategies we know of. Dividing to break alliances that if they are to be strengthened, can potentially overpower you.

This was the policy employed by empires to rule widely spread territories and that fuelled hatred to consolidate their power and hold it for centuries. In Malta, the politics of division, the divisive rhetoric, continued to stand out even after the Independence. Polarisation has become so powerful that we rarely get a chance to ask: "Who stands to gain today if we remain so divided?"

I hope that this Conference will give us a platform to reflect – in a serene manner - on what can bring us together. I believe that the moderate majority seems to have been orphaned because there is little space off the battlefields. National unity does not mean being weak, it actually needs a stronger backbone, to confront opposing currents every day.

We often look with suspicion at those who talk about points of convergence, because in the past we have seen many missed opportunities towards a more consensual

society capable of making itself meritocratic, inclusive, and clean. We know that these ideals require more than legal and structural changes. They need a more difficult and deeper reform at all levels of the political culture.

Today we are challenging a context where polarisation and division are the typical features which characterise the identity of our Republic. Division is often triggered by emotions, sometimes genuine, but often manipulated by systematic campaigns in the game for political, economic, and cultural power. The language became belligerent, and rarely respectful, perhaps due to frustration and anger. The fast ways of social media have no filter, and everyone increases the dose in arguments that rarely lead us to justice; neither social nor institutional justice.

The Norwegian sociologist Johann Galtung wrote that "peace is not merely the absence of war and conflict". Positive peace is not simply a pause between one episode of tension and another. Resentment boils up like a volcano that from time to time erupts and destroys everything in its path. National unity means working together for justice; for an egalitarian society and to guarantee an appropriate legacy for future generations.

Linked to justice is the need to safeguard our very limited resources for future generations. It is not possible to get there without a transparent and consensual policy to protect our land from strong business interests. 'Divide and conquer': that is why this concept often feeds electoral campaigns and then, whoever is in power, expects free reign to destroy our urban and rural environment with a negative impact on the quality of life of a whole nation. We cannot confront these local and international interests as long as we remain without some form of consensus.

In a world full of misinformation, lies and false rumours, truth easily escapes us, and we cannot be blamed for being suspicious. The road to trust takes years to build but you lose it in the blink of an eye. But with more trust, people will be more productive and happier, not only at an organisational level, but also at a national level. How are we going to restore and strengthen trust? Who is taking the first step?

We should create networks of action based on elements we agree on; it is unrealistic to think that we will agree on everything, every time. We need to start our reflections from somewhere. Fulfilling such ambition requires commitment and vision. And here, the figure of the President is offering us a possibility in an era where today a strong sense of leadership has become a challenge as you no longer find absolute trust in a superhuman leader who is expected to be an all-rounder. It is clear that a larger section of the electorate has chosen healthy scepticism vis-à-vis the political class,



and absolute loyalty to one political party or another is being extinguished through generations. Political secularisation is parallel to that which has eroded the traditional hegemony of the church.

I suspect that today's meeting is not a one-off event. I hope that it will not be a one-off event, because we will only succeed if, in our various roles, we commit ourselves to continuing to pursue these perspectives. The worst thing that can happen to us is that we get lost in platitudes. It was Anton Buttigieg, the second President of the Republic of Malta, who wrote this haiku originally in Maltese:

"The mule of the watermill  
has walked thousands of miles,  
and gone nowhere".

When we look back at history, I imagine us this mule of the watermill because we kept going round in circles in relation to the challenge of polarisation. What if we cut the mule's ropes and let it roam and work and ramble? How greater can our achievements become if we find solutions instead of creating obstacles?

I was born two years after the Independence and from time to time in my life, I hoped that the political polarisation will calm down. I considered it to be an element leading to meaningless tribal conflicts that hampered the path to building the nation. No wonder there is disagreement about national symbols and their significance: the George Cross on our Flag, our National Days, and the meaning of some important monuments such as that of the Great Siege. Around twenty years ago, my colleague Godfrey Baldacchino had implied, that Malta is "a nationless state". To this day, I think that the concept of 'nation' has not become any clearer and stronger than it was then.

I would like to mention a positive experience I have had in recent years where women from various political parties and civil society, I am referring to more than 20 women's organisations, have worked together to push for a number of initiatives promoting gender balance in Parliament. These initiatives in synergy, will hopefully spur change that will lead to a more representative Parliament. What kept many women from entering politics? It is true that there are many structural shortcomings, but when we spoke to promising women, they all mentioned the macho politics built on cruel tactics and mudslinging, not just on public figures. Who wants to encumber themselves with public service considering they are entering a world of suspicion and trouble? Then there is retaliation, as Mahatma Gandhi said: "An eye for an eye, makes the whole world blind".

In bad times, who knows how many of us said that our country deserves better. Today Malta has reached a stage where more citizens are living a comfortable life. As the economist Lipset had predicted in the 1950s, wherever basic needs are met and the country has a satisfactory Gross Domestic Product, people's expectations regarding values, liberties and civil rights rise. Expectations in terms of quality of life, standards of governance, transparency and governance rise as well. Over the past year, when the world slowed down our busy lives due to the pandemic, we have had more time to reflect and assess what really matters. As we examined our lives, I hope we also had time to weigh our relationship with the community and what we would like to see in what is being considered as 'the new normal'.

Let me also say something about the media, before concluding. Because I believe that the media has the potential to create a common public sphere like when we followed what was happening with the COVID-19 virus pandemic and related events and realised that it had no borders. We had no choice but to fight it together. A pandemic that made us aware of human interdependence. Although audiences are extremely fragmented, the media still provide platforms where people concentrate on issues of national interest. And there are moments where they also become a platform where the people of a whole nation come together to help each other. And here, a very clear example is the Community Chest Fund: we set aside division because, regardless of the elements which divide us, there will be people who will benefit from what is collected. But these moments of unity quickly fade away.

There is a journalism culture that is common in Mediterranean countries that seems to reinforce the political divide. Two writers, Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, described our region's media system as "pluralistic and polarised". And we find that countries like Malta, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, and other places have this kind of system because the processes of democracy started late, secularisation was slow, economic development also took place after other northern countries and this has impacted the way the media industry has developed in our country. At the same time in these contexts, public broadcasting has always remained a political football; where governments often try to push their agenda and the opposition complains that it is not given enough visibility. A perpetual situation that keeps repeating itself no matter who is in government.

Pluralism in broadcasting started exactly thirty years ago and extended the media system we had until then, where political parties and the church had a tremendous influence, first on newspapers, then radio and later even on television. There have been several moments where the divisive impact of political party media has been put under scrutiny. I remember for example in 2005, Lilly Gruber (an Italian journalist who later became an MEP) complained to the European Commission about the fact that the political media in Malta are abnormal. And since then, the same criticism has

been made many times. It was as if we were dominated by a neoliberal narrative that anticipated that if Malta set aside traditional political journalism, commercial media would flourish. As if, it was implied, that there would be more room for fairer media and that it would better serve the interests of the public. But it is also worth noting that all media outlets operate in a polarised context and despite all good will, they are often caught up in these currents and even in other commercial currents that might be more insidious.

If we look at the *Eurobarometer* survey, we see that in Malta, the level of trust in media is one of the lowest in all of Europe. This also applies to online media. We need to work hard to give truthful information and filter out what is speculative or sensationalism that misleads readers simply because of clickbaits. So far, efforts to reach a consensus on an updated *Code of Ethics* for journalists have failed. Instead, the line between genuine journalistic news (with *news value criteria*) and content intended as advertising or public relations, is becoming increasingly blurred. Add to this the commercial challenges, as the pandemic is even continuing to threaten the existence of media organisations since the source of advertisements has dried up.

If the media is one measure of democracy, I currently feel that we are in an existential crisis and this is not just a result of the heinous murder of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, although this has had a dreadful effect. While collegiality is becoming rarer, it has become too common for media outlets to undermine each other's integrity. While some criticism sometimes is deserved, I suspect that many of these attacks are more fuelled by animosities, personal or political rivalry, rather than the need for scrutiny. I also note that among the best investigative reports published in the local media (as has also happened abroad) have been the fruit of collaborative projects between journalists of various organisations, who were wise enough to recognise their limitations if they were to remain caught up in the tradition of 'divide and conquer'.

I know I took up a lot of time so I will stop here. But to conclude, I hope that today's Conference will demonstrate that the time for the long-awaited Constitutional Convention, Your Excellency, is now and that there must be an immediate commitment to a not protracted outcome that also takes into account the arguments raised today.



## ***Reno Bugeja***

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The call for national unity has been echoing in our country for a long time, but to this day it is like a mirage. Thank you, Your Excellency, and I am convinced that the presence of so many people and the interest generated by this Conference shows the enthusiasm, the eagerness of the public, that the mission in favour of national unity will commence and hopefully it will get us somewhere.

here are various factors that over the years, have created divisions and wounds that have not yet healed. And these open wounds will not heal on their own if we, as a society, do not make an effort to address what is causing division.

Certainly, our country must further underpin its democracy by strengthening institutions and through the active participation of all. We need to grow in political maturity which from time to time is seen in some of the decisions taken, but then fails to be evident in others.

I am certain that my fellow speakers will come up with other arguments at this level. In my speech, I would like to address the most obvious divisions that emerge and are evident in social media, among others.



From the political aspect, politicians need to set an example by not shying away from correcting the vile, low blow, and unjust attacks of their own supporters on social media. Actually, as Chris Peregin also said earlier, they should also make sure that their broadcasting stations serve as a tool not to increase divisions but to try to reach to more consensus and awareness of what should make us a society.

I am certain that politicians engage people to follow what is written on social media but prefer to turn a blind eye to such comments or face away, even if I essentially believe that they do not agree with them. You rarely hear comments that dissociate themselves from certain comments.

Harsh comments on social media can be visible symptoms of the division whose roots might stem from our political system. I dare say that the flaws of the political system, that although democratic, it has its shortcomings and there is much to be refined in it. Among these, I am only mentioning that our political system has been reduced to a two-party system, and as is often said that they have become like tribes.

This dualistic system has resulted in making the winner of the election as “the winner takes it all”. This greatly weakens the idea that we all make part of one nation.

I believe that if there is good will, the constitutional reforms that have been on the nation’s agenda for a long time, can help improve our democratic system. However, one understands that in a democratic system, there must be room for debate and agreement is not always reached. This is agreed by all.

But it is a great pity that in our society the political tribalism of us and them is leading to disproportionate divisions which I regret say, blur the beauty and goodness of our country and our nation. This, in my view, can begin to be addressed by allowing democratic tools and institutions to work with serenity and independence and away from the conditioning that rampant partisanship may bring.

There is a need to foster a genuine culture, that can be promoted by politicians themselves, that in politics there is always the alternation that almost comes, I would say, naturally after two or three legislatures. If we divide today, we cannot expect to unite tomorrow. All this can lead to a more normal country and a society with less political bitterness. *Since His Excellency announced this initiative, many people presented newspapers or documents to outline their expectations from this forum for national unity. Most of them are valid comments.*

In my humble opinion I think that perhaps no one understood more the gesture of this forum than the bishops. Allow me to draw some points from the Lent pastoral letter that

came out last week in which the bishops spoke clearly about what needs to be done to foster the desired unity.

They explained that, if we look at each other like siblings, we will be able to work together for a society of dialogue with a kindness that respects, strengthens and seeks the truth. As we dialogue, added the bishops, we must acknowledge the wounds that we are faced with as individuals and even as a society. The bishops urged us to heal the wounds, in a spirit of forgiveness. They explained that forgiveness does not mean impunity, but it is about not allowing our negative experiences to enslave us and condition us. Forgiveness frees us from the vicious circle of revenge, as we continue to work wholeheartedly for justice and righteousness. In this way we will be able to overcome the prejudices, and the walls that were built over the years. I think that they hit the nail on the head.

Traditional media, and not just social media, can be a divisive tool but if used properly it can also serve as a tool to strengthen national unity, as Professor Sammut also explained well. The role of the media in a democratic society is essential but so is freedom of expression -which is sacred in a democracy. This must be exercised wisely and responsibly.

In recent weeks there has been a debate, which is also before the court, on political broadcasting stations. There are many arguments to be made for and against and are all valid. But in my opinion, the most crucial thing is not the broadcasting stations and newspapers which all, more or less have their own editorial line and agenda. It is the media consumers – the public - who needs to have the tools by means of education on how to read, listen and watch the media and come to their conclusions in an informed way and not through blurred lenses of political prejudices, or the way the media sometimes, often rather, tries to manipulate public opinion.

I believe that we are still a long way off in this regard. Prejudices often based on political alliances and perceptions, are seen among others in the many comments in the news portals. I think that here, online portals need to discern their way forward on whether to allow this burning fire to continue to fuel to the detriment of unity in society.

Although I agree that political broadcasting stations are increasing the dose of partisanship and division, I do not think that their closure, more and more in today's digital world, could be the solution we want and need.

What is happening in Malta with the political broadcasting stations, although it has its peculiarities, is not unique. As an example of this, we can consider America, FOX News and CNN, and see how they also have their declared alliances, perhaps with more finesse than the Maltese political broadcasting stations. As a starting point, Ranier Fsadni's proposal in an article in *The Times* for political parties to agree on a minimum code of ethics, could set

us on the path to recovery in this regard.

At the end of my speech, I wanted to mention other divisions that are not so political, although sometimes they are also fuelled by politicians, with homophobic and racist sentiments. These are also of serious concern as they undermine harmony in the community and society and are a threat to national unity.

Humanity's history has repeatedly shown that fuelling this spark of hatred can lead to tragic consequences. I believe that even here we must work much harder to keep the troubles from growing.

Thank you very much.



### ***Jessica Sultana (Communications Officer at the Office of the President)***

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We received messages of appreciation for this initiative and also messages about the need to ensure that public discussion is less stifled by political parties. Perhaps a question made was this: "If political parties aim to retain or gain power, how can they genuinely, and not through empty words, be committed to national unity?"

## **Carmen Sammut (Moderator)**

Thank you, Jessica. I think this is a question that has come up a lot in today's discussion. Reno has already mentioned what Ranier Fsadni said, for example, to have a common code of ethics between the political parties. At least having a line not to cross. What do you think Reno?

## **Reno Bugeja**

Minimal. I think that such an initiative should be taken. He did not actually propose big things, he proposed the first step that I think should be taken. And just as for elections the political parties meet and discuss among themselves how to organise certain things, I think it should not be impossible to revitalise their broadcasting as well.

## **Carmen Sammut (Moderator)**

A comment I wanted to make is that we are living in an era where it looks like the difference in ideology between the political parties has died. So, they have agendas that are very similar. What happens is, and I think the process has already begun in view of an election to be held by 2022, as far as I know, they start meeting with various groups having different interests and see what they propose and sometimes their electoral programmes end up with very similar electoral proposals. So I cannot see why we cannot come to an agreement on what we are mentioning here this morning. Your Excellency, we have already started to come up with proposals, you see, while we are discussing, and not just talking.



## ***Perit David Xuereb***

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Thank you, Your Excellency, for the invitation. Thank you.

Mrs Vella, distinguished guests, and all those who are following us on social media.

It is true that perhaps one would expect that as an architect or as President of the Chamber of Commerce I would speak or focus my thoughts on buildings or commerce. I have decided not to do so and perhaps I will disappoint you. I have decided however to give my personal perspective, which is focused, and based on the fact that I am a child of my parents who made me who I am now, and I am also a parent of my children, helping them to form an opinion and position in this society we are in. I will, perhaps, leave the talk on obligations of politicians and institutions to others, and from my end decided to focus a little on the responsibilities and obligations we have as citizens in our normal world, both as parents in the family, as well as leaders in our enterprises, in our workplace. Because that is where, I think, we can truly make an impact.

In order to talk about the subject of unity which is very close to my heart - and that is why I very much appreciate that His Excellency invited me to talk about it - I started by

trying to discern what divides us or what we think divides us. And I have a couple of notes. We Maltese say: "You are either from the North or from the South or Gozo". We say: "You are tall, or you are short". We obviously say: "A man or a woman". We sometimes also make a distinction on levels that do not help: that you have money, or you are poor; that you support blue or red; that you support England or Italy; that you are straight or have relationships in which you develop your love differently; that you are very good at art, or science; that you are, for example, an intellectual, able to attend university, or you are very good at manual work; that you may come from other countries, that you appear not to be Maltese, when in fact you are Maltese and are living in Malta; that you are disabled, and the word disabled is a difficult word because it often means you have something missing. This week I met persons who are blind, they came to the Chamber of Commerce and we did not talk about what they do not have, but how much better they are at what they have, much better than us.

So, when you start to think a little bit about these differences, I think that we like to label people as this or that, and then we debate what is best, whether it is one thing or another. So, we have this virus, and I am not referring to COVID, but that of individualism, of the fact that people love... We love football, but you win games because, despite all differences, everyone is united, everyone loves the same thing, everyone is emotionally connected and then you win games. And the Champions League and the leagues are won, as far as I know, not by those who have the best team and football players, but by those who have the best teamwork, who are most united. And unity is not achieved because one is white, or all are white and all are dark-skinned, but because there is actual emotional unity, the heart that enables the minds to work together and then score goals and win games. And I wish... and I have done so in my life. I have always surrounded myself with teams at work, at the Chamber of Commerce.. wherever. We actually work this way and where the heart unites, the mind gives us the opportunity to diversify, to think differently in order to become stronger.

And so, when we talk about national unity, well, I do not think of unity too much as a concept, but rather as a matter of the heart. And I must ask: "If we had to do a survey and see what the majority of Maltese people think, what are the things that unite us?" Let us try to focus on those. And I realised that there are a number of things. And I realised that we talk about political parties, that political parties agree with these things. Such as, for example, good governance. We have been through a lot, it is true, but today we all realised, and it is evident as I feel it in my position, that good governance is fundamental, that nowadays you no longer get answers such as: "Do not worry, we will come up with something". People out there want good governance. Therefore we need institutions that address that good governance, where the truth and the difference between good and bad is clear.

There may be many people who speak intelligently, but if in the end, deep down, when we have a glass of beer in our hands, we are discerning on what is being said, if it does not feel right then it is not right. If it feels right then it is probably right. So then, we want all of us to feel that we can trust each other, and we can also trust those who are leading us, because we really feel that something like that is being taken seriously. But there are other things that form part of the social foundations. The obvious ones are:

- Food. When speaking of food, we do not refer to the quantity, but the quality of food, so that we really feel healthy and that we are living a good life.
- Water. Maybe we do not talk much about water, but water – the quality of water - is a topic that will, by time, become very important.
- Housing. That we live in a home that respects our personality and our lives, and the expectations of our families.
- Social equity. We talk a lot about this subject!
- Having a political voice. You do not have to be in Parliament to have a political voice, you can be on the streets. As we are doing today. Political voice. It is important that we express our thoughts, so that we can put them together and bring out their value.
- Justice and peace. I think it is obvious.
- Having the right to income and to have a job. Therefore, feeling respected.
- Education. Very serious.
- Health. We do not need to talk about how important health is. Both physical and mental.
- And also having, for example, gender equity, not making any distinction between men and women.

If we were to take a snapshot of Malta right now, and for example capture all these areas that constitute the basis of what unites us, of what really makes us a stronger society, how would this picture look? Using today's terminology, how would this selfie look? Can we have a common cause then to really have something that unites us and actually create one common discourse? That one builds on the other? Let us try to do this job well. I do not think that we are far away. In fact, our emotions, are aligned on these basic topics. So, what do we want?

For our society to be united, we must ensure good health, both physical and mental health, especially now in the midst of a pandemic; we must ensure that society feels that justice is always served, and that we have no doubts on whether to trust our decision-makers. And of course, I cannot not mention the need to talk about the respectable way of using our resources. When we talk about climate change, we are talking about a zero carbon economy. You know this is close to my heart. And so these are the things that in themselves give us the opportunity that every little decision, at home, with our families, in the workplace, in institutions like the one I lead, in Parliament, on social and other media...



these are the opportunities for us to put them together and make sure that we are focusing on what really unites us.

Society does not grow, I will conclude, society does not grow when the GDP grows. This perhaps may sound strange coming from the President of the Chamber of Commerce. It would be pointless to continue observing the GDP grow because eventually, someday, those who are young and still have a career of 50, 60 years ahead of them will realise that if we are not careful, and if we continue to grow no matter what, taking land heedlessly and heedlessly using water and our resources that means that there is no sustainability. In a few more years, we will have nothing to live on. And so, having a thriving economy, is more important than a growing economy. And so, we need to make these choices – that our little ones today have very clear in their mind – as part of our diction, as we develop and paint the painting that shapes our society. When that starts taking shape, our society develops.

Genuineness. This is very important! To be truthful; honest; serious, sometimes in certain circumstances we need a good dose of seriousness. Telling the truth; being healthy; having clear values, if need be, written on our diaries, on our calendars, that we know what we stand for, we know what we represent; respect; and inclusion. And not the other way round, obviously. Let us focus on these, these are the things that unite us. These are topics that no one, I think, has a problem with. So we need to treat everyone with dignity and respect and that is maturity. This is the maturity of a community, of a nation that really has an interest in uniting people.

And here I coincidentally wrote the same thing as you Reno on the code of minimal respect. At the political level, at work, in our families, we need to know what that minimum is.–And hopefully, one day, it will be more than the minimum, but let us start with the minimum. Let us take the first step – and know how to deal with, how to talk to each other, even when we disagree. Let us disagree, let us debate, as long as we respect one another. I did this many times and I always came out stronger, even if my argument was the poorest.

So I think that this is an opportunity. Our difference, in terms of how our brains work, is our strength. It is the way we can really unite. Contrary to differences related to our emotions and our hearts. And this distinction is the thing I wanted to focus on the most in my short speech.

Thank you.





## ***Prof. Andrew Azzopardi***

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Your Excellency, colleagues, good morning.

*I think we can understand what unites us when we understand who we are.*

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to start with the fact that the scales and I are currently going through a tough time. Let me give you 3 examples:

- First: the scales and weight. There is currently a conflict. As my daughter says to me: "Dad, the buttons have become a danger to those around you!"
- Secondly: the scales of justice. There, too, I am more than a little worried when I saw my country sliding down and observing how we have hit the bottom because of a bunch of unscrupulous people, who pulled down the institutions that have not yet recovered. Let us not kid ourselves that all is well. Day after day we hear stories making us ask: "Do I really live in this country where the criminal and the politician, the civil servant and those who were supposed to be enforcing the law, blatantly con the nation, steal from us, kill our journalists?"

- Thirdly: the scales and quality of life. I admit that I am currently leaning to a race against time and sometimes I do not have enough time to recover, to enjoy the small victories I make in my life with my friends, and I am sorry for that because it is good to do a lot of work, but it is also good to make time for reflection.

For the latter, in order to try to find some balance in my life, once every fortnight or three weeks, I would go to trim my beard at the barbershop. In the past I remember my father taking us to l-Lafoj in Hamrun, up the road next to Saint Gaetan Parish Church. And there was the barber with his hands resting on that chair inviting me to come to him as if he were impatient for a victim. He had the razor in hand, which he sometimes sharpened using his belt, wearing his white gown, and I was there, probably one of the few times I did not budge because of this terror, as I imagined that with the slightest of movements, he would cut a piece of my ear. Because that is how I felt, as he grabbed my head between his hands and rubbed the blade against the back of my neck and the sideburns, and then he started to zigzag with the scissors as if he had a challenge against time to get rid of me.

Not today. Today my visits to the barber, who as you know were the first surgeons, is an experience I look forward to. It helps me because I forget the problems and the worries I face. This visit to George, known as il-Ballun, and Patrizio, who loves super bikes and has enough, beautiful, tattoos, to be able to decorate one of these walls, is worth as much as a recreational outing and a 'school from the streets' at the same time.

There I really perceive the state of the country. There you have your finger on the pulse of the nation. Not in books and sophisticated documents drafted in Queen's English, or in some Webinar, but in that moment while waiting our turn – because just like at the outpatients everyone is called in at the same hour – I laugh and at the same time reflect between one story and another by George or Patrizio.

Apart from some jokes, sometimes vulgar and politically incorrect, 'wisdom' emerges. I am not joking, quite a lot of 'wisdom' emerges. I learn a lot from what is being said there. The interaction is worthy of a PhD seminar, as we are saying, between a vulgar joke and some heresies that are not appropriate to share here, and you will notice what people are saying, what they are thinking about, what their complaints are. And as George, of whom I know all about -because he is too generous with the stories about his life- starts speedily swinging the razor back and forth, as if he was carving the David of Michelangelo and not Andrew of Lina, you will also be listening to the people out there. The people who count.

But I really love this man because he is genuine. Because George is the People, and the People are George.

*And do you know what the people are saying, Ladies and Gentlemen?*

The people are saying that they are fed up listening to politicians who think that the people out there are a bunch of idiots. People are telling us that what drives our identity as a nation, what must pass through all of our veins, democracy, is being dismantled with every consultation process taken place and that is later brushed aside. When the political dialectic is used to alienate and when the political class does not bear its responsibility.

*And do you know what the people are saying, Ladies and Gentlemen?*

The people are saying that they want to see more resistance to the uglification forced upon us by speculators. You are uglifying our country; can't you see this? Stop! Our environment is a living symbol of what you are killing. You are dismantling our memories. For example, that tree that I used to see on the road to Rabat when I was a child going to l-Għadira with my mother, father, and brother, on a hot summer day, and that I kept seeing until the bulldozer plucked it out from the roots. This tree reminded me of the sounds and flavours of summer, the time with my family, time to play and have fun and the many lessons our parents taught us as they watched us grow, enriched with a decade of the rosary that nourishes the soul as well.

The greed for money is separating us from what is right. You are taking our country away from us.

*And do you know what the people are saying, Ladies and Gentlemen?*

The people are saying: "Let the civil society have its say". It does not matter if we disagree, but it is important not to shut down voices. Actually, we want more voices, and voices that contrast the wrongs of politics. Is there any joy in a Christmas tree decorated with white, dull light? Or would it be better when the colours are varied and flickering without any understanding of the sequence? We do not achieve unity by not talking and by holding hands, or because we sing the kumbaya. We achieve it because all voices find themselves in a safe space, and from there doing what is right.

*And do you know what the people are saying, Ladies and Gentlemen?*

The people are saying: "You drained us. You took everything away from us with this economy you created with as many heads as Hydra", that serpent that we refer to in Greek mythology. "You conned us into believing that wealth lies in economic wealth, but all you are doing is trying to alienate us as you are taking our time from each other. The Maltese Dream, based on the American Dream, has ruined our family, our friends, our sense of

community. Leave us, let us live our lives". As George the barber says, we work but we enjoy ourselves, we earn money but we spend it, we work to live and not live to work. We focus on family wealth but more so on family happiness. This is the wisdom you find in a shop intended to take care of your beard.

Today's Conference is important because it reminds us that our identity is based on pillars. Who we are. Because over the years we have created an identity that is shaped by these ingredients: mutual respect; love for what is right; communion; and watching each other's back.

Leonardo da Vinci died five hundred years ago. Let us take a cue from his life. This wise inventor who found comfort not in any flag or in any anthem, not in any language or in any ancient custom, or any folk dance, that no one is able to dance the proper steps without tripping over the sash. But he found his freedom in unity: the way we live and behave. For as we know, the great da Vinci is among the first voices to speak of unity, to speak of the need to unite the body, science, and humanities. He talks about the vision he had of finding our respite when we are based on Unity. And he did not separate the sciences from the arts, for he realised that these complemented each other and did not separate man from animals. "We have to be united", this was his philosophy.

So on our plate today we have this important dualism, which started from the moment I sat down on George's hard and uncomfortable sofa. The sense of identity is identified in behaviour and not in any caricature or colour, sound, or piece of fabric. The argument is that simple.

And like archaeologists, we need to dig and search in the most gentle way, as the character of our nation is covered under the dust, Ladies and Gentlemen:

- the dust that covered the way we look at those who need help;
- the dust that covered joy, and instead we thought that money and material wealth are the solution;
- the dust that covered the fun and pleasure of sacrifice that we no longer want to make.

And my message is, that while identity is complex, at the same time it is a very simple concept. Identity is the generosity found in the barber; the accuracy and sense of responsibility symbolised in the way he uses the razor; the sense of welcome he gives to all those entering this community experience. Because like when we visit George, the personal becomes public, and you become part of the narrative, otherwise that is not your place.

And this reminds me... Our identity is the discomfort of the barber's hard sofa, as I already told you. So, we must ask:

- do we identify ourselves with the community?
- can we build identity not on nostalgia but by nurturing and overflowing our culture with our experiences?
- do we feel obliged to build what is demolished?

This is a *unique* opportunity, but it should not be the *only* one.

Let us have the courage to say it as it is. This country is divided on everything. Divided on bands, on politics, on saints, on firework factories, on sports. Also divided on whether we are supporters of that candidate or the other. Divided because our environmental organisation is better than yours, because our autism organisation is good and yours is flawed. We do not see eye to eye on the most fundamental and human issues, for example, immigration and prisoners' rights.

This is not just a matter of a flag, a national anthem, or a religious frenzy. But our identity is shaped as the conversation at George's shop is shaped, between one laugh and another, between one experience and another. Sometimes you feel comfortable, sometimes you do not, sometimes you listen to what others have to say and start from there.

Ladies and Gentlemen, with regards to this subject, we are not in a good place. I know because I spoke to people. The divide in social classes, in politics, between believers and non-believers, between those who do not give a toss and those who want the wellbeing of society: all of this is evident and tangible. But let me refer back to my visit to my friends George and Patrizio. Their English might need working on, their Italian even more so, but between songs drumming on the radio, there is a lot of humanity – which should be the crux of everything, you know.

Symbols make sense after we come together. They make sense when we are in a position to make our lives better. Because otherwise the symbols remind us that we achieved nothing, that we are still wrapped in our bigotry, aliens from a world in which to succeed in surviving, we must take courage.

What defines us in society is not just the symbols, but the fibre that we have and that passes through the backbone of all those who live here and have made this land their own. The foundation of this nation has always been our values, and only then have the symbols emerged. We are a nation known for its hospitality. A nation nurtured by civil feelings, thirsty for excellence, hard-working, who knows how to love, who lies down under the shadow of the cult, who finds comfort in giving, who rejoices before God.

- But where does this leave us... or have left us?
- How can we connect with what has been so obvious and sweet in the past?
- What have we done to risk losing all this?

This country needs to step up and do two things: first and foremost, evaluate what makes it happy and joyful as a nation and what gave it that joy. And secondly, anchor itself to what is good and to common good so that the seas hitting it do not cause lasting damage and do not impede this nation from its path.

This is a nation that still has a mission, that of professing the beauty of unity. That if it wants, it can gather in reflection in the face of crisis, and that while throughout history it has often come close to direct confrontation, it has always managed to find a solution before it was too late. And thus, this makes a nation chosen to do the right thing.

Thank you.





## **Mario Fava**

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Good morning everyone.

Your Excellency, I would like to begin this speech by thanking the lady who has just spoken (please refer to pg 73), because she is certainly an example, and I think an important lesson that came out of this exercise that we are doing this morning, is that she came from another country, worked hard, put all her efforts to learn the language that welcomed her, and she came here speaking in the language that we are all supposed to embrace. And I think that this is a strong message and that it is important to be amplified. I think that this initiative taken by the President this morning is an occasion to put some pressure on all of us because I believe that it is a day that can give new hope even to those who are in a position to lead.

I believe that we are all Maltese, and this is the bond that should unite us. Back in October 2019, as the Association of Local Councils that I lead, and my speech will be addressing the local aspect because I believe that any change that needs to be made must come from the bottom up, not from the top down, and so our localities and communities are important, they are catalysts to make these changes, we launched

a vision, which we called "Resident First – Better Quality of Life". And the purpose of 'resident first' and not 'citizen first' I think in itself is significant because if we were talking maybe 20 years ago, 15 years ago, where we did not even have as many foreigners working among us or foreigners living in our country, there it made sense to refer to the word 'citizen'. But I think that in a globalised world, in a country where, as I said, we have a number of foreigners who are working among us, are living in our country, in our localities, and so forming part of our communities, it is important to use the word 'resident' and consider these people as residents in all the localities that we in one way or another run.

I also believe that this should be done because you cannot have change, especially at the local level, if you exclude a substantial number of people living in your community. And I want to give examples because, as Anthony DeGiovanni said, let us not start off with the idea that everything seems wrong, and we have nothing good. In various localities, both in Malta and in Gozo, there are a number of ongoing programmes where these children meet up with Maltese children, where there are exchanges, where there are lessons to teach the Maltese language and even for the Maltese to learn the language of these people. And so, integration and inclusion are a very important element when we are talking, even at the local level, about unity. Because you cannot have national unity if obviously as a locality, as a community, there is no unity. I remember, I am seeing here Mr Joe Mifsud... maybe 20, 22 years ago, I remember us stating how important it is to instigate this even in our children. An activity we had organised - perhaps it was one of the first activities that I took part in at that time of EuroMed - was when we managed to bring to our country a group of young Palestinians and Israelis. I remember that hearing them speak here you would never have believed that in their country and their land, they were involved in a constant struggle ever since their infancy. The way they spoke here and the way the future they imagined for their country were wonderful we did not even live like that here in those times. The problem is that when they return home, the seed that is sown in their field is a seed of hatred, a seed that does not give them space or a possibility that what they spoke about here materialises in their own country and that they would be able to embrace it. I think that this is a very crucial point.

The same can be said about children and I ask: "How happy are our children?" Because how can we aspire to have national unity maybe in another 5, 10, 15 years, if our children, the way of life we are giving them, and here we are also referring to the quality of life of the resident, because the quality of life is not only measured by the income you have, by the luxury you can afford or by the ability to treat yourself. Quality of life also means that if I have children and I cannot afford to buy a car to take them from one locality to another, or else in order to play, I have no choice but to take



them to Ta' Qali or I to take them to the Majjistral Park, but I live far away; they have the right to get out of their house, go down the sidewalk and find a place where they can play in their own locality, where they can meet, where they can socialise as well as places for recreation. And so, if we are not giving this to our children, and our children are already, from such a young age, because of the systems we operate, they are already depressed, how are we pretending or expecting that in 10 years' time, when they grow up and turn 18, 20, 25 years old, they will be open and able to relate well to other citizens and residents? And therefore, I think that in this context too, emotivity plays a big part in how our children relate even when they grow up.

And I also want to refer to the past and I think it is important to consider how one actually looks at the past. If we are using the present time, which is perhaps the most precious thing we have, and look at the past to, one way or another, put our fingers in each other's wounds, we will continue to use those memories to continue fuelling hatred towards each other. And I think that this is not the right way. But, if we look back and see what we have been through, both our ancestors and our country, well certainly there were difficulties which we do not have today. They have gone through war, they have gone through pandemics as we are going through now, they have gone through miseries of hunger, of poverty. But if there was something that united them and someone mentioned it as well, an important element that led them then as a country, together, to achieve Independence, achieve Freedom, achieve the Republic, what united them was surely the fact that they were Maltese and believed that if they did not work together, they would not become a nation. I think that this is something important that we should keep in mind. I think it is important that if we are going to use the present time to look back, not with the intention of learning from the past, but with the intention of using the past to continue to divide and sow hatred between us, then we will certainly not be able to achieve unity as a nation.

I also want to make reference, and it has already been mentioned, to social justice and equality. And certainly, if we want a democratic country you cannot have a strong democracy if you do not have these two elements that I feel are very important. And equality, as I said, is not just between genders, between men and women, or else between the poor and the rich. Equality is also about giving you equal rights and accessibility to every opportunity that others have. And if you have people, youths, children, who from an early age are deprived of certain rights that others, because they have the money, they are in a position to obtain them but because you do not have the money then you cannot do so, you will certainly foster a certain anger which you will then carry with you as you grow older. And so, this will make it even more difficult to someday reconcile in one way or another.

I also think that, sometimes, as the President mentioned in his introduction, when one talks about unity, one may laugh or think: "Listen, you are talking about something that cannot happen". But, of course, if everyone makes an effort, because we really believe in the principle, then I believe that it can happen.

I will conclude with the last two points. I think that it is important that even those who are in a position to lead, many times, and I have been involved in politics in one way or another for the last 20 years and if I haven't learned anything, I have certainly learned that putting our ego first is pretty bad. In the sense that if I have a project that I firmly believe that is beneficial, and I want to push it forward, most often if I push it forward on my own, there will be more opposition, there will be more objections, there will be, even due to envy, more people who will try to stop you from doing it. On the other hand, if your starting point is not who takes the credit, or whether you will be taking credit for that project, but rather getting onboard the widest possible group of people who believe in the project that you would like to implement, that they too will be part of it and make it their own, and even where necessary, if they take it forward with you, take the credit for it. What matters is not whether you have taken the credit for what you believe in, but whether what you believe in could actually be accomplished. Because it is futile to come up with the best ideas and the best proposals and it would be useless to have the best principles, if you will not be able to push along with the rest of the society, push that project, that opinion, that proposal towards implementation. In that case you might as well have done nothing, irrespective of how good an idea is. I think that even here, the important thing is not to die for the principle, but to live by the principle, to convince more people in order to be able to implement those principles.

And lastly, a recommendation perhaps...political leaders. Political leaders at every level and in every rank and position. I think we should refrain from words of partisanship which are often addressed only to the roots of that party or another but not to the society as a whole. I think we should manage the time we dedicate to politics to deliver the best policies, not to make insulting remarks that lead to more division. I think one should also question, whether in this country, a small country like ours, we can afford that throughout the full five years making up a legislature, the Sunday evening news are dominated by the speeches of the leaders made earlier on? It is understandable that if you are in an electoral campaign, if it is one year before the general election, their frequency will increase. But I wonder if there is a need for political parties to organise, on Sunday – throughout the whole five years - their own political activities with speeches that, like it or not, are of a partisan nature because without a doubt they are mostly at their own supporters. I think that here, then, lies the importance of the media. I think the media needs to take a step back and re-evaluate itself. I do not

believe that pluralism is contributing in any way. I believe that whoever is leading, or whoever is contributing to those broadcasting stations, can create division or unity. As Tony and other people said, rather than the broadcaster, it would be more important to focus on who is listening and how one analyses the message received.

And I would like to conclude with a short quote from a song that everyone knows for sure. I am referring to John Lennon's song where he is stating:

"You may say that I'm a dreamer,  
But I'm not the only one.  
I hope someday you'll join us,  
And the world will be as one."

And I think that this is important and so my appeal is to dream that we can have a better Malta tomorrow than that of today. Malta of tomorrow that will be more united than what we ourselves have inherited from our past.



## ***Prof. Simone Borg***

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Thank you.

Thank you, Your Excellency for this opportunity. I really enjoy seeing so many people dedicating their free time to really coming together and spending these moments and their lives to this very noble cause.

So, what makes us a nation can be analysed from several perspectives: the legal, the historical, the cultural. But ultimately, what do the Maltese, the residents living in Malta, feel makes them Maltese?

Perhaps the first easy conclusion is: we are Maltese because we are citizens and residents of Malta. This implies that we are not only Maltese people, but we are a nation state. I disagree with my colleague Godfrey here, who said that maybe this is something questionable. A State that gives us its name and distinguishes us from other nations. A State that provides the land where we live, where we share joy and sorrow, where we will probably rest forever at the end of our lives.

Many of us can say that as far as we know, even our ancestors were always Maltese. Generation after generation, here is where we were born, where we grew up, where we stay, where we work. We live here day after day. This land is our home.

Today, as we have heard, we are sharing this home with others who have chosen to live here. There are those who wanted to do so, others who needed to do so, others had no other option, that is the way things turned out. But before we come to the conclusion that this influx of people from other countries, has led to a different Malta than the one we were used to, we should remember that history repeats itself. Malta has always been a land that has seen a mixture of different people and cultures. The only difference is that in the past, this influx of people from abroad, happened before we became a nation, before our self-determination. In the past, therefore, the responsibility for caring for the Maltese islands was not in our hands. Today, with all the circumstances we are in, we are the owners of our country, of our home.

But are we really respecting these islands as our home? Can we still say or rather ask: "This Land, is it Pleasant?" (*Din l-Art, Helwa?*)

For thirty years I have been working in the field of Environmental Law, in environmental diplomacy, particularly on Climate Change that will affect these islands, which is already affecting us and the whole world. Many ask me: "But haven't you given up yet?" Others tell me: "If we cannot even repair pavements, how will we repair the climate?!" Scepticism never affected me, it never influenced me. Rather, the more I feel I am fighting for a cause that people see as impossible, the more I am keen and ready to fight for it.

But we cannot but say that this is the way many people think: that it is impossible to improve things on a large scale if we are not able to make improvements on a small scale. I think one can ask the same question when it comes to national unity. Dun Karm prays to God to "foster unity in the Maltese... and peace" (*seddaq l-għaqda fil-Maltin u s-sliem*). The poet always knew what to say. There is no possibility of unity if we do not have peace. There is no peace without unity. There is no unity and peace without justice. And to link these two aspects together, I wanted to focus on a particular aspect of justice: environmental justice and national unity.

One of the most controversial topics in our country is without a doubt, the protection of the environment. We are not alone. This issue is linked to divisions and disputes in other countries, even between countries. Like a family living in the same house, where the siblings, though all keeping themselves busy to take care of it, do not agree how to do so and how to use it wisely and sustainably.

Until we stop arguing and instead agree upon how to take care of it, our home will continue to deteriorate. We can see this in a national context, in a regional context like the Mediterranean; or in an international context: our planet.

Environmental law is based on a fundamental legal principle: *Neminem Laedere*: Do no harm: exercise the duty to protect: take care. Therefore, an independent nation has the freedom to choose and determine its pathways for development but it must do so on condition that it does

not cause harm, neither internally nor to other nations and places in the world. On a national level, we are free and we all have an equal right to enjoy this home, but this is a common home and so, freedom and right are tied to the duty to take care of it.

This comparison that I am making of the Maltese islands as our home, is not some romantic interpretation on my part. Environmental justice aims to protect ecology. And the word 'Eco' comes from the Greek 'Oikos' which simply means 'home'. Interestingly, the words ecology and economics have the same root: Home. Economy means: taking care of the home; Ecology: caring for those who live in the home. In an ecological context, this includes not only humans, but all natural resources and biodiversity.

That is why many Maltese, as in any other country, are very upset when they feel that someone is damaging the common home, for whatever reason. Sometimes it is a case of vandalism, of negligence that leads to environmental damage. Sometimes it is development. There are those who argue that development is good for the home because it increases wealth, it generates economic well-being, it raises the standard of living. But although a home must support its inhabitants, it must remain a place that welcomes all those who live in it, in order to improve the quality of life.

Most importantly, it must remain a home that sustains future generations such that tomorrow it can meet their needs by providing even for their livelihoods, without having its components weakened, damaged or, worse, lost forever. There is also another aspect, perhaps more related to the sense of archaeological culture of our country. Malta is Malta with all it has, because it is unique. What makes the Maltese islands is also our uniqueness.

We inherited this pleasant land, but to what extent are we leaving it such for future generations who have three vested rights:

- freedom of access to the home's resources;
- freedom to enjoyment the same or better quality of these resources;
- equal opportunities to enjoy the diversity of these resources.

But how do you achieve unity and eventually environmental justice? Many think that the solution is in the hands of the authorities. It is the authorities that must create and operate the necessary legal and administrative structures to provide sustainable development. The authorities certainly have the greatest responsibility in this sense. It would also be an asset if environmental protection achieves national consensus, both at the public and private level. Environmental justice requires long-term planning, involves everyone, but without a doubt, those with the greatest power, whether political or commercial, have the greatest responsibility to do more.



Those who benefit from the natural capital of this home, have a duty to restore what was taken from it. And they should replenish what they took, perhaps even in a different manner. So not only is there an obligation not to cause harm, but also to do good, to replenish what we take. But how?

Some examples... While, in the past, philanthropists have built orphanages, schools, and other social works, perhaps the time has come for the biggest developers of our country, maybe even the government itself, but not only, both public and private developers, to leave a true environmental legacy behind them. For instance, let us say they invest in an area of land within the development zone, not to develop it but to serve as a green recreational space and thus create social wealth, suitable for present and future generations. I hope that one day we will get to a stage where all parties concerned compete for social justice, working towards the 'Highest Common Factor' and not the 'Least Common Multiple'.

An independent nation, large or small, is equal to any other nation and therefore has a duty to behave as a good neighbour to protect the rights of all people and every nation. It is in this sense of mutual respect that unity and peace are developed. Protecting the global environment is based on this rule of 'good neighbourliness': the good neighbour. At a national level, we as individuals are all free to improve our social and economic conditions, but do we ever think how we are affecting those who share this home with us? How will they be affected? And above all, what are we leaving behind for future generations?

We may think that the solution lies in the hands of the decision-makers. This is true, however, as citizens we are all 'influencers' and we have a greater opportunity to make a difference if we engage in dialogue with those who may challenge us. With those who we feel are causing division because they disagree with the way we think about environmental protection. We must never underestimate the power of dialogue. In order to achieve social justice, like any other form of justice, we have the opportunity to influence those who lead, those who develop, those who use the environment.

The concept of sustainable development, which although as old as time, has become a buzzword since the Rio de Janeiro Conference in 1992, is still with us today as that path towards achieving a balance between the economy, social needs and the protection of the environment. But perhaps we do not recall enough that the tool for achieving sustainable development is dialogue between the parties. Between parties that disagree. Not a dialogue between like-minded people, but mostly, between those who disagree. After all, dialogue between like-minded people is easy, but dialogue between opposing parties brings about unity.

But is this possible?

Let me refer to an example set by the Maltese youth, I am referring to the Kummissjoni Nazzjonali Żgħażaġh. This Commission is made up of youth organisations with different

ideas, different ideologies, but they managed to agree on a vision and draw up a document on sustainable development, which was presented to His Excellency the President of Malta. They were also instrumental such that the Maltese Parliament came to agree unanimously that climate change is a national emergency.

Allow me to analyse again the need for dialogue in the light of international law. In international law, most wars and conflicts are avoided through diplomatic dialogue. Diplomacy is in fact nothing more than a tool to bring the parties together. Drawing opposing parties closer together, peacefully. If we question ourselves on this regard in the national context, we may realise that we can make better use of this tool in the field of environmental justice and undoubtedly for national unity at a general level.

But what could drive us to be able to dialogue together even if we disagree, even if we are divided, even if we feel we are right, and others are wrong? And let us be honest, as I mentioned at the beginning, there is no unity without justice. So perpetrators can never be relieved of the responsibility to make up for what they have done. Dialogue between the parties takes nothing away from any of this, but distinguishes between the person and one's action. Dialogue is a tool to avoid conflict and division, even though we disagree. Effective dialogue must be based on the three pillars that make up the fundamental human rights. Liberty, equality, and the spirit of fraternity. We hear a lot about liberty and equality, but how much do we hear about fraternity? How much do we hear about regarding each other as brothers and sisters? We do refer to fraternity in rhetoric or even as a moral obligation. But unfortunately, in law, although there are legal parameters that define liberty and equality, the spirit of fraternity, which requires us to regard each other as brothers and sisters, has remained stuck at the moral level. Perhaps it is too difficult for human nature to legally impose the duty of fraternity to behave as brothers and sisters towards one another. Can we be an exception to this limited thinking? We manage to achieve tolerance, most of the time, as well as solidarity.

But if after the French Revolution and the wars of the 20th century, we have instilled the spirit of fraternity as one of the three aspects of the fundamental human rights, is it possible that in this century we are unable to do so? Whether we like it or not, even if we disagree, we remain brothers and sisters because we live in the same home.

Our children and grandchildren will live together after us. Our predecessors, despite all their flaws, have left us an independent, sovereign, democratic country that embraces fundamental human rights, we, our generation, are called upon to leave environmental justice as a legacy. This is the destiny of the present generation in Malta, in the world. I hope that on this aspect, at least, we come to an agreement, and then we can say that we are really working towards having a land that is truly pleasant to everyone.

Thank you.





## ***Aleks Farrugia***

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Thank you very much.

Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen.

When I received the invitation to participate in this Conference, I confess that, while appreciating the honour bestowed upon me, I could not understand exactly why I was chosen.

Those who know me, either from my writings or personally, know that I can hardly identify myself with epithets of a nationalistic or patriotic nature if not with much irony. If anything, I have always felt more comfortable as a citizen of the world; that borderless world, a heritage of humanity. Therefore, I confess that this invitation has driven me towards a little – perhaps more than a little – self-reflection: I did not want, even due to the respect I have for you and your office, Mr President, to accept this invitation just for the sake of it or else state things that are not really the reflection of the truth as I see it. I apologise to you in advance that I did not bring absolute truths. You convened this Conference with the theme of National Unity because you are concerned about the divisions that exist on these islands – between those who call themselves Maltese, proud or not that destiny chose

that they are born here; between those who are Maltese and those who feel Maltese, even though they were not born here; and between those who are Maltese and those who wish to be Maltese but it seems that they will not get their wish. I have these same concerns, Mr President and this was the first reason why I accepted your invitation.

You often use the phrase “National Unity”, and this is where I wanted to start my short reflection: from the meaning and value of this phrase above all as a symbolic gesture (or act).

Any symbol, whether it is a linguistic gesture (as in this case) or another gesture of a visual or plastic nature, has no meaning or value in itself before it is given symbolic recognition. For example: two pieces of wood crossed against each other, in themselves have no meaning or value before they are given their meaning, a religious meaning in this case, when we are talking about the Cross as a religious symbol for Christians. Likewise, the phrase “National Unity” takes on a symbolic meaning because we associate it with a particular meaning and value.

Value and meaning in any symbolic gesture are first and foremost communal. Every symbol is such because there is a community that recognises it; there is a community that in that symbol sees meaning and sees value. This does not mean, however, that the meaning and/or value of the symbol is always clear, that there is no ambiguity, that the parameters are always well-defined. For someone like me, for example, who often uses satire and irony in his writings, this symbolic ambiguity is part of the craft tool. Satire plays with the ambiguity of the symbol to turn it upside down, to make it a counter symbol, which then strikes a chord because it actually shows the symbol for what it is – a place for social-political-economic conflict.

What do I mean by all this? Let us look at the symbol as a place of existential space, as when we refer to a house, a place where men dwell – and precisely because men dwell in it, they shape it and make it in their image. We do this in our house, we shape it according to our tastes and needs, according to the values we embrace and the meaning it has for us. Through this example we can immediately understand how the value and symbolic meaning of the house are different for different people: for whom the house is a symbol of rest, comfort, and shelter and for others the house is a prison; for whom the house is a place to eat and sleep and for others the house is where violence, abuse, and oppression reign. Same symbol, different meanings and values.

The so-called ‘national’ symbols are no different. For a symbol to be considered a ‘national’ symbol, it is already part of a broad narrative – that of the sovereign State, depending on the symbols it adopts and the meaning and value it gives them, it shapes a narrative that makes it distinct from other sovereign States. For example, the flag, the anthem, the

emblem, etcetera. The idea of 'National Unity' is also part of this narrative; it is an idea that I can call 'facilitative', in the sense that in the context of the national narrative it has the role of collecting the adoption of individual symbols (such as the flag, anthem, etcetera) and presenting them as part of one, unique and distinct narrative.

The problem here is that in itself, the idea of "National Unity" is also symbolic and therefore also a place of conflict, a place of contrast between different meanings and values depending on who is voicing them.

Mr President, when you convened this Conference, there were those who criticised you and said: "How can we have National Unity if we do not have justice!" Here, the reference was obvious. But at the same time, someone might rise and say: "How can we have National Unity if justice is not extended to social justice!" Or: "How can we have National Unity when among us there are people who are still marginalised!" These are different voices, voices coming from the same nation, but for which the meaning and value of "National Unity" are different, because the circumstances, aspirations and needs that motivate them are different.

I therefore feel that in order to speak of "National Unity" we must speak of the symbolic conflicts, a mirror of the socio-political-economic conflicts of our country and their roots. Perhaps the easiest root to identify (also because it is the easiest one to externalise and pin on others) is colonialism, of which we are certainly still left, among other things, with the bureaucratic heritage and the architecture of the bipartisan political structure. But we cannot console ourselves by blaming everything on colonialism; after all, more than fifty years of independence have passed and we bastardised both the State administration and the bipartisan political system enough to become ours, part of our national identity as much as the Maltese language and the other 'national' symbols we are talking about.

The system of clientelism that binds everything around the character of the candidate, with his district canvassers, is our creation that apparently there is little 'national' eagerness to change – neither by the benefactor politician nor by the clientelist voter. This system is the nest where those small and big acts of favouritism and other corruptions hatch; maybe that is also why it is as convenient for the benefactor as it is for the client and so we turn a blind eye. However, this is a system that creates conflict even within the same political party, let alone at the 'national' level, where the privileged (due to their closeness with political figures) take the seat that should be filled on the merits of competence, with megalomaniacal powers of 'gatekeepers' where, of course, the gate is opened and closed depending on who you know, who you talk to, in which district you vote, or who recommended you. No wonder the Maltese proverb says that "a friend in the market is better than one hundred coins in the treasure chest" (*aħjar ħabib fis-suq minn mitt skud fis-senduq*).

It is also a monstrosity that we gave birth to and nurtured, during these little more than fifty years of independence, the gap and the institutional arrogance: starting with the courts, continuing with the public administration – in the form of departments and entities, from planning to those supposedly based on social values – and on to financial institutions such as banks. To begin with, not only have these institutions become an absolute dominion of the privileged professional class, and thus modelled exclusively on the logic and values of that particular class, but the lack of empathy and the disgust are rampant towards those who in the past (in an extremely paternalistic tone) we used to call 'the lower class' and today we prefer to call them (with a coldness that reveals indifference and detachment) clients. Not only that, but these institutions are hardly bound to give a genuine account to the people who are paying for them and when dealing with individuals they become big bureaucratic machines that individuals can hardly ever win against them. I only derive two examples:

- The tired machine of justice. We have recently seen a clear example of how people who have broken the law in their youth had to wait for years to be sentenced. Meanwhile their lives remained in the balance. In some cases, we have seen how, until the verdict was delivered, these people had already built a family, found a job, hoped to shape a future and then, after so much sacrifice and commitment, everything went up in smoke because years after committing a crime, at the stroke of a pen and at the strike of a gavel, someone decided to knock down everything they had built in their lives and lock them in jail. On whose side is justice in these cases? How are the courts serving the common good with this morally criminal inefficiency? Who is paying the ultimate price if not the vulnerable – while those in power turn a blind eye and wash their hands?
- The second example, speculative property prices in both purchases and rents. Successive governments continue to ignore this problem and the burdens it brings on families of all kinds. They continue to refuse to regularise property prices as in any other civilised country. Instead, we have generations sentenced to life with debts to the banks, making greater sacrifices than they can bear, and you cannot say that if you cannot afford to buy, you can rent, because in truth there is no difference in the financial burden you must bear. Who is benefiting from this lack of regulation? How can we talk about National Unity when greed has blurred every sense of empathy and reason and anyone who has the smallest of houses tries to fleece as much money as possible to become rich, if possible, yesterday before today? Where is the State in all this? Who is it protecting?

The point I want to make is that the machine of the State itself, due to the imbalance of power it generates, is a source of socio-political-economic conflict which we then see reflected in the symbolic conflict of what is 'national'.

The nation that runs the gears of the system is not the same nation that is the victim of that system. Malta of judges is not Malta of prisoners; Malta of bankers is not Malta of precarious workers; Malta of speculators is not Malta of environmentalists. It is useless to pretend otherwise. There are those for whom "National Unity" means the status quo and there are those for whom there is no "National Unity" before changing the status quo. In my opinion it would be a false National Unity if we pretend that there is a 'team Malta' when the starting point (even if it is not said) is that not everyone is running on the same track.

Despite all this, Mr President, I do not want to stop with the impression that conflict is only negative. Rather, I would like to emphasise the dialectical element of conflict. The dialectic presupposes that conflict gives birth to creativity: to borrow Freud's terminology, the anxiety generated by conflict is sublimated through creative activities. We can direct the 'national' symbolic conflict into a 'creative' symbolic conflict, and this is done by the State promoting what in general terms we call "culture".

Culture plays an important role in the debate on national unity. Culture is not going to cure the pains or straighten out the crookedness that we have in our society. Culture never saved anyone. The role of culture is to motivate, to instigate, to provoke. Culture brings closeness. That is why culture has always been at the centre of events of major historical significance.

When talking about culture, I am not only talking about the various forms of art. I am also talking about historical research, about humanities – like philosophy – and about sciences, the traditional ones and the social ones, like sociology and anthropology. First of all, though, I want to start with a premise. The dichotomy between high and popular culture is a class dichotomy whose result is the barricading of sections of people from a certain type of culture. It is a pity that this class dichotomy has become ingrained even in our educational framework, in itself a colonial heritage in which we still swim. We see culture being trivialised and presented on an amateur level, where mediocrity is celebrated over excellence probably because it appeals more to the narrow-minded parochialism of who was not taught better. Thus, the so-called high culture remains the exclusive territory of the elite. Like everything else, appreciation comes from learning: the ear must be trained to learn to listen; the eye to see; the reason to understand. If we are not training people from an early age on how to hear, how to see, how to reason, it is no wonder that culture is divided in this classist way. I must admit that sometimes this is also convenient for artists and other cultural operators who are also not devoid of classism. In truth, I claim and continue to claim that every well-educated human being is able to participate and appreciate cultural spheres – not necessarily to become an artist or philosopher or scientist, but to take an interest, to read and research, to think and analyse.

And this is precisely the main role that culture must play in the 'national' narrative: the creation of a discourse, where the social-political-economic conflicts of our country find their place in the cultural theatre and give rise to new, creative discourses, which eventually build the country's consciousness. Culture serves to create what Jürgen Habermas calls public discourse: that is, the exchange of diverse opinions in a dialectical sense, where what is considered a public matter is examined and scrutinised in its full complexity.

I cannot, for example, not welcome Herman Grech's play about Daphne Caruana Galizia. It does not mean that the playwright, in this case, has the last word or that what he is presenting on the national stage is the sacrosanct or ultimate truth. Quite the opposite: it is the opening of a public discussion; it is an invitation to other artists – and more openly to public opinion – for a dialogue that should take us beyond the banality of the dichotomy that in the character of Caruana Galizia one either sees evil personified or vice versa, the indisputable sanctity of the martyr. The ultimate goal should be to examine the character in her complexity, in all the nuances of her public activity, from the disgust shown in writing towards those coming from a 'wrong' social class (the "vulgar" class, God forbid they are entrusted with power) to the senseless murder that undoubtedly demands speedy and definitive justice.

Another example was the exhibition of the painter Shaun Grech with the theme *Dehumanation*, which recently, in my opinion, presented in a brutal but sensitive way, themes related to the symbols we adopted and called national, but which when stripped of the meaning that is supposed to create a sense of identity, they have become symbols of hatred against anyone who does not fit into the parameters of populist discourses conceived primarily by fears and ignorance. Shaun Grech has the merit of removing the flesh from the bodies of the monsters we created and instead presented us with the decaying interior and pointed teeth that hatred instils in our society. Yes, art is always beautiful – not necessarily in its aesthetic shell – but beautiful because it excites, evokes, and creates.

Here comes to mind the mourned Juann Mamo and his novel "Ulited in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka"; a novel of violent, polemical, and bitter satire about the ignorance that the people were left in during the opening of the twentieth century. Mamo's novel is not only a stir of emotions for social justice, a cry of sorrow for the situation the people were left in by their rulers (local and foreign), but it is a unique literary gem that enriches the Maltese cultural chest.

No wonder that culture is the first to take a hit when the regime wants to stifle or even deaden public awareness. A composer friend of mine, Karl Fiorini, chose the theme of the degenerate artist as this year's theme for his annual classical music festival. Who are these degenerate artists? Artists – in this case composers – whose art was considered degenerate



because it did not fall within the acceptable parameters of oppressive regimes. This art was considered wrong and so it had to be destroyed – the art and whoever made it. Can we forget the meaning of burning books in Berlin or Nuremberg? Or the list of books banned by the Inquisition? However, there is no need for savage censorship, no need for the Gulag or concentration camps to stifle culture. It is enough to be side-lined, to be ignored, to be placed on the periphery, to be trivialised, to be seen as an ephemeral object which we will not miss.

In our country we still have not understood the role of culture in shaping the consciousness of a country. In South Africa, after many years where black culture was being cancelled, the process of healing from the Apartheid was built around culture: they wanted Caucasians to hear the pain of black people and then spur them to stop seeing in each other the divisions of the past – the fruits of hatred born of racism – but start seeing the common future as South Africans and above all as human beings. Recently in the UK, as part of a charity programme in these pandemic times, they brought together a left-wing comedian and the former Chairman of the British Conservative Party: a Muslim baroness, who spent her career in a masculinist and Islamophobic political party. The first time they met, in the first thirty seconds the comedian told her that she was the last person he wanted to meet. The beginning was difficult until in the freedom given by the theatrical studio, she told him about her humble origins, the frustration and isolation she suffered in the Conservative Party as a woman and as Muslim. She told him about the prejudices she faced. And they used this to develop a five-minute stand-up act that aired on *Channel 4*. When speaking to the newspaper *The Guardian*, they both said that through this exercise, they got to know each other as people – and despite their political views, they found that there is more to unite them than to divide them and a friendship was born between them.

Many of the divisions that exist here will remain because there is no consciousness of a country. There is class consciousness among certain classes, usually the privileged ones, and I would say that this is the most predominant consciousness in our country, but we do not yet have the consciousness of a country. Therefore, when we look at the 'nation', we still have a partial view rather than a broad view that brings together those different communities forming this country. When culture is given the support it requires to grow – not only support to operators (such as artists, scholars, etcetera) but also in the dissemination and existential importance it is given – the various elements forming this country find their voice and, from the symbolic conflict, a narrative is formed that through its diversity, it gathers within it those who form the entirety of this nation.

I conclude this argument with a small example from Finland, a land that, like ours, has been ruled by foreigners for centuries. Jean Sibelius, a composer, became a symbol of the Finnish people at a time when Finland was fighting for its independence. The Finnish State

understood so much the importance of Sibelius for the Finnish people that it provided him with a stipend to dedicate his life to music. Today, all Finnish children at school get to know Sibelius. Why? Because in Sibelius' music there is the spirit of what brought the Finns together in a common struggle. And the consciousness that this was a common struggle for a land that all Finns consider theirs and share with each other, is the foundation of a social and empathetic policy on which they built the new and independent Finland; a policy that includes and not divides, that gives the opportunity and not deprives it.

I therefore conclude, Mr President, by thanking you again for the invitation. I can now see that you were right, because yes, my place was here today. As my friend Andrew Azzopardi likes to say, even I had something to say. I now hope that the words do not fall on deaf ears because yes, I have to say, that in this country we have a big hearing problem. Maybe that must be the first step: to listen, not just where it suits us or to who agrees with us, but to start first by listening to what is inconvenient, which we see as wrong, which discomforts us. Maybe the persons who are telling us this also have something to say and in what they are saying there is another, different discourse, which is also part of the discourse that forms this country.

Thank you very much.





## Other Interventions



### ***Dr Robert Aquilina – Repubblika***

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Thank you. I greet His Excellency the President of the Republic. I am Robert Aquilina from the association Repubblika. We welcome this initiative by His Excellency the President.

Unity is fundamental. We had a meeting with His Excellency and understood his motivation and we have our mind at rest about his noble intention. We are of the opinion that unity, as essential as it is, needs to be built on truth. If we are talking about the need for unity, it is a sign that we feel there are conflicts, as we have already heard in the introductions to this Conference.

In our view, if there is a conflict in the country, it is not a conflict between the Labour and the Nationalist parties. It has always existed and will continue to exist between the parties that will be there from time to time. But there is a fundamental conflict between a section of the nation that justifies any wrong doing because it is done or supported by the political party to which one belongs and another section of the nation who wants to face the truth that the abuses committed, irrespective of the perpetrator, must be denounced and, unfortunately, this second section of the nation is being labelled as traitor, that it is composed of people betraying their country. This is not right. And the role of the State in

all of this should not be of a mediator between the two sides. It should not be a spectator. But it must be one that discerns where the truth is, what is right, and puts its heart and soul on that side.

There are some basic facts that have happened in our country, extraordinary things that have happened in recent years. One of these has just been mentioned: the murder of one of our sisters. The murder of a journalist, of an investigative journalist, who was killed, and everyone acknowledges this nowadays, because of the investigations she carried out. And she did not investigate trivial issues, she investigated corruption.

And therefore, we must acknowledge this, and we must acknowledge other facts. We must acknowledge that 14 months ago we had a Prime Minister who had to resign in disgrace, and I am not saying this with a sense of division, but this is an extraordinary fact that has never happened in our country. And so, it is necessary that as a nation we face this reality. Because if the State is not going to face this reality, then it will create room for ambiguity and ambiguity leads to division. So, we want unity built on truth, because unity built on truth is the only democratic unity.

Thank you.





## ***Christian Peregin – Lovin Malta***

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Hi. It's Christian Peregin from Lovin Malta. Some people have questioned this Conference because they thought it was a cynical attempt to silence dissenting voices. But unity is not the elimination of criticism, debate, or even fierce disagreement.

Unity is simply the idea that we start from a position of humanity and good faith, rather than from a position of suspicion towards one another. Unity is when we see each other as human beings first, before we see each other's political views. Before we see gender, religion, abilities, skin colour, wealth, what language you feel more comfortable speaking, who we love and all other aspects that make humanity rich with diversity.

However, to achieve unity in Malta, especially after the trauma of the past few years, we must start to promote unity. Currently in Malta, we are teaching division, 24 hours a day. Two of our three TV stations are literally designed to rally political tribes like warring factions. Even the most basic of information, the daily news, is deliberately presented to us in a way that fuels our suspicion of one another. Our children, our elderly, our entire electorate, are constantly bombarded not with facts, but with a careful distortion of the facts designed to make us mistrust the other side. Worse still, to make us believe that there

can only ever be two distinct sides. We are teaching ourselves to mistrust anyone who does not identify with our binary political system.

The idea that our political parties should control our TV media in this way goes contrary to all global standards in broadcasting as well as our own Constitution. But it also makes it impossible for others to promote national unity and respect among the people of this country. And this is happening at a time when we should actually be transcending nationalism and realising that we must be united, not just as Maltese, or Europeans, but as global citizens facing global problems. It is only through international unity around the world that we can overcome existential threats like climate change. But how can Malta hope to be part of global solutions when we are still so suspicious of ourselves? When we are still dedicating our small country's resources, including taxpayer money, to fostering division, mistrust, and distortion of reality? Instead, we must move towards a situation, where we can foster unity, not at the expense of debate or dissent, but at the expense of systematically thought division. Remember, this is not just a Maltese problem, social media today means every society is both gifted by unlimited information and divided by algorithmic echo chambers.

In 1967 Malta was one of the first countries to convince the United Nations of the world's need to protect the common heritage of mankind, in particular our seas. A line of thought that gave birth to the fight against climate change. If we are bold enough to change our bad practices and find better systems, we can be global frontliners in the battle against misinformation, one of the biggest blocks to climate action and many other important movements. So, my hope is for this Conference to help us become leaders in finding ways of teaching respect, truth, love, and justice, and above all, of replacing division with unity and common sense. I commend the President for this Conference. I think it's a good starting point to begin promoting unity. But achieving it and making sure this is not just an empty promise with no follow-through, requires a lot more than just good faith. It requires sacrifice, it requires commitment and most of all it requires action. It means putting our money where our mouth is and starting as of now to make the small changes that will slowly make a real difference.

Thank you.



## ***Isabelle Cuschieri***

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Good morning. I am Isabelle Cuschieri. I am a very ordinary citizen, so I am here to listen, to integrate and be part of this nation and to learn more.

I strongly believe that the media can have a more positive effect. We talk a lot about problems, we do not talk enough about how to face them. I believe that there is not enough awareness of how to be positive. There is not enough awareness of the more positive paths we can take. I am really happy with this step taken by the President.



## ***Wayne Flask – Moviment Graffitti***

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Wayne Flask, on behalf of Moviment Graffitti. First of all, we thank the President for his invitation to this Conference.

It is an invitation that we accepted without cynicism, without stamping our feet, because our work in social justice, that has been going on for 27 years, showed us how much this national unity is needed.

But instead of trying to define what national unity is for us, we have come to explain that we believe that we have national unity – if we are talking about the fight between the two tribes – we have more than enough. We see the recent Parliamentary debates and we see how the political parties are always quite united on many issues that we fight against. And we also say that currently there is no opposition. We are not saying that there is no political opposition in Parliament, but there is no opposition in the sense of opposition to greed, theft, corruption and even bullying being perpetrated against ordinary citizens. The only opposing position is currently taken by the civil society.

Dr Sammut has made many references to media issues and to many other topics that are close to our hearts as well. One of the things I would like to draw the most attention



to is the fact that apart from partisan media, State broadcasting is not being inclusive with regard to civil society. Organisations like the one I militate in, and many other organisations, are given a few minutes, a few minutes a week and for the rest of the time, the speech is controlled entirely by the two big tribes of PL and PN. Society is much wider than politics, and broadcasting is not making room for civil societies.

Apart from the issue of minutes, we would also like to draw attention to the fact that civil society, the vast majority of it, is free from any political interference. It is made up of individuals who give their time, time and resources, to work for just causes, for causes of social justice and we believe that here yes, we need national unity in order to fight this huge concertation composed of policies and big financial interests working together against the well-being of citizens.

We appreciate the President's references in his speeches to natural resources, to open spaces, to the need to preserve them because there is currently a concerted effort by the great powers to erode the environment as a resource. Apart from the environment, there are other resources that continue to be eroded in our country, such as workers. Their rights are consistently ignored. The political parties agree among themselves not to introduce a minimum wage threshold as indicated by the EU. And 'by sheer coincidence', there is always national unity in such issues. There are issues where the interests of the few are favoured over the quality of life of citizens.

We, my group, would like to leave here with hopes of having the bases for discussion in order to create a national unity, which avoids political interference. A national unity made by the people for the people so that we really stop going around in circles like the mule of the watermill mentioned by Dr Sammut.

Thank you.



### ***Dr Lynn Faure Chircop – One Voice Malta***

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I am a lawyer and a mother, who would like to convey this message today because in law we talk about the *bonus pater familias*

Often, in civil matters, we follow the principle of probability, that is, when we allege something, whoever has the most evidence will be able to succeed. However, in criminal matters, there is also what is beyond reasonable doubt, which is followed by the State to investigate further. And what I am seeing is that a need was felt for an entity, the highest institution, from the legislative aspect, from the judiciary aspect and from the executive aspect, that we have long seen disagreements, some say one thing and others say another. Now this time, apart from the fact that the Office of the President had to take the reins, like when having a mother and a father who have lost all sense of direction or discipline because their children are defiant, because they gave them too much freedom, also due to progress, as we the people, had the freedom. The fourth pillar, which is the people and the media. In a democracy we must not disregard the voice of the people, and this is transmitted through the media, however, unfortunately, there is an abuse of this freedom. But it is a very important pillar. If there is an allegation, one expects that the institutions, so to speak, the other arm is investigating and making sure that justice is served.

However, I wanted to touch on the comment made by the lady here who described herself as a normal person. I think I am a normal person; we are all normal persons, and the nation should behave normally based on human principles. And what is fundamental? We must not judge a person because of their place of worship, because they associated themselves with a political party or with a belief or religion, or the colour of their skin, but how they are practising that belief in their day-to-day life. In the lifestyle they have adopted and then one can really start judging, and we can really have a media that starts comparing one person with another. It can start evaluating the standard of the highest institutions and say whether we have met the criteria or not. But then what happens to these allegations and these, perhaps, thoughts of principles that are not being put into practice? Maybe here the institutions, the fourth pillar, which is the media, and here I thank you Professor Sammut for your speech on 'divide and conquer'. This is a concept that unfortunately shows abuse of authority and not everyone in authority uses or practices it. So, we must not leave room for allegations that are not investigated. That is abuse. So, the media is doing its job, but how can we help the people who do not necessarily use portals that have a particular agenda, to also put forward their allegations as a person making part of the fourth pillar and can have their voice heard?

The national media, the national broadcasting station, whatever is of a national form, there must be a collaboration, all the perspectives of people with different opinions. And we cannot allow the stifling of others' voices by those having a business or personal agenda. I think this is what the lady referred to when asking about the means, and that the means are further promoted, having more awareness of the people. How can people petition for something, as happens in Switzerland, for example, to bring a change, to be involved in changing existing procedures? This is maybe part of my proactivity and my collaboration through One Voice Malta which is a platform that I have started 5 years ago, and I wish, and I am very happy that these principles are now being addressed on a national basis.

Thank you, Your Excellency, once again, for the opportunity.



### ***Dr Anthony DeGiovanni***

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I am Anthony DeGiovanni, I am also a lawyer, but my experience lies in education. I am also member of various organisations, but I am just representing myself. This is my personal opinion.

So, without underestimating the importance of this Conference, or the gravity of the situations and events that took place in this country, one should not exaggerate as if there is some form of need for a truth and reconciliation commission following the Apartheid of South Africa or following the desaparecidos of Chile. Or else compare to some serious situation like that in North and South Somalia or Eritrea.

In this country, we must be proud that since the Independence there has been a transition of power in the most civil and democratic way. Something that even countries larger than this, we have seen recently, have not been able to do. So, we must not only point the finger at our shortcomings to try to do better, to try to make the situation better, but we must also celebrate the successes of our national unity, which are real, and we must not let such a conference achieve the opposite of its intention: that in its results it would appear that this was done because effectively a national unity does not exist.

As Auberger, who is a widely used expert in the Council of Europe, said in their ongoing project "Education for Democratic Citizenship", which started some 20 years ago, the meaning of citizenship has changed. It is no longer the relationship between the individual and the State, between the subject and the prince, but it is now the relationship between one individual and another. Therefore, I think we would be doing a disservice to the Maltese citizen when we talk about tribes, as if the political parties are more real than the individuals who are their members. So, if we are saying that they exist - or rather there are those who say that there are tribes - that means that we are saying that the people of Malta belong to tribes. So, the solution lies, not within the institutions, or the organisations. The solution here is the individual, the citizen. The citizen takes a stand. If there is an institution that the citizen does not believe in, then the citizen does not approach that institution. If there are news outlets which they deem not credible, they do not follow them. So, if we, want to have a more homogeneous society, and therefore we achieve national unity because there is more diversity (because this is an oxymoron). We want more diversity so that we have more national unity. That is what we are saying here. Because we are very critical of the institutions that unite people.

Another concept emerging from this Democratic Citizenship is that of 'multiple identity': which means that it is not necessary that a person belonging to an organisation, does not have other affiliations to other groups at the same time. A person can be a Maltese citizen, whilst belonging to the Fgura community at the same time. They can also belong to the European Union and to world citizenship, all at the same time. But they can also be member of a political party, and at the same time be a member of the band club, the vast majority of which have different political ideas. So, what am I saying? I am saying that, always, when we talk here, we must stop talking about the institutions, and start talking about the individual.

Thank you.





### ***Philip Chircop – Grandparents Malta Foundation***

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Hello, Philip Chircop, President and founder of the Grandparents Malta Foundation.

First of all, I want to congratulate the President who is showing that he is a role model, this is not rhetoric, because everyone said so. This is how to be a person in the highest institution of the country, setting a clear example of national unity.

And, since the first four days of his swearing-in, the President, His Excellency began to hold inclusive meetings with various religions, with different societies, and we all breathed a sigh of relief as we said: "Finally, we will start to see something positive and tangible". Now we have been saying a lot of words and assessing the situation. Everyone knows what the situation is. Now I wish and I hope that we start from somewhere. As Lynn said we have many freedoms and we have abused these freedoms, and now we have our patron, His Excellency, the Head of this country, who has taken the reins, and I am hoping - because we share a common characteristic as we both deliver - that from now on we begin to do something tangible. We do not need to understand the problem, the problem has been there for ages, so we cannot keep talking and pointing fingers. Let us stop pointing our fingers. Let us start, from tomorrow, for example, as every Sunday, the two political parties

will have their exponents, in public, on television and making their political speeches. So let us start – by talking to the politicians, so that they start showing a sense of unity. I have listened to them, both sides, and sometimes said: “Look, at long last, today’s speech is quite reconciliatory. They are not berating one another. Because we did this, and you did not do this and that”. The people are tired of listening to this as they are also tired hearing about COVID. I have people, whom I get in touch with almost every day, our grandparents, and they tell you: “As soon as I see that needle piercing...”, that is also something negative, those afraid of needles say: “No, I will not take the vaccine...”, so we also must be careful how we express ourselves on certain things. But as soon as they hear the word COVID, they tell you: “I switch channel because I am tired of hearing about COVID, it’s been almost a year and a half”.

If you allow me, I would like to make a few reflections, that today, as Anthony DeGiovanni very well said, the nation must say: what will I do tomorrow to participate and contribute to national unity? We cannot wait for others. The President has now given us the opportunity and, as Lynn just said, we have so many freedoms that he felt he should take it upon himself and grab the bull by the horns. So now how do we respond? I, as a founder, as a president of an organisation, like many here, what are we going to do once we get out of here? I have already started brainstorming possible actions to take as an organisation in order to contribute, to remove partisan politics, to remove envy among the people, to remove inequalities, and so on. And so, I think that we have to talk about what we are going to do in the immediate future, so that our courts are more transparent, Parliament... Someone mentioned Gandhi... “eye for an eye”. We heard these words in Parliament. Hand for a hand and eye for an eye. So how can we... My conclusion, my fear as a grandfather is... I am a grandfather, I am a father and I have today’s parents who are raising children and I am helping them raise their children, and my fear concerns my grandchildren. They are getting information from school, from their teachers. If they are passionate about something, this will influence them. Then they go home and there we have families facing separation, going through traumas, we have grandchildren who are deprived from seeing their grandparents...we have a lot of issues going on. Let us start from long-term education, from education in schools so we start doing something tangible and create the awareness we have been talking about. Let us start with all public entities and enforce laws. We have the Commissioner for Standards, we have the Ombudsman, but they are taking remedial actions. I feel aggrieved, I present my case to them, and they serve justice. Let us also start by these entities.... to enforce things, to prevent, and to address matters tangibly not just with words.

Thank you.





## ***Manuel Delia***

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Manuel Delia and thank you for the opportunity. There was talk on how we speak to each other, and address each other in particular, on social media.

I would like to expand a little on the language we use when talking about Maltese people, because they have been living in Malta for decades, or people who are not Maltese but are trying to save their skin. And we talk about them in a way that we would be ashamed if we had to say the same about animals. People of different races or religions. The nature of language has led us to lose the most basic sense of civility. It is not something of 50 years ago or 5 years ago, thousands of years ago people living by the sea identified themselves as civilised because they went to the rescue of all those who were drowning. In Malta, when the Germans were bombing us, if we hit a plane and it sank into the sea, we would rescue the pilot, bring him in, feed him and take care of him. But today, it has become legitimate and mainstream to argue that we should let drown whoever is trying to come here. We have people in our community who are making this argument.

And the responsibility of broadcasting and public broadcasting was mentioned, which with the coverage they give to these people, without challenging their attitudes, legitimises

these barbarisms. Someone said we should not exaggerate and there is no need for a truth and reconciliation commission. I will not go into the merits of the procedure we should use. But let us remember that we do not have a consensus on what is true. Someone mentioned today that it should be proposed that the broadcasting stations of political parties, and therefore the political parties, should sit around a table to make a code of ethics. Do we need to agree on a code of ethics to remember the Commandment "Thou shall not bear false witness"? Lying is the constantly used political tool that weakens the foundations on which we can have a dialogue of citizens living together. Just like the Commandment "Thou shall not steal", the thieving corrupt politician, forgets it. It is our individual responsibility as citizens. There was talk of ordinary citizen, or a citizen in public life... We citizens all have an obligation to distinguish right from wrong. This is a country where there is still no consensus that killing a journalist is a bad thing. It is still a mainstream opinion, to try to mitigate or even justify this action. The State has not yet taken a position on this. Yesterday the Government Gazette announced that the State will award a medal to a police officer, a police officer criticised for failing in his duty and allowing impunity. But Daphne Caruana Galizia is still unacknowledged by the State, as the State does not yet want to take a position on the fact that it was wrong that she was killed.

So, the whole argument is that if we are looking for the national symbols, the flag, the national colours, the language, we are just taking the easy route. The true path to unity is to have responsibility and loyalty towards each other as people living here. To be citizens before members of a nation. But this is a country who sells its citizenship to those who want nothing to do with this country. And denies it to those who have lived here for years, have peacefully contributed to this community, but because they are dark-skinned, we exclude them.

Thank you.



## ***Fouzia Borg***

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I am pleased to be with you. I am Fouzia Borg, a person who came from Morocco. Morocco is close to my heart, as it is my country first and foremost, and I feel that Malta is my second country.

I am proud of this country and I have children who are Maltese. I am very pleased with the President of Malta and all those present of the State of Malta. I am very proud of you, and I am also proud to be here among you.

My question is, as a woman, as an Arab woman, or a foreign woman: Why is it that although I have Maltese citizenship, I need to be with my husband to do some business or, for example, to get a bank loan? I have Maltese citizenship, I should have the same rights as you. In my case, even though I would like to bring my children, who were born abroad, here in Malta, in order to give them Maltese citizenship so they may be here for their future, like the future of your children, like those who are also Maltese, I cannot do that. Why?

The second question is why do they insult me a lot because I am a foreigner? I do not feel like a foreigner. I feel like that I represent that unity which you mention "foster unity in the

Maltese and peace” (seddaq l-għaqda tal-Maltin u s-sliem). That peace for me means peace to everyone. I do not consider colour, religion or the person. I consider the person’s heart, the love. I would like to join you, and I am very proud to be among you because, let me also say that I will never forget what the Maltese people did for me. Taking a step forward and being here, for me is a great honour and pleasure.

Thank you very much. Thank you.





## **Mary Gaerty**

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Thank you very much. Thank you, Your Excellency, and thank you to all the speakers making their intervention.

I agree with many arguments made. But I wanted to mention a point that I think we sometimes deviate from: rights. Often everyone asks for their rights. But rights bring duties as well. So, if I am going to take this right, what is the extent of my right? Will it make me selfish? Will it let me speak properly? Will it let someone keep my mouth shut? What is the extent of this right? The right to take what is mine, without needing to beg to take what is mine. To beg, to go to a minister, because I must ask for and implore for what is rightfully mine. That does not bring peace. Because that will divide us into 'you' and 'me'. I am entitled to take what is rightfully mine, but he has contacts and perhaps took what is not his. Or maybe he jumped the queue, taking my place. So, we need this to have this equality.

Even in terms of women, we still lag behind. We still lag behind. Why don't we have enough women in Parliament? Why? Because women stay away from problems especially relating to lack of governance, where there is corruption. We need to pave the way, and everyone needs to pave the way, not just women, but men need to work for it as well. Because men

have wives and daughters too. We need to work for them as well. We should not be the only ones fighting for equality.

I also wanted to mention, for example, level playing field, fairness. Where is fairness today? One of the things being discussed within the MCESD, and I am the deputy head of civil society, the civil society committee within the MCESD, is fairness. This takes us back to what is yours. What you should have, but you do not have it.

I think the time has come for ethics to be discussed in schools, to be taught in schools from a very young age. Ethics and unselfishness. We became a very selfish nation. We should start looking at ourselves, at our souls, what am I? What kind of person am I? How can I help others?

I will stop here to give an opportunity to others.



## ***Marianna Galea Xuereb***

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I am Marianna Galea Xuereb. It is true that I belong to various NGOs, but I will not mention anyone, so as not to embarrass anyone, if I say something that is not in accordance with someone's policy.

Someone mentioned the political divide. What worries me is not the political divide between PN, PL, and maybe other small parties, whatever. What worries me is when one suffers certain abuses just because they tried to do things right. I used to work for Enemalta, to be frank, and I always took pains to make sure that tender documents are issued properly. If I ended up doing tender adjudications, I never requested them, but sometimes I had no choice and had to do them, I took pains to do things right, and others because they fail, either bribe you, or scare you. They destroy your career. I have not worked since 2004, I was dismissed abusively, with the statement from both the Court and the Industrial Tribunal, which both bullied me, but they absolutely could not get away from the fact that it was an unfair dismissal. However, I still remain unemployed. I was not reinstated. I tried to find other jobs, I did other degrees, still, even in the private sector, you know that they want to hire you, but they are being forced not to hire you.



So, my biggest worry, not like we were in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, where we had roughly the Nationalists, Nationalists, and the Labour, Labour. Not that there were no business deals between them as well, but not as much as today. Today they literally unite, they really unite, so that whoever is right, they will crucify them and not serve justice. They pray to God to take them as soon as possible to shut them up once and for all. This still happens to me to this day.

I thank the President for working for unity. I hope he is listening to me and I also hope that he has some kind of email address where we are reassured that when we write to him, he truly sees our email, and there is no gatekeeper to decide whether the President sees the full email or some edit, cut and paste, only God knows how.

Now... I want to say something else, but well...

### **Carmen Sammut (Moderator)**

Thank you and the President told us that he would like to reassure you that this is not the case. He reads them.

### **President George Vella**

Put her mind to rest. One hundred percent.



## ***Andrew Bonello – ReLeaf***

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Your Excellency. Andrew Bonello, President of the Non-Governmental Organisation 'ReLeaf'. I will talk about language, stigma and people who use substances.

Language is a very important tool for any society and from an early age we learn to write and think and speak a particular language that helps individuals to be an active part of society, while further strengthening communication and unity between people. In addition to playing a role of communication and learning, language is also a treasure chest of thoughts, views, and perceptions that are fully embedded in an individual's vocabulary and mental schemes. These are then translated into different behaviours, are passed down from generation to generation and also find their place in writing and the media. Over time, even thanks to formal education, we learn to distinguish between a language that is fair, inclusive, and that aims to foster unity, from a language that is unfair, that attaches cruel titles to the person, creates an environment of tension in the community and of conflict between us and them. Often, this approach leads to the creation of stereotypes, persons are deprived of their human qualities, and given negative adjectives that lead them to internalise those words, live an isolated life and possibly, with less access to social, educational, and economic opportunities.

When talking about people who use a substance, especially those illegal substances, such as cannabis, there is a tendency to associate language with personal moral thoughts, with the perception that these persons have bad qualities because they are committing a crime, are of an inferior character, unreliable, as well as dangerous, lazy, and out of control. Perhaps among the most popular titles and adjectives locally are words such as 'drug addict' and 'junkie'.

Therefore, words intended to cast a bad light on these persons or to detract from their dignity, as these persons are only associated with the use of the substance without giving importance to the other qualities and roles of these persons. Creating a more tense environment between us clean against them addicts.

The use of language that is inclusive, that does not further reinforce negative stereotypes about people who use substances, both legal and illegal, is important to further foster national unity and no one feels excluded or less able to contribute to the good of society. This will also contribute to achieving the goals of the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially the goals related to inclusion and justice.

As a tangible contribution, a document issued by the International Network of People who Use Drugs (INPUD) "Words Matter!" is attached for this Conference. More in-depth research on language use and people who use substances. This document can serve as an important guide to make members of the public such as academics, politicians, and journalists more aware of the relationship between language, inclusion, and national unity.

Thank you.



## ***Jeannette Axisa – Fondazzjoni tat-Trasport***

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Greetings Your Excellency, panel members, everyone. I am Jeannette Axisa, Foundation for Transport.

I wanted to propose two common causes. This is well linked to interventions from the panel. Two.

So, the first one is people with disabilities, with different disabilities and the workplace. Even in a recent report, from a few days ago, we found that transport greatly helps the employability of people with disabilities. I wished that one of the common causes that we could discuss perhaps: how can we help them? How can we train them? And also, how can we, for example, cooperate with different organisations to reach all these people so that they are also able to go to work independently. That is one.

The second suggestion I wanted to make, many interventions that are being made both in social media, in newspapers, etcetera, etcetera, concern the introduction of new technologies in transport and most of them are electric vehicles, etcetera, etcetera. I wanted to propose that there be either a focus group or even a particular

organisation between us so that we can explain to the general public and even perhaps to businesses, the impact all these technologies can have in their lives and in their business. Let me give you an example. If, for example, I want to buy an electric vehicle, I think I have a right to know what impact this will have on my lifestyle. Whether I will be safe, whether I will be able to move on with my daily life today, with a different car. And if, for example, I crash or have an accident, how sure am I that it will be repaired properly, and then when I use it, it will be in a condition that does not put me in danger? And the same maybe with regards to businesses, that they need to change the machinery they use on the roads and because of, who knows, logistics, because of something, and I think that there needs to be some safety that their workers are not in danger, but there will be technology that will help both our lives and the environment as well.

Thank you.



### ***Imam Laiq Ahmed Atif – Ahmadiyya Muslim Community***

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First of all, peace be with you all. I am Imam Laiq Ahmed Atif, President of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community.

I thank His Excellency for this courageous initiative because I think it was long due, in order to create an environment where the nation can come together. And I thank him from the bottom of my heart.

I can say that when we have the good will for this unity, then together we can achieve this unity. I believe that education is the key, and without education we can achieve nothing. So, if we, for the nation to come together, it is very important to teach our children what unity means. Why should we be united? For this I propose to include a chapter in the syllabus of social education on national unity and things that are of common good. And these must be agreed by everyone.

Secondly, I want to say something about social media. It is important to teach our children because I always say that our youths, or our children, are the leaders of tomorrow, they are the future of the country. So, it is very important that we invest in



them and teach them human values, solid values and tell them that when they use social media, write something, or say something, they must understand that words can also break the person on the other side. In Urdu we have an expression that when you hurt someone with your hand, they can heal quickly, but when you hurt someone with your words, they do not heal so quickly.

So, it is very important that we understand first of all, and lead by example and also teach our children to be very prudent when using these social media.

Thirdly... And I would also say that there is also some policy, there are some laws, but I propose that there should be some policy based on values. It should be focused on moral grounds, so that people use social media wisely.

I also propose that there should also be some national days where the people can come together and everyone, as a united nation, can celebrate these days of national unity. Because in my experience, in Malta we have many days that are considered national days; one person agrees on this, and the other agrees on the other. But there is no such thing as a day when all people can come together. And I think and propose that the leaders sit around a table and find a solution where, by common consensus, they establish or decide some days, it could be one or two, where the people can unite and celebrate as a united nation.

I also suggest that this Conference will not be the first and last conference on the theme of national unity, but that it will be the beginning of an ongoing process, because we cannot achieve unity in one day, but this is a long marathon, we must raise and teach the whole generation, the future generation in this way.

I want to share my experience as to why I say this. My son was in kindergarten and once we were coming back from school and we saw an African boy and he told me: "Dad, he is brown". I told him no, he is a person like us. And every time he saw that boy, he would always say: "He is brown". And I tell him no, he is a person like us. He told me: "No dad. My friends at school say so, so they tell the truth". And this took me almost six months, because he was a young boy and not to blame, because he was in kinder, but it took me six months to make him understand that he is a person like us without any difference, so I would say that it is very important to teach our children, and this is an ongoing process.

In summary, I am proposing those four suggestions:

- to include a chapter in the syllabus on national unity and common good;
- second: we raise our children's generations with moral values and there should also be some policy based on values;
- third: national consensus on national days;
- and fourth: these conferences should be in the future as well.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.





## ***Joseph Vella***

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Joseph Vella. Hello and thank you. The Italians have a saying: "If you are blind, deaf and stay silent, you live a hundred years in peace".

The problem is when they do not let you live in peace and I wanted to talk about courts, the District Criminal Court. Anyone can, open a case against you, put you in a loop and then in another and you can never get out of it. In fact, I have written to the authorities, and here impunity is mentioned many times, you notice this from the answers they gave me, they throw things under the rug, and finally do nothing. Some time ago, one of the things that happened to me, I will not mention any names and places or anything.

## **Carmen Sammut (Moderator)**

Sir, is it related to the subject of the Conference, please?

## Joseph Vella

Yes, this is related to national unity, because you cannot have national unity, when anyone can go to court, lie about you, and open a case against you. I am referring to the District Criminal Court, right? What happened is, one of the last cases I had, there was this person, who on the eve of the feast said that I had been doing something for two years, and that was not true. On the eve of the village feast. I told the police: "Listen, look at the MEPA aerial photos that show that this is not true. They still took me to court, I ended up with two charges that were not true at all. Now, since I had the MEPA court photos...

What is happening is something you must take note of, because a fake six-second video, which was not true at all, and marked with Photoshop...the court issued a ruling, I appealed and to no avail, they did not even let me talk about the video. They went to watch it in the hall now referred to as hall 22, the big hall. They watched it alone and did not let me comment.

Thank you.



## ***Adriano Spiteri***

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First of all, Adriano Spiteri. Greetings, Your Excellency, participants, viewers.

A few thoughts on my part, because I naturally did not prepare a message to share with you, but I listened to several people talking. I would first like to support the idea proposed on such a day, that there would be a national day. It is a very good and important idea to start considering in our country. Regarding national unity, two very important elements for national unity are inclusion and equal participation and equal treatment. This also includes freedom of speech. A freedom that although there were some listeners who mentioned some freedoms before and included that of the speech, I believe that it is being eroded. A very important freedom in a democratic society. A freedom that enables you to express yourself on topics even if these are not so popular for the majority or otherwise for some. And so, if you look back and say: "What is the extent of this right?", obviously this is not an absolute right, it is not. But if nowadays we consider, for example, Aristotle and put his contexts to the present day, he would end up in big trouble. Because there is a restriction of freedom of speech. A previous speaker mentioned a topic on which there is a big national ban. I am alluding here to immigration. Where he also said that those who are against this concept are

mainstream. Absolutely not true. It is important to have citizen's dialogues, because through dialogues we can form opinions and ideas. Those elements that are supposed to form a political party, of which unfortunately in Malta, we have two and which we can truly refer to as mainstream. And to highlight how often we fail in these principles, now we will either talk about immigration, or about the political party, one may decide for himself or herself, but last year, we can mention a decision by the Broadcasting Authority in relation to a complaint from a political party that I will not be going into, a small political party however, about the lack of time it was being allocated to communicate its ideas, which included illegal immigration. The Broadcasting Authority issued a decision and said that this political party, was systematically excluded from PBS from broadcasting its opinion.

We have heard journalists, we have heard an editor speak before, but the whole truth is, and here I come to my second point. The first point was that citizens should be allowed to speak, but the second point is that they motivate what they say, the theories, the promotions, the principles. Because after this decision was taken, I think that both in relation to immigration and in relation to various subjects in this country, we keep seeing same faces and hearing the same ideas. I think that the people deserve a greater variety of these things.

Thank you.



### ***Prof. Vicki Ann Cremona***

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Vicki Ann Cremona, University Professor, and member of Repubblika, but I am speaking on my behalf.

I think that there are solutions. I want to talk about solutions rather than problems, which need time. But there are also solutions that can be more immediate. It is a fact that trust - the sense of trust in each other - is being lost, and that solutions are needed in this sense. We spoke about dialogue, but before dialogue there must be the ability to listen, because if you do not listen, you cannot dialogue. We mostly listen and follow national media. Our national media need to be taken away from political parties. Whoever is in government, immediately takes control over the national media and use them as they see fit, as they wish. We need to make sure that national media are neutral, objective, and critical; offer a critical reflection on what is being done.

The second point. We are talking about freedom of expression, but we are not talking about where this freedom of expression... your freedom of expression ends when there is also my freedom of expression. So, currently, there is a lot of hate speech in social media, etcetera, etcetera, but the bodies that are supposed to be governing this hate

speech are not functioning properly and are certainly not functioning quickly. We need a rapid and decisive intervention against hate speech. So that a person is reluctant to use certain language again.

Another element is acknowledgement. We do not have it in Malta. Our institutions, especially, do not acknowledge the wrong that has been done. It is important that before we talk about reconciliation, we talk about acknowledging bad things that have happened, things that have divided the country, even the murder of a journalist who, after all, we called a “witch”, and we should acknowledge this fact. In fact, this week was the first time that the Prime Minister spoke about her with respect. Another element.... I followed with great interest what the Professor said about the environment. There is a need for a seriously drawn up regulatory plan between the authorities and civil society regarding the environment. On where will be built-up, where will not be built-up, to what level will be built-up. We cannot let everyone do as they please because suddenly they have a plot, they demolish the house and turn it into flats, usually ugly...nothing matches anything else, an element of an impossible hideousness in our country and then we must be careful because if we have no tourists, we have no economy. That is what is currently happening. But let us not uglify our country so that we definitely have no tourists.

Another important element is radical Parliamentary reform. Our Parliament cannot keep going down this route; a place of insults, a place where they agree as convenient, and when it is no longer convenient then they pretend to be insulting each other. I think a radical Parliamentary reform... Repubblika has issued a document on this, with proposals.

And also, an important element of political discipline. Our MPs need to have political discipline as well as a manner of speaking. They cannot insult each other when speaking in Parliament, and worse still, on social media where they use a certain language that is not even acceptable. An element of equal opportunity. Equal opportunity also comes from education. If I am educated enough, if I am trained enough, I do not need favouritism, I can face whoever is in front of me because I have my means and I do not need anyone to give me favours. And I think it is important to insist on education because only that can bring equal opportunities without political favouritism.

Another important thing, the last thing, not to blame foreigners for everything that goes wrong in this country. Because it has become an easy habit, that if there is something wrong, it is because foreigners did it wrong. If we want to have national unity, we must have a certain sense of trust in each other. The sense of trust in each other does not come from saying that we trust each other, but from really embracing certain values and principles and also accepting, that we distinguish between what is right and what is not.

I want to thank the President and the panel for everything they said. Thank you.



## ***Wayne Flask – Moviment Graffiti***

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Environmental I would like to make a point about environmental justice that was just mentioned a few moments ago.

justice in terms of citizens. And lately, we are seeing that this thing has been happening for a long time; the lack of trust in certain environmental regulatory authorities. The planning process not only does not have a long-term vision, but it is a process that is sick and does not even have the hope of a vaccine.

Who will protect the residents from the authorities, when what is currently going on around us is being done with malicious intent where even politicians are intervening to divide communities from each other, trying to pit neighbours against each other, in order to get what they want? And we are not only talking about private development projects, but also the construction of roads that must necessarily pass through and crush entire communities of farmers. Who will protect these people?

And in the end the Presidency took the initiative to organise this Conference, and as I said earlier it is an initiative we strongly agree with, however political parties have chosen not to attend today, because on Saturday morning maybe they run their own campaigns, their own initiatives and tomorrow they will continue to broadcast on the media and will continue to fight. It may be that the people in this room have the best of intentions, but if the leaders of this country will continue to ignore the demands for national unity, we will come here for the next Conference and we will be saying the same things again.





## ***Patri Dijon isju Mintoff***

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Not just with words, but from the heart. I thank the President, very much.

He brought us here in this Knights' palace and I am enjoying discussing here, listening, and seeing a lot of people here but no swords. There are no swords anywhere, no swords, no fights, no Knights, nothing. Because both the Knights and others, always reminded us that if you want peace, start a war, so they told us: *si vis pacem, para bellum*. If you want peace, fight. Go to war. Because war brings wealth, it brings money, it brings so and so. That is what we were taught. I am from the old school, and do not worry, I will not be making a long sermon, nothing, just a couple of words.

We must be careful, because I think I have gained a bit of experience in this field. Almost forty years ago, perhaps some of you were not even born yet, Social Studies was introduced in Malta. For the first time. No one knew what the word Social Studies meant. I thank God, that I was alone at that time, I had no organisation, I had nothing, but then I sought unity. And when I sought unity, the first thing I sought, I sought in myself, I said: "Who am I?" I said: "I am a monk. I am Franciscan. I will not convene big conferences; I will not throw big parties. I will say a word and I will keep saying it

and saying it and I will see who believes me and see what I will achieve. And I started saying the word I always learned to say and for which I swore to live. That is why I became a monk, for nothing else. The word 'peace'. We heard many speeches, we heard about education and it is true that education is the best thing. Education is the best thing, so we heard enough about it. We also said that this unity, this justice, and peace need to be included in the curriculum. In the curriculum, we did not only have Social Studies since the very beginning, but there was a time, only five years later, that the report on education from the United Nations brought Malta's Social Studies as an example to the other nations. An example. And as an example, they praised the way we based talks on peace and social justice. We were doing well, some things changed, things were removed, others added, today I do not know if the dress is still recognisable or what it is, because what happened is that we paid a lot of attention to the words and lost the substance. Instead of eating the pulp, we ate the peel. And we kept eating the peel and did not get enough into the pulp.

We have the media; we mentioned the media a lot and, in this regard, I feel that the media took us backwards. It was beneficial in some other things. But in this regard, the media has given us a new substance, a new idea of the image, how we are perceived. It shows us all the time how to look, how to dress, how to shop, how to talk, how to swear, how to do one thing and another, how to fight, how to shoot, but it shows us how to become stars, how to look, the image. And I hope that this will not be a unity just for the image. And after the image we would have made a lot of speeches, we would have perhaps implemented a lot of reforms and things, but we would have just painted the front of the house, where is visible to the outside, the front of the house. Inside, where no one can see, and where it is most important because you spend the most time inside. It is most important because there you can have true peace, because peace comes when you have internal peace, when you are also fair to yourself, when you are not divided with yourself, when you are whole.

Internal peace. If you live without internal peace you live like an animal: you look for food and just eat; if you are in peace with others: you live as a human being; and if you are in peace with nature: you live with the world and everything, with all that God has created. The word unity must not become a danger to us and resemble the unity brought by globalisation, as the Pope said. The whole world is united, globalised, but not for peace. So that everyone earns money and has more and to have more exposure and to have a better standing, but in order to achieve social justice you must live with those who are suffering. You must live with them, not meet them once in a home visit, or meet them once in a party, or in an occasion or during a sermon.

Peace must be the basis of our national unity, if there is peace there will be harmony, if there is harmony there will be the band and, in the band, the drum and the clarinet and the others are all different instruments, but when played together, we end up with something beautiful. Peace be with you all.

## ***Marianna Galea Xuereb***

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There was one woman in a red coat, I do not remember names, who talked about the uglification of buildings.

They are definitely ugly, but it is the least of our problem, uglification alone. She talked about regularisation. I would say that rather than regularisation, of which, I feel, we have too much and most of the problems in the building sector are due to wrong regulation. I am 60 years old, in my time we did not have MEPA, but even as children we knew why there is a ventilator, we knew why there is a well, we knew why you must clean your ventilators once a year, we knew why there is a stack effect, and thus we used to take care of old houses and even children were better than many architects today, I'm sorry to say. So, what we need is education. Today they demolish a perfectly designed 400-year-old house, designed when there was no electricity, so they say: "I want to put an air conditioner or fan or connect electricity". They used to make perfect passive designs so people, whatever happens, live there and stay healthy. Today, conversely, not only in Mater Dei, the international standards of any hospital, we use negative pressure, why? To prevent diseases from escaping the room. If you look, for the sake of argument, at the best building left to us by the Knights, which is the Knights' Hall when it was used as a hospital, not as it is used today for fairs, you will notice that it is true, sick people were healing, even because of the air, they had very good food and good care.

## ***Philip Chircop – Grandparents Malta Foundation***

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In short, because I, everyone here, with all due respect, have devoted almost five hours of our time, of our family time.

Now I want to leave here convinced that there will not be another conference and I will listen to a lot of well-prepared speeches, pleasing to the ear, but no one will take note and do nothing.

So, let me ask a few questions:

- My colleagues and I here who have the power in their foundations, in their organisations, me as a father in the family, will I go home convinced to try to have unity in the family? Let us start from there.
- To set an example for my grandchildren? Let us start from there.
- And then in the community, if I am a Local Councillor, will I do my best to bring unity in the community and among the local residents?

I hear a lot of talk and I do not want to hear it again: "I am ashamed to be Maltese", or "I am proud to be Maltese". We say them both, as a nation. But our subordinates, they are undermining, both sides, undermining and causing division and undermining national unity. What can we do from now on so that the President convenes political parties, individually and then collectively, convenes individual MPs, separately and collectively, so that we have the way forward? I think whoever convened this Conference has a plan, the way forward. I would like to hear, before leaving, that I have not wasted five hours. I am sure no one wasted them, because we listened, learned from everyone and congratulations for the initiative. But now, let us not point fingers, but make progress with the plans to really achieve it now, the election is coming, let us start now, not in another five years.



## ***Therese Decelis***

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Thank you for the initiative, for this Conference. I am Therese Decelis, I speak on my behalf, I do not represent anyone.

All interventions were valid, everyone contributed in some way. I think that Fr Dijonisju Mintoff concluded well on peace, because peace starts at home. Education was mentioned a lot, which is very important and parenting. Then there are Local Councils. I understand that currently we are going through a pandemic, hopefully in the near future, we will start to overcome it. And Local Councils can make a huge impact on national unity. The unity of the village or city, right? We mentioned the environment. The environment, these Councils for example, can start promoting the use of bicycles in the village, so that we will reduce cars, emissions, ok?

Now, today some organisations mentioned the wrong being done and the media. However, you cannot mention what is done wrong, because every government has done things right and wrong, every government. And they all want to do the right thing. But let us not only mention the present, if we want to be credible, let us also mention the past, for otherwise we will not be credible.

And another thing, a lot of people can send good messages, but we are living in a democracy, and it is good to hold protests, right? And it is good that even on the media they mention what is not good and acknowledge the good as well. But when you protest, you must obey the law. This is important, you cannot go and create chaos, because this does not send a good message. Maybe some people delight in such things, but I do not think that this will help national unity.

Thank you very much.



Social media  
comments read out  
during the conference

"If political parties aim to retain or gain power, how can they genuinely, and not through empty words, be committed to national unity?"

"In order to have unity, the Maltese people must live in a society in which justice reigns. Justice, not for who has the most contacts or the largest bank account, but justice for all. Are the police and the courts doing everything they can to prevent criminal politicians and businessmen from really sowing more division and confusion in the Maltese society?"

"Having national unity is a wonderful concept and may we achieve it. But how can we achieve unity when it is not the first time that politicians make speeches that can cause division among us?"

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**A conference recording including all comments sent by the  
online audience may be found here:**

**<https://bit.ly/3wbR5A2>**

## Closing Speech

## ***H.E. George Vella, President of Malta***

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I was following very attentively because all the interventions were very valid.

And I am very happy, as we are approaching the end of this session because, admittedly, this was a gamble. When we decided - I say we as I was not alone, I asked for opinions, I discussed, I took advice - to launch the Conference, as I said at the beginning, some people were negative, some discouraged us and until this morning, I did not know if we will end up happy or disappointed for carrying out an exercise that maybe increased division rather than caused division.

So, I want to thank you. Thank you for the excellent way in which we interacted this morning. First of all, I want to thank the panellists who were very prepared and, I have to say this, without coordinating the content of their speeches, they each managed to address different aspects of the same subject. Well done and thank you.

But at the same time, well done to all those who intervened in a calm, democratic, informative, and respectful manner. We discussed, we all expressed our opinions, and this should be the way forward. No one - and I said this at the beginning - no one is going to tell anyone not to talk about one thing or another. Because no subject is a taboo. The most important thing was to discuss together. This morning we mentioned the word 'dialogue' many times. This is dialogue. We agree to disagree. We learn from each other. We pass on our messages.

I do not have the time here to answer or to react to all that has been said this morning. I have taken all the notes so I can assure you and I can assure anyone who is wondering what will happen after, that I will not make immediate statements. Naturally, there is a lot to ponder on. We obviously need to see exactly what was said, we need to analyse the results. But I promise that this is not a process that will begin and end today, because I would be going against what I said at the beginning; that this is not a process in which one expects a result after one session. I am convinced and I hope that from this encouragement received this morning, and I say this with gratitude, sincerely, we take courage to keep this process going. In relation to how and in which form, I kindly ask you to be patient and to give us some time to decide what to do and what not to do. But there is no doubt that I intend to continue this process in one form or another.

As I already said, I will not go into... we mentioned the media, we mentioned inclusion, the Maltese, governance, the uglification of buildings... we mentioned everything. But this was what in environmental terms is called a 'scoping exercise'. You try to do a study to see what is bothering the people of Malta, to see what is creating division. You

might ask: "Did you have to...?" But when we can externalise our thoughts, that is where we learn more about the most important areas to talk about.

Someone also asked and made a comment regarding the political parties. Perhaps you understand why we took the decision not to formally invite political parties. I did not want us to listen to what the politicians have to say. This was an exercise for politicians to listen to us. All that has been said, has obviously been transmitted, we know that everything is recorded, and I believe and hope that much of what has been said here, will reach the politicians.

Because after all, as someone told me in the beginning: "Everything is political, isn't it?" Yes of course, everything is political. But there is a difference between the dialectic of politics, a difference between political partisanship and the way in which the discussion on politics is held in general. Politics, everything we mentioned. We mentioned the construction industry, we mentioned the social situation, we mentioned the need for education, all this relates to political decisions, and we address these so that the politicians can get our message in relation to what we would like to tackle so as to minimise this division as much as possible.

And I will emphasise it again here. When we speak about national unity, we are being overly optimistic and overly hopeful. It is better to speak about reducing divisions so that gradually, there will be more unity. To talk about absolute national unity is utopian, and I am sure that we will definitely not be able to achieve this in the blink of an eye. However, as has been mentioned, the many differences we have - I am referring to the many things that are causing divisions, both minor and major - well, one may start by addressing these, one by one, like the famous legend or.... We do not grab the whole bunch, the whole bundle to break them all at once, but we try to get rid of them one by one.

I will not take up more time because we already 'took enough time'. In the sense that time was used in an excellent manner. Thank you for spending almost 5 hours here today on a Saturday, a day when everyone would like to rest. But I can assure you that we have taken note of all that you have said. All that has been said, has mostly been within our line of thinking, so, we have not heard, to be honest, we have not heard things out of place here. We are putting our finger on the symptoms, on the things that are evident. We now either try to put them aside, or else we may say: "That's the way it is as that's how we inherited them".

I will not simply say that we have to accept these things. My training, as a doctor, has always been that of approaching cases without prejudice, checking the symptoms and signs, and analysing them. What you can fix, you fix. What you cannot fix, you see what

you can do. But it is also important that you consider all elements, put them together, and take decisions.

To conclude, while thanking everyone again for all the hours we have spent this morning, I can assure you that I am leaving here satisfied, honestly. I am satisfied and happy that we discussed as civilised people do. As people who all love our country. We all want to see our country better than it is today. We would all like to grab a magic wand, and make our country better with one single move. But as you know, this cannot be done.

But if we continue to work together - and I ask you and I invite you to continue working together - I am convinced that we can make our country better than it is today, and for this I thank you. I hope that we will be able to cooperate later with respect to the initiatives we intend to take.

Thank you very much.

Incidentally, I found the document I mentioned earlier, sent to us by schoolchildren who took on the task... when we get to this level, I think that this means that we are already doing something. And this is very important.



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II-maltin nistgħu  
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I-Maltin jistgħu  
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