

DEMOCRACY SHOWS ITS TRUE METTLE



This week's special report focuses on a number of Labour supporters who were arraigned in court in connection with the incidents of barbarism that occurred in Tal-Barrani Road, Zejtun on 30 November 1986.

Unbelievably, their lawyers try and convince the courts that their clients are actually being politically victimised. The report also looks at the comments made by then opposition leader Dr Eddie Fenech

Adami shortly after the incidents and the comments made by Magistrate Carol Peralta when considering the innocence, or guilt of Silvio Bondin, a Labour thug who got hurt on that fateful day

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On the 14 November, 1988, after the incidents that occurred in Zejtun on that fateful day two years earlier, a number of Labour supporters were brought to the courts, accused of having taken part in the violence and public disorder that occurred during that mass meeting. Joseph Zahra, Anthony Carabott, Edwin Bartolo, Godwin Schembri and Alfred Desira were hauled before the court and charged with committing several different offences during the Nationalist mass meeting on 30 November 1986 at Tal-Barrani Road in Zejtun.

Carabott, Bartolo, Schembri and Desira were charged with having joined more than 10 people with the intention to commit crimes and with having indeed committed the crimes they had set out to commit. They were also accused of bearing arms illegally, of trying to raise a riot, of threatening and of generally sowing fear among the people.

Zahra was also additionally charged with having blocked the road that leads from Bir id-Deheb to Zejtun.

Carabott, Desira, Schembri and Bartolo were also charged with having hurt seventeen people to varying degrees and with using force to try and influence the actions and behaviour of people. Bartolo and Carabott were also charged with having stolen a truck and with also having attempted to steal a bulldozer. Bartolo was charged with stealing a second truck and with having driven it recklessly. Schembri was also charged with making use of unlicensed communications equipment. To all these accusations the accused replied not guilty and went on to say they had been victims of a frame-up.

After the charge had been read, defence lawyers Joe Brincat, John Attard Montaldo and John Buttigieg filed an objection. They claimed that their clients had been politically discriminated against because opposition supporters had also used violence on the

police and had attempted to kill Silvio Bondin. Besides the Nationalist supporters had also wilfully caused damage to property. The lawyers went on to say that even though the police had been given the necessary evidence, no investigation had been initiated against the Nationalists because of their political creed. Based on this the lawyers argued that the accusations that were being brought against their clients were unconstitutional and also contravened fundamental human rights. The accused were released on bail which varied from a personal guarantee of Lm500 and a deposit of Lm500 for each of the accused, except for Joseph Zahra who was granted bail on a personal guarantee of Lm100 and a deposit of Lm100.



The whole episode was given an ironic twist when Magistrate Carol Peralta found Silvio Bondin, a labour supporter who was injured at Tal-Barrani, not guilty of banding with a group of more than ten people who gathered to violently breach the peace and disrupt a meeting on the 30 November, 1986.

Because of the lack of a positive identification, the magistrate acquitted Bondin from the charge of having formed part of a group that caused injuries to others, of damaging property and vehicles. It was pointed out that during the riots, people from both sides of the great divide had been injured. Moreover, Bondin's guilt had only been confirmed through a declaration he had made to the police. The magistrate pointed out that Bondin had been shot and had had to be air-lifted by helicopter from the scene. At the time of the incidents Bondin was still in his twenties and had a clean criminal record.

In his conclusions, Magistrate Peralta incorporated the comments that Judge Patrick Vella had made when deliberating on a verdict in conjunction with the accusations of

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corrupt practices that had been brought against the Zejtun socialist thugs. Judge Vella had said that in spite of the time interval, "the court still wants to pass on the message that these procedures were about very serious crimes, crimes which go against the supreme will of the citizen who, on election day, has the right to freely exercise his sacrosanct and constitutional right to choose his representatives in Parliament... This is what Maltese society deserves and the variation in punishment should in no way be construed negatively. The crimes, in the circumstances and political climate of the time, were extremely serious.

"But the mentality has improved and matured and Maltese people now tolerate political opinions which are different to theirs. A jail term is no longer appropriate because after matters have improved so positively, it will only serve to reopen a wound which no one wants reopened so that the 1987 incidents will be consigned to history and buried once and for all."

Addressing a press conference shortly after their return from the fraught Zejtun meeting Dr Fenech Adami said that he was happy that despite the known difficulties and dangers, a crowd of around 30,000 people had gathered. The leader of the opposition reminded everyone that the police had not even shouted a warning before firing tear gas into the crowds

Speaking about the incidents Dr

Eddie Fenech Adami said that after the day's events, his party could understand why the then Prime Minister, Dr Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici and the police had agreed on why the PN's planned meeting in Zejtun would result in injuries. Dr Fenech Adami insisted that the injuries were caused by the action of the police and those they had protected.

The then leader of the opposition had said that there were two lessons to be learnt from Zejtun. One was that it was now obvious that in Malta democracy was threatened. The other lesson was that the Maltese were very resolute in their will to defend their rights. He went on to say that had Dr Guido Demarco and himself not stopped the crowds, they would have continued to advance on Zejtun and confront the handful of thugs that were blocking their progress. However they had not wanted to endanger the lives of anybody. Dr Fenech Adami went on to say that the behaviour of the MLP increasingly bore witness to the desperate state that the MLP now found itself. It was also a strong pointer to how the Maltese people were rallying behind the Nationalist Party and that the MLP had no chance of winning the next elections.

Next week's Special Report will start to examine the corrupt practices that occurred at Zejtun on polling day, 9 May, 1987