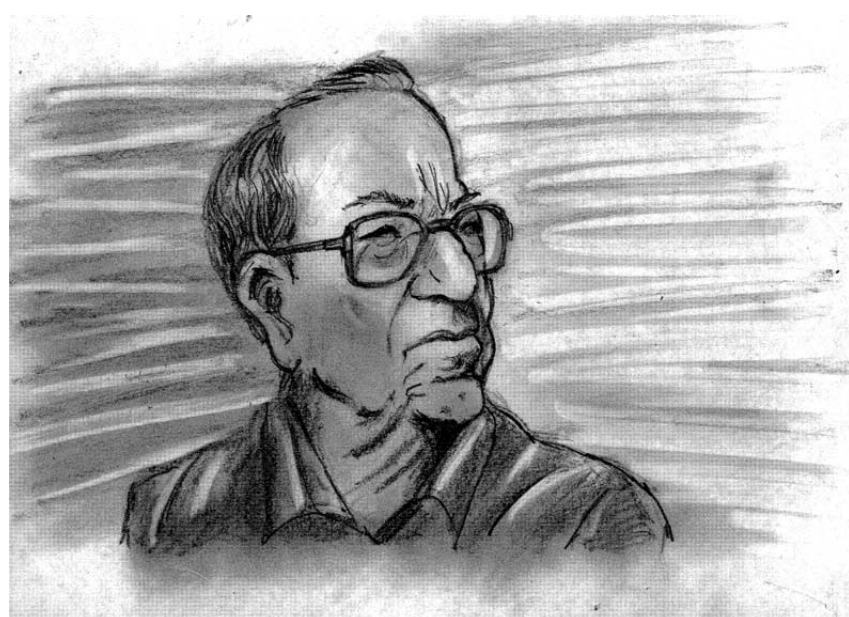


The days Dom Mintoff roared and Alfred Sant trembled





It was a sultry June four years ago. The tension of the World Cup only served to add to the heat. All ears were glued to their radio sets, listening to the games. All ears? One might ask. Surely you meant...? No. All our eyes were glued to the local national TV radio station, where a 83 year-old man once again held the nation in his iron grasp.

We watched breathlessly as the little man spoke carefully, deliberately, ever-playing his audience to derive maximum impact from every syllable uttered. He knew - we all knew - that this was his last moment of glory. Slowly, unswervingly, he plodded on in that inimitable style of his. First he would tease his side, making them doubt whether he was

really going to go so far as to pull the rug from under their feet. Then, sensing a rising air of expectant buoyancy from the side of the foe, he would deftly turn what he had just said on its head and deflate the enemy, causing everyone to lick their dry lips as the uncertainty started to mount, for the umpteenth time, from square one. Everyone was held in thrall as he

slowly set out to demonstrate with devastating clarity, that nobody, but nobody, tried to sideline Dom and put him out to pasture and got away with. With the passing days, it began to transpire that perhaps, the grand old patriarch of Maltese politics was, Samson-like, actually going to pull down the temple about his head, burying his ex-colleagues with him.

The day Dom Mintoff competed with

15 June, House of Representatives 1998

DOM MINTOFF: Madam Speaker, I would like to raise a breach of privilege. I shall not quote legal sources because it is up to your distinguished office to check if there has been a prima facie breach of privilege.

I am raising a breach of privilege against the Prime Minister Alfred Sant who, over the last eight days has done everything, including threaten me, so that when I came here, not only would I not vote against the motion – and this he had the right to do. But that I would resign. This is something that has never happened before in the history of democratic parliaments in Europe or the world. It has never been that a prime minister gathers all his strength, including the police force and all he has in a district and threatens to resign, and even scares people if a member of parliament does not vote as he wishes. If this does not constitute breach of privilege, then this house has absolutely no privileges. If that is how things stand, then privileges have come to an end.

Now let me continue to expand this argument, so that everyone will know why I'm raising a breach of privilege. What was the prime minister's theory? What was his justification in perpetrating this act, the likes of which has never been seen in Europe. His justification was that I had been hampering him for a long time. He said that I had been interfering since the last election and not only since this issue regarding Cottonera arose. He did not say, however, that he, as head of the party, when he convened the general assembly, could have hauled me in front of the board of discipline to inquire whether or not I had broken the disciplinary code of the party. He had a legal right, a democratic right and the right conferred by the party to do this. But what did he do instead? He went on and said during the conference: "Give me a vote of confidence," and expected that I who did not give a vote of no confidence against him, but had only told him that what he was doing went against the fundamental principle of the party, that it is not in the party manifesto nor in anybody's and that I had the right to vote against him in Parliament... I only told him this and I also sent him a letter, the gist of which was that he should have called a general conference in order for him to ascertain whether

he was following what was mentioned in the electoral programme and whether he was following party principles, not to see if the party wanted him removed from the post of prime minister. He did not do this and acted as if nothing had happened.

Now what did I say in November? I said that this was not a budget that did credit to the Socialist Party and that it was not true that it was not going to affect the small worker adversely. But the Prime Minister as well as the ministers – since they chose to go along with him – used to deny the veracity of what I was saying. Later they admitted that the small worker was going to be affected and they spent months negotiating with the two unions and in fact some amendments were made. But they did not only carry out amendments which were going to influence only the small workers, but also the hotels. I'm saying this because the Prime Minister hardened his head and did not allow me to speak and were it not for the opposition that gave me a chance, I would not have been able to speak. I am referring to when this issue cropped up for the first time. Now one would imagine that from that time till now, something would have happened, but neither the Prime Minister, nor his ministers tried to consult me regarding anything. What I am saying – this is important as background – is that I was never consulted about anything, especially when it came to the Cottonera project. But in spite of this and in spite of the fact that they used to do everything to try and avoid me... here I'm not going to mention what they did to annoy me personally to force me to either tow the line or else leave Parliament. I will refer to this at a later date so that I won't mix what is personal with affairs that have to do with the nation, but if they dare me to I will mention it as well.

Madam Speaker, I knew of nothing, but I remained watchful and when I saw things that went against the interests of the nation, against the interests of the party, against the programme, against everything, I sent word to the Prime Minister.

Watch your step because I have already told you that if you do these things, I will finish up having to vote against you in Parliament.

Here I would like to make a small parenthesis because I have been accused of something which they know is not true. I have been accused of having gone abroad on purpose so that when it came to voting for a bill over a loan of 20 million liri, I wouldn't be here to vote and therefore constrained you, Madam Speaker, to vote in my stead. This is a blatant lie. Whoever said this is a liar. And if it was the Prime Minister who said this, then he is a liar as well. Why? Before I went abroad, I told the Whip to be careful. I told him: "You left me here on Friday the whole day long on stand-by for nothing because you told me there was going to be a vote of confidence in the government. Now are you sure that this vote is not going to happen on Monday or Tuesday? Because I'm not likely to be here." And he told me: "You can go." And then, on my return nobody attacked me or told me: How dare you go abroad when there is a money vote? As I said, I thought the opposite was true. I knew that there was not going to be a money vote, not that there was going to be a money vote. When I saw the Whip, I told him: "What is this story?" he told me: "Don't worry about it, we've arranged the matter." This is what happened. But let me go on about the Cottonera episode.

I have to admit that I am sick a lot of the time and that I am not always in a position to follow affairs. I never acted as if I were not ill. In fact I tell everyone not to depend on me, because my health fluctuates from day to day. But when I'm healthy let nobody think that they can use me to work against the party and the nation. At this point in time I'm healthy, but I don't know what I'm going to be like tomorrow morning, like anybody else. Let me repeat, I did not know anything about the Cottonera project, I knew absolutely nothing, and when I read about the amendments that were presented by the Nationalist Party and when I saw that what they were saying was true, I did not come here and inform all of Malta through the television that the Nationalist Party was right, but I called the deputy leader and told him: Do me a favour, either you come, or else I'll come so that we may talk about urgent matters. Why? When I noticed this it was Friday, and I swear before everyone that I did



not talk about this to anybody, not to Gonzi, not to de Marco, even though had I spoken to them, it would have been perfectly within my right. Since when do I not have the right to speak with other members of Parliament to seek their opinion about things that have to do with Parliament? Since when has the right been taken away that somebody from this side speaks to somebody from the other side of the House? And this is no plotting; I did not speak to them because there was no time, because there was no need to speak and because I did not want to involve them and not because I was going to do any wrong by speaking to them about these matters. It often happens that somebody stops me to speak to me on the stairs and tells me: "Is it possible that you agree with 'this'?" By doing that are we plotting? I often spoke to the members of the opposition about divorce.

Did I do wrong because I spoke to them about divorce? To those who have condemned me without listening to me – I am referring to all the members of Parliament – I ask:

"Do I have the right to do this or not? Did I break anybody's code of discipline by doing this? Those that are hearing this now deserve to blush!"

I reiterate, Madam Speaker, that until Friday I knew nothing and I called the deputy leader, as I was bound to.

Were it true that I wanted to start trouble in the party and that I wanted to topple the government, as they are saying, I would not have called anyone – I know how to put spokes in wheels – I would have said that it's not my fault and that "this" and "that" happened. God forbid that I do not know how to do these things, but I do not do them because it is not in my character to do them. That is why I called the deputy

the World Cup and...

leader and told him: "I'm calling you because you have the responsibility to guide the party and if you don't want to shoulder your responsibility, just tell me, don't worry." He told me: "No! Why?" and he came. Now that day I could have had a notary accompany me - not Madam Speaker - but any other notary - so that he would be my witness. Do I not have the right to take a witness when I speak to someone, when I would have notified him previously so that if he wished to, he also could bring his own witness? Did I do anything wrong by doing that? So if I did not do anything wrong why should you involve Sammy Meilaq in the discussion about Birgu - so that they would make fun of him and blow raspberries at him?

MADAM SPEAKER: Perit, continue talking about the breach of privilege.

DOM MINTOFF: How else can you say it in Maltese? If there is another word tell me and I will use it.

MADAM SPEAKER: I did not correct your language.

DOM MINTOFF: Then I'll say that they made noises at him from behind! But let me continue with what I was saying. Why did this name crop up?

MADAM SPEAKER: Honourable Mintoff, if you don't mind, do not mention people who are not part of this House.

DOM MINTOFF: Madam Speaker, either I'm going to talk about these things or else I'm going to sit down and say that this Parliament is allowing the Prime Minister to do whatever he pleases outside and that he who is being attacked is never even heard. I will say again; the Prime Minister had no right to mention this person, the very same person, moreover that the Prime Minister himself nominated to be chairman of the Commission for Fiscal Morality, when this person went to him a second time and said: "No, this does not suit me." It is true that the position he wanted to give him was not suitable. So the Prime Minister said: "This is what we'll do; take this bill that we are discussing with the Grand Masters; see what you think of it and give me your opinion about it." I am saying all this to show that these things are no secret and had they wanted to, they could have told me about them. I'm saying all this so that he won't stay involving this person so that he can hurt him tomorrow. He told him: "If this bill has to do with sovereignty, then it's better if you don't give it to me." And when he told me about this proposal, because he is a friend of mine, I told him: "Don't you dare show it to me because tomorrow he'll taunt you and say that he gave you something in confidence and you came and showed it to me!" I don't know what this bill contains but I'm saying this because there is going to be a link with the Cottonera project.

Now, that day when I voted against the proposal of the government - I did not vote with the Nationalists because it's one thing to vote for an amendment proposed by the Nationalists and another to vote against a proposal by the government - because I did not agree with it, I knew that the Prime Minister had, without telling me anything, asked some ministers, amongst them Minister Vella, to create a lot of propaganda on television about this project. People told me that these appeared on the television and I said: "Prosit, So I'm trying to do my best to hide things and these have already appeared on television! When he came to me at 2.00 p.m. with Dr George Abela, he said to me: "The contract that we're going to sign with the company is not the one that is appearing in Parliament. I'm saying this so that the members on either side, whoever they are, will notice that I'm being precise and not because I'm on one side of the house, the others will say that he's lying, even if I'll be saying the truth. Have we reached this extreme situation in this Parliament? So he told me that this blessed contract did not contain the clause that they were ready to insert when they signed the contract. I have my doubts, too whether he told me that they were ready to propose this amendment in the evening. But I interrupted him and said: "I'm sorry, but I only vote in Parliament on that which I know is going to be binding and not on what you'll do after I have cast my vote. And if you don't need to include all these privileges that you're going to give this company, why did you include them in the contract? Why don't you amend?"

MADAM SPEAKER: Right Honourable, you have to connect what you are saying with the breach of privilege. You cannot make this part of you discussion.

DOM MINTOFF: Madam Speaker, I am giving all my reasons why I think that there is a prima facie breach of privilege, and I'm giving all the reasons after the Prime Minister, with his government, has been harping on and lying about me all week, making people cry, saying that I'm a traitor and many other things. I have as yet not told him anything. I'm only mentioning facts. So I expect that you, Madam Speaker, will allow me to do so and not interrupt me, and if possible you will help me to get this over and done with.

TO CONTINUE



A president's view of the Mintoff months

One year ago, on 10 June 2001, this newspaper conducted an interview with former President of the Republic Ugo Mifsud Bonnici. The Cottonera-born politician had supervised the transition of administration in 1996 and occupied a central role in the run-up to the 1998 freak election. Here we reproduce excerpts from that interview in which Dr Mifsud Bonnici talks about that eventful summer in 1998.

"Mintoff had been criticising the government for quite some time but I did not believe the issue would have come to a head in June. Furthermore, Alfred Sant did not know the situation was going to precipitate in that way," Dr Mifsud Bonnici recalls.

He continues, "I could not understand how the Labour government never consulted Mintoff on the Cottonera project. This did not bode well for Alfred Sant's government."

The ex-president admits that the water and electricity price-hikes were a difficult measure to adopt, but he understands that they went against Mintoff's principles. "Even so I never believed Mintoff would bring down the government," Dr Mifsud Bonnici remarks.

However, the issue was more complex than that. "Alfred Sant had taken a number of decisions to bring about reconciliation in the country, such as the Independence Day celebrations. These could have bothered Mintoff because they were undoing all that he had created in the party," Dr Mifsud Bonnici insists.

Describing the situation at the time, Dr Mifsud Bonnici recalls that in June he was in hospital undergoing a major operation. "The Acting President had come to me explaining what had happened in parliament. After the vote of no confidence passed in parliament an election was on the doorstep. Given my condition I asked the Acting President to delay the situation until my condition improved."

The election seemed to be the only way out of the impasse.

"I had a judgement to make and the question I asked myself was, 'Could I save this government?'" Dr Mifsud Bonnici reiterates.

The options available were limited. He could have either asked the Leader of the Opposition to form a minority government supported by Mintoff or else turned to somebody else from the Labour side to see whether he could have mustered a majority in the House.

Dr Mifsud Bonnici explains that Mintoff had insisted on more than one occasion that he did not want to support a PN government.

He continues, "from the way things developed I understood that nobody except Alfred Sant would have the trust of the majority of MLP MPs, apart from Mintoff obviously."

The situation left the President with no other alternative but to accept Alfred Sant's advice to go for an early general election.

Dr Mifsud Bonnici adds, "In my considered judgement I think that was the only option available."

During the whole crisis Dr Mifsud Bonnici never called on Mintoff to talk to him. However, he admits that on more than one occasion he told Alfred Sant to take note of the octogenarian.

"I repeatedly told Dr Sant to try and understand Mintoff. Mintoff was an aged man, the founder of the Labour Party and a personality in his own right. However, there was a clash of personalities and Dr Sant did not take things lying down," Dr Mifsud Bonnici said.