

“Is it possible that our country has chosen the methodology of confrontation as its symbol?” – de Marco



Today's excerpt leaves the technicality of the contract and its amended version in the background and focuses on a new contributor to the great national debate. Professor Guido de Marco assumes centre-stage and like a breath of fresh air wafting into a musty room, brings a certain objective distance and vision with him. Slipping easily into the role of quasi-mediator between his own party and the government, he endeavours to cool heated tempers. Encouraging everybody to stop being partisan and to work in the best national interest, de Marco manages to imbue the debate with a noble nationalism which has been sadly lacking up to this point.

GUIDO de MARCO: Mr President, initially I had no intention in taking part in this debate, not because this is not an important debate. Not because this debate is not interesting and has not got positive and economic ramifications for a part of Malta that certainly needs the constant attention of this parliament. Nothing like that. I believe that this parliament would do well to discuss the project for Cottonera and the contract that pertains to Cottonera. In fact it is essential that the nation considers these issues in a non-partisan way and with the most apolitical approach, as when it comes to the interests of this part of the island, it certainly deserves to have all the attention of this parliament. Mr President, this is not an economic development that only affects Cottonera, but it has a positive bearing on the whole of Malta. That is why to me it is a great shortcoming that in front of our people we give the impression, even remotely – and I say this with the greatest sincerity – that this parliament divides up between government and opposition in connection with this project.

I am saying this because judging from all the discourses that I have heard in this parliament, it is certain that each side is saying that it is essential that this project progresses. That is why it is incomprehensible how in this country we have the capacity that on a project upon which there is agreement from both sides of the house, as well from the general populace, we create a crisis in Parliament, a crisis that is also reflected in our country. I believe that in this way instead of doing good, we are causing harm. Now, I am convinced that no one on either side of the house wishes to cause harm to his country. I am convinced

that each one of us has as his main intention and moral political conviction nothing but good for Malta, but it's as though there is a devil that in some way or another, even in matters that are of benefit, contrives to separate us and create this tension in our country, which in my opinion causes a lot of damage to our very own country. This is what I want to talk about today.

I have heard my colleagues from both sides talk about this debate. I am almost tempted to say that we are turning this debate into a serial or soap opera. I wouldn't know whether to call it 'Waterfront' or 'Watergate' but while everyone recognises the validity and necessity of this project and while each side is proclaiming its paternity, we have our differences about how the contract should be projected and implemented. As a result we are witnessing a situation where this country has a serious constitutional crisis on its hands that is involving the party in government and because it is precisely the party in government that has a crisis that the crisis goes beyond a simple internal party crisis. This is a crisis that affects the whole country; it is a crisis that imposes upon us, the Opposition, certain obligations and responsibilities. It is a crisis that brought and continues to bring economic stagnation to our country. This is the reason why I asked to speak in Parliament this evening.

Mr President, I cannot boast that I have a grandparent or an uncle who hails from Cottonera or that I was born there. In all probability, like every other Maltese, I must have someone who is related to me in every locality. In other words, if I had to research the matter, I would find that I have an uncle who used to live in Isla, another ancestor who used to live in Bormla and another in Birgu. What I cannot fathom is why the validity of this process depends on whether one's ancestors had connections with Cottonera. To me, even the parochial way we approach things when it comes to this country – as if I should stick up for Hamrun and Valletta just because I hail from there, or for Sliema because that is from where I got elected.... It is true that everyone should do his duty as deputy elected from a particular district, but there is an importance which eclipses the matter of electoral districts. There are matters which go beyond this. If you had to ask me, Mr President, I would tell you that I am a citizen of Cottonera, just as much as anyone who was born there. And as a Maltese and a deputy of the Maltese people, I have

a vested interest to speak in favour of a project that will bring wealth to our country. So where, actually did the mischief start? As I am saying, the trouble began over the contract and not about the project. There is the contract that the government is proposing and which this side of the house and Dom Mintoff found difficulties with. This is the truth and this is no difficulty based on contention, Mr President.

We are saying that transferring the quay with limited access for the Maltese people is not in our best interests. And if I had to be on the other side of the house, I would say that the opposition were right to raise this objection. It could be that this matter has already been discussed with the consortium and when the government weighed its options, it found that either way, it was going to have to hand over the land for ninety-nine years. Many of my colleagues on either side of the house are members of the legal profession and everybody knows that when you are negotiating a contract you try and extract what you can. Sometimes, however, you don't get everything you want. If this is the situation obtaining about this matter, then the government should explain to us what it wanted and perhaps tell us that when they weighed the pros and cons they found that it would be better to give the land for ninety-nine years, rather than risk losing the

one should negotiate. Is it possible that our country has elevated methodology over substance? Is it possible that our country has chosen the methodology of confrontation as its symbol? Is it possible that sixty-nine deputies – all of us – have the capacity to turn into a mountain of disagreement that which we don't agree upon, when if you come down to the brass-tacks you find that our disagreements are so minimal? Is this sensible for our country? Is this the way that we want our country to develop? This is what hurts me, honestly, whenever I talk to my colleagues of either side of the house, because I feel that this issue should not separate us. I don't hold any representative from either side to be my political foe. We do have our political differences but I have no enemy from either side of the house, either on a political level or not. Why therefore, are we developing this concept of a divided people in our country? Now why am I making so much emphasis on this concept, Mr President?

I believe that every government wishes to negotiate the best condition in any contract. There is no sacred cow that, through this contract, we are handing over to Port Cottonera Ltd. I was listening to my colleague Anton Refalo talking about the contract of Chambray. We had said that we were going to leave half this project for the Maltese people. Even Dr Edgar Mizzi had said in his report that

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opportunity. These are things that happen but they are also things that can be negotiated upon both in Parliament, as well as through the medium of the Public Accounts Committee, or through some other committee, as was suggested from this side of the house and as was discussed amongst ourselves. I don't see why that that should have been something to separate the people of Malta, to separate the government and the opposition and to separate the party in Government. By remaining level-headed and focussed we can obtain that which is in the best interest of the nation; this is the way

this was a good idea. What am I trying to say? I am saying that there is no need to turn every issue into a battle, to the point that we almost physically attack one another. Why should things reach this stage. Naturally, Mr President, a lot of discussion has taken place in here. For example, we suggested we should go before the Committee of the House to examine certain aspects of this contract, but the idea was shot down. That is why I don't think that we were treated well, especially when we were called traitors and that we did not want the Cottonera project and that we were simply criticising this contract.

A selected transcript of the 1998 summer sitting will continue next week