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Can I have my peace of mind back, please?

This election has produced many casualties – not least, the credibility of a number of supposedly independent pundits – but as the dust settles and debris is cleared out of the way, there appears to be at least one survivor in the wreckage: Irony.

Yes, indeed. The ultimate survivor, which like a cockroach will survive the most earth-shattering catastrophe you can possibly imagine: a nuclear war, an asteroid impact, the collapse of the dollar... heck, even a Maria Muscat concert on the Granaries.

Even, in extremis, the all-out, naked and hideously ugly power struggle we know by the name of “Maltese elections”.

Small example: this week I drove past a huge, illuminated billboard on the Gzira sea-front. You must have seen it, too. A fine example of classic Kim Il Sung-style electioneering, featuring an unfeasibly large close-up of the Glorious Leader’s face – skilfully airbrushed to remove all eye-bags, wrinkles and other such unsightly blemishes – next to the words: “Gonzi means peace of mind.”

Well, what can I say? So reassured was I by this near-perfect replica of the Big Brother poster in 1984, that I very nearly drove headlong into a lamp-post.

Peace of mind? You call this peace of mind, do you? God, I’d hate to see what the GonziPN acolytes consider as tension, stress and fear.

But like I said, irony has been the great victor in this sorry mess. And besides, it is right and fitting for the GonziPN strategists to draw their inspiration from George Orwell’s 1984. Wasn’t that the novel that gave us neologisms like “doublethink” – the ability to hold two contradictory opinions at one and the same time?

And what is that billboard, if not an iconic symbol of the eternal ability to say one thing, while simultaneously projecting an entirely conflicting message?

So well done, all the boys and girls of the GonziPN Fear Factory. You have succeeded in robbing us all – minority voters in particular – of the “peace of mind” we once foolishly thought could be achieved in this very sick country of ours. I hope you’re

all very, very proud of yourselves.

But back to the business of commenting on the week’s events. I don’t know about you, but I for one am not all impressed with any of the myriad versions we have so far heard about the visit to Harry Vassallo by the police earlier this week. Starting with Harry’s, which seems to have omitted a few details, prompting numerous government departments – supposedly bound by confidentiality – to kindly supply them on his behalf. Clearly, the Green party leader has been somewhat negligent in the handling of bureaucratic matters. I must confess, I do sympathise... if nothing else, because this is precisely the kind of negligence I am often guilty of myself.

But despite the many online opinions to the contrary, I fail to see how – through criminal negligence, or even sheer strategic genius – Harry Vassallo could possibly have engineered things in such a way that a notification of imprisonment (the exact equivalent of Monopoly’s “Go to jail, do not pass Go, do not collect \$200”), issued in October 2007, could lie forgotten in a Sliema police station drawer for five whole months, only to be suddenly remembered and executed a mere three days before an election. If anyone out there can suggest a way that Harry might have convinced the police to spring it on him like that – and while he was at it, also to inform the NET TV journalist himself – then please go ahead. Until then, I shall have to assume that Harry’s version is correct at least in this: whoever orchestrated this most bizarre and unlikely of coincidences, it could not have been Harry himself.

So, for my “peace of mind”, I would like an explanation.

In his press conference on Wednesday, Harry Vassallo said that he was asked by a Net TV journalist to comment on the fact that he was about to be arrested. And sure enough, two hours later he received a call from the police.

What happened next depends very much on whom you believe. According to Harry, two police officers turned up at the AD office (he himself did not go to the station, citing health prob-

lems), and presented him with the court order. But according to the police statement issued the following day, the same officers went to the AD offices only to ask Harry for information about a burglary which took place next door to a property he owned in Sliema; and it was only after a very cordial discussion about the burglary issue, that the police officers in question said something along the lines of: ““Oh, and Harry, one last thing before we go. We had almost entirely forgotten to mention it, but there’s also this tiny little triviality that... you’re supposed to be IN JAIL!”

Like I said, it’s a question of who you believe. But what I really haven’t understood is: why was Harry informed by a NET TV journalist?

OK, at this point I must be honest and admit that the journalist in question has every right to his dirty little secret. Far be it from me to begrudge a colleague for laying hands on supposedly confidential information: after all, it is part of a journalist’s job to get to know things they are not supposed to know. So obviously, I don’t expect the journalist in question to reveal his sources... but then, I don’t think the services of Sherlock Holmes will be required, either.

From where I’m sitting, it does look very much as though there was some form of collusion between the Nationalist Party and the police. But of course, looks can be deceptive. The police officers concerned have vehemently denied passing on any information to NET. And they were forceful in their declaration, too... so forceful, in fact, that before anyone had even voiced the tiniest of doubts, they had already offered to sign a sworn statement of innocence.

Hmm. Now, I know I’m a suspicious geek (I can’t help it, it’s my defective DNA) but this does not do very much for my “peace of mind” at all. It seems that even the police officers involved knew from the outset that their version of events was less than 100% credible, and tried to preemptively reinforce it with an unnecessary oath.

As Shakespeare might have put it, they “protested too much”.

Not without good reason, too: for at face value, the police’s version of events is not much more believable than the ending of “Dumbo the Flying Elephant”. Excuse me, but... how on earth could a NET TV journalist be informed from beforehand about something that the police themselves claim was merely an afterthought? I am sorry but I just don’t see it. By the principle of Occam’s razor (a very popular principle, especially among certain pundits of the variety described above) I find it infinitely less complicated, and therefore much more probable, that the primary scope of the visit was in fact to present Harry Vassallo with the court order... and that, if anything, it was the questioning of the burglary that came second.

As things stand – and regardless how conspiracy theorists have since conspired to distort it – about the only incontestable fact of the story is that a NET journalist contacted Harry Vassallo with news of the court order presentation two hours before it took place. This was confirmed by NET TV itself, in a press release which also revealed that it knew about the impending arrest attempt 24 hours before the police actually turned up.

This in turn implies – though admittedly does not prove – that the Nationalist Party knew at least 24 hours in advance that its own media were pursuing the story. I say the “Nationalist Party”, because Media.link is a media house owned and operated by the PN from within its headquarters in Pietà. I have never worked for that organisation, but I know enough about it to know that there is precious little goes on there without the knowledge and approval of top party officials. Even without this detail, it is simply not plausible that a journalist would know of the impending arrest of a political party leader (and thorn in the side for the PN) just three days before an election, and – despite the sheer enormity of the political implications – not inform his immediate superiors before taking any initiative on the story. By the same line of reasoning, it would also be grossly negligent of his superiors if, in this scenario, they did not immediately inform the

media house’s owner of this potentially explosive story.

Make no mistake: Media.link planned all along to run the story... as in fact it did, on its website Maltarightnow.com. The article appeared on Wednesday, within minutes of Harry’s own press conference and – interestingly enough – vanished from the site almost immediately afterwards, to be replaced by an article about the SPCA.

(But, HA! Even though they removed the story, they left the picture of Harry Vassallo instead of the usual homeless, beaten and abandoned dog. So as you can see, panic can cause even a very intelligent party strategist to make very stupid mistakes.)

For what it’s worth, my own reading of the election campaign’s last dramatic revelation is that Media.link had planned a killer knock-out blow about Harry’s failure to submit a VAT return 10 years ago (and not to pay his taxes, as “Mr Peace of Mind” said on TV last Thursday)... but the scud-missile exploded upon launch, causing the PN to panic and distance itself as much as possible from the debacle.

Yes, I am aware that there is a flaw in this argument – for with hindsight, it was a strategy that was doomed all along to backfire. But we know from the Maltarightnow story that this was the PN’s intention all along, and let’s face it: hindsight was not available to the geniuses of Media.link on Tuesday and Wednesday. All I can say is that it doesn’t reflect very well on the intelligence of Nationalist Party strategists.

But no matter how unintelligent the strategy, the overwhelming impression it has left in its wake is that the execution of a court notice of imprisonment of a political party leader was delayed for five months, and when delivered, it was done so three days before the election, in apparent collusion with a rival political party. I am sorry, but it just doesn’t look good. So my final question for whoever emerges victorious from this week’s disgraceful bloodbath is: can I have my “peace of mind” back, please? Thanks.