

In the final analysis . . .



This last episode of the chronicles which record the downfall of the Labour Government takes a brief look at the more poignant parts of the speeches made by the players of this great national drama in parliament. The main factors, which together formed the components of the disastrous equation are also highlighted. In retrospect it seems that, given the antipathy between Mintoff and Sant, and given that Mintoff had accepted to contest the election on his own terms, as it were, what happened would have happened anyway. Different circumstances and different factors would have simply supplied the necessary tinder for a conflagration which just had to happen, one day or another.

Mintoff, who in the new taxes introduced by Sant and even more so in the proposed Cottonera contract, sees his entire puritanical socialist belief system threatened, lashes out in retaliation. He cannot stand by and watch the values, pride and arrogance – the sheer sense of inviolability that he had painstakingly inculcated into the 'small' Maltese workers - being undermined by one of his very own successors; "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."

Very early on in the proceedings, Mintoff issues a warning to Sant and makes his position very clear; "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."

Mintoff goes on to reveal that he suspects he is the victim of a massive conspiracy. First he accuses the government whip of having purposely obfuscated the issue when Mintoff had told him that he had to go abroad to Libya on private business. According to Mintoff this had been turned round so that it looked as if he had gone abroad on purpose to cause the speaker of the house to vote in his stead. "I have been accused of having gone abroad on purpose so that when it came to voting for a bill over a loan of twenty million liri, I wouldn't be here to vote."

Secondly, Mintoff takes issue with the subject of the Cottonera project. He accuses his colleagues of intentionally keeping him in the dark about this matter. He says that he got to know about the subject very late and immediately tried to arrange a meeting to discuss this matter of national urgency. When he tries to obtain a twenty-four hour postponement on taking the vote, it is denied him.

The personal enmity between Sant and Mintoff, and Mintoff's perceived notion that the Labour Party is not what it once used to be, force the rift between Dom and the rest of the party to get wider and wider: "But in this very same programme; in this programme of the Prime Minister, mine and of whoever spoke

up to now, are we saying that we're going to hire out the quays for ninety-nine years? Is there anything that intimates this in the programme? Are we, perhaps, saying that in the programme of the party we are saying that people are not going to be allowed to go there, or that they have to get the permission of a company?...Who is the traitor of Malta? I, who have never hidden anything from Malta, or he who says all these things without actually knowing anything?"

The situation starts to spiral further and further out of control with insults and angry exchanges thick in the air. Mintoff, as usual, is championing the Libyans' cause and lamenting the poor conditions won for the people of Cottonera; "I'm not saying that what you said was wrong, but that it was unnecessary. You did not have to say this; you caused offence by saying this. Why? Because the Libyans said: The government gave so much land to others, why did he single us out? That is why they had the right to get offended. . . I was convinced that the government had not really done its utmost to win the best terms for the people of Cottonera."

Confusion continues to reign supreme. Mintoff turns Sant's own admissions against him and taunts him by saying that he doesn't even know who is with him and who is against him; "You don't even know those who you yourself said are gnawing from underneath and not telling you about it. How are you going to know what these are going to do if you go on like this? ... Why don't you see why they are gnawing from underneath, if they really are gnawing from underneath?"

Mintoff goes on to remind everybody that he was elected on a different programme than the rest of his cronies and that as a consequence his allegiance did not automatically belong to anyone.

Then it is the turn of Dr Eddie Fenech Adami and Prime Minister Alfred Sant to step into the lime-light. Fenech Adami, scenting the possibility of another term in office much sooner than he ever dared to hope, leaves no stone unturned and relentlessly insists that the situation has become untenable. Dr Fenech Adami crystallises the picture by declaring in Parliament that "The country cannot live in this state of uncertainty where the Prime Minister says that he no longer has the support of a majority . . . The only logical consequence of the Prime Minister's declarations is that he immediately offers his resignation to the President of Malta."

Alfred Sant wearily admits to what is palpably obvious, but disagrees with Fenech Adami about how the situation came to arise; Sant blames the goings-on of the House, rather than the external circumstances that Fenech Adami focuses on. In a do or die attempt, Sant places all his chances of surviving Mintoff's challenge by declaring the vote on the Cottonera project a vote of confidence in his government. He declares "This crisis that the leader of the opposition is mentioning is easily resolved by the proposal the Government side is making; that we discuss the next motion on the basis of a vote of confidence. Our suggestion is that we proceed with the suggestion to forward the motion at once." Mintoff steps into the fray again and don-like declares that it won't be his fault if the country goes to early election, because of the fact the Sant has chosen to follow the 'wrong' path. The fact that the right path happens to be the one Mintoff would like to see everyone in the party following is, of course, incidental; "I have already said today that I do not want to defy the government and I don't want to be the one responsible for sending us to an election. This is the responsibility of the one who insists on going on even though he knows for sure that that we don't agree about certain things but he does not even want to listen." Notice how Mintoff refers to himself with the royal plural.

Alfred Sant defends his position and holds forth at length about the exact nature of the bill of the Cottonera contract and the differences, if any, between the two versions; "Ms President, first of all I would like to make it clear that the contract that is being presented in front of the parliament along with this motion, in our opinion, is identical to the one that was presented last week. I know that there are arguments from the other side that we carried out amendments that were not approved and that don't show up in the contract and that is why I want to make it clear that this is the same contract that was presented last week . . . it happened that on the day it was presented to this parliament, in other words, yesterday a week ago, a change regarding access was made. It is worth noticing that this change has increased the rights of access of the people of Malta and Gozo, which rights were already recognised in no uncertain terms in the bill of contract. So we were given the legal advice that since the new arrangement that was negotiated

and that the house was informed about was giving the public more rights than the contract, all that was needed was that the house be informed of the changes."

Sant goes on to reflect on the Nationalists' past performance, or, according to him, the lack of it, especially when it came to starting and completing public projects. The hint here could be taken to be, of course, that by siding with Mintoff on this huge project, the Nationalists are once again abandoning a project in its tracks. The difference being that this time, they are managing this extraordinary achievement from the opposition benches. Sant dwells on all the wonderful projects which the Nationalists, with all the good intentions in the world, had planned to start. But didn't. He reminds everybody about how the Tigne' and Manoel Island projects remained forlorn and forgotten after a couple of half-hearted attempts to start them up.

Guido de Marco steps into the picture and attempts to pour oil over troubled water. He does his best to remain as objective as possible, and even goes so far as to include his own party in some of his chastisements; "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."

De Marco seeks to switch on sensibilities which seem to be dormant in his peers. How successful he is, is another question. De Marco blows the whistle on the attacks that the Labour party carried out on the good name and reputation of Dom Mintoff; "One can say many things to a crowd, but to tell the crowd that the Honourable Mintoff is a traitor is unacceptable . . . the Honourable Mintoff can defend himself in his own able manner. In other words, my aim is not to defend him but to defend Common Sense as a quality in this country and as a quality in the institution of Parliament."

Of course, it wouldn't even begin to cross anybody's mind that all this show of being a fair sport could be part of a subtle Machiavellian plan, designed to further the interests of the Nationalist Party and mollify Mintoff into voting against his own party.

Would it?

The end

Next week: The Anthony Mifsud saga