

## THE LANGUAGE QUESTION IN MALTA (II)

THE second part of this brief exposition of the language question in Malta opens with the grant of self-government to the Maltese Islands in 1921. The Charter then granted by His Majesty's Government practically incorporated the actual use of the languages. It was not what the National Assembly had asked for, but it gave in this matter full justice to the historical traditions of the Island. His Majesty's Government's declaration on the subject proceeded on the assurance that the settlement arrived at had been inspired by a wish to avoid further struggles on that question. Indeed, in paragraph 7 of Mr. Amery's despatch of April 9th, 1921, it is stated that

'in endeavouring to arrive at a final settlement of the language question, the only object kept in view was to avoid future discussion and controversy by a solution which should take equally into account the historic and cultural traditions of the Island, its position as a member of the British Commonwealth and the every day needs of its people. There was certainly no intention of displacing or restricting the use of the Italian language.'

Further, Lord Milner in his despatch of May 28th, 1920, paragraph 13, wrote that:

'Those (religion and language) are matters which it is obviously desirable to keep outside the field of party strife, and which should not be liable to alteration at the discretion of a purely temporary majority.'

This attitude shows that His Majesty's Government intended to give a final solution to the problem in the sense that any departure from the state of things sanctioned by the Constitution on this question should be made *only if and when* public opinion had definitely expressed itself in a stronger sense than a temporary parliamentary majority could provide.

The Milner despatch continues:

'At the same time, the possibility of amendment by Letters Patent is not excluded, in case experience should show a clear necessity, sustained by public opinion, for change in some particular.'

And in paragraph 16, which deals with the position of the language in the Courts of Law, it is stated that

‘ suggestions for reform in this respect (*viz.*, extended use of English in Courts) must be left to the local initiative of the Bar of Malta and of public opinion, which may lead to some future amendment of provisions of the Letters Patent on this subject.’

Again, in paragraph 17:

‘ In the sphere of education, no change is made in the existing practice whereby English and Italian are on the footing of equality as languages of culture, while such facilities are afforded for the use of Maltese in the lower classes of the elementary schools as may be necessary for purpose of instruction.’

Once more, the British Government, as after 1800, was entering into a most solemn pact with the Maltese nation, and in order to impress on all parties concerned the seriousness of this pact Lord Milner wrote (paragraph 14):

‘ The question of language required and has received the most careful consideration so as to do justice both to the position of Malta as a member of the British Commonwealth and to the traditions of its history and culture.’

Under these circumstances, the Nationalists fought and won the first election. Their programme on the Language Question, contrary to the pretensions of the so-called Imperialistic Party led by Sir Gerald Strickland, was for *pari-passu*, as the old system was called. The Nationalist Party then consisted of two groups, the moderate section and the extremist section. The latter wanted a *pari-passu* Bill to affect the elementary schools from the very first standard upwards. The moderates contended that the first two classes were intended for preliminary teaching of English and that English and Italian were to be taken up together in the third standard through the medium of Maltese. In this the scheme of the Moderates had also the approval of the Labour Party. A Bill, framed as the Extremists willed it, passed the Assembly by a majority of one, but, when it reached the Senate, it was amended so as to start the *pari-passu* from the third standard. So amended, the Bill

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passed the Senate at the sitting of July 4th, 1923, by a majority of fourteen (exclusive of the President, a Nationalist). On its being referred to the Assembly, the Senate's amendments were concurred in, and at the sitting of July 5th, 1923, it passed that House as well, with a majority of eighteen (exclusive of the Speaker, a Nationalist). His Excellency the Governor is entitled under the Malta Constitution either to assent himself to Bills passed by Parliament or to reserve them for the Royal Assent. The *Pari-passu* Bill was reserved. The legal officers of the Crown were at liberty to see if it violated or not the Constitution. They decided that it did not, and the Bill was assented to by His Majesty and entered on the Statute Book as a Law of the Island.

The second elections took place in 1924, again confirming the Nationalist Party in power. Hence no change was effected, nor did any change take place after the elections of 1927 (the third under self-government), although the Nationalists were not returned to power, being succeeded by a *Compact Government* combining the Imperialists and the Socialists. They remained in office for almost three years, but did not even attempt to revoke or change the *Pari-passu* Bill of 1923. They only tried by legislation to introduce Maltese into the Criminal Courts, and as a medium in the drafting of contracts and deeds. But they failed to command a majority even at a joint sitting of both Houses. The Imperial authorities in Malta and in England then tried to help. The Charter of 1921 was amended invalidly in the hope of securing a majority for them, but both the Malta Courts and the Privy Council decided against the *Compact* Parties, and when the life of the *Compact* administration came to an end in 1930, the country found itself confronted with a series of laws which were null, void and without binding force.

The fourth elections, which were due in 1930, did not take place. The Constitution was suspended and the elections, which had already begun, were postponed *sine die*. The religious controversy, which had existed between

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Ministers and the Church for the previous three years, developed in such a way as to make it expedient in the eyes of the Imperial Government to suspend the Constitution and postpone the elections. It was thought that that was the only way to save the Imperialists and the Socialists from defeat. This is not the place, however, to discuss such a question. For our purpose it is enough to state that the language question had nothing to do with the crisis which, in the opinion of the Imperial Government, necessitated the suspension of the Constitution and the stay of the elections. In the Report of the Royal Commission, 1931, it is stated (p. 116) that the Commissioners were not astonished at the fact that the contention of the Imperialists and Socialists that the Italian language had been the cause of the trouble had not been and could not be established.

With the suspension of the Constitution, a Provisional Government was formed, with all powers centred in the Governor. With the excuse of not giving way to the Vatican (namely because of the religious crisis) the Imperialistic Ministers were retained in office, if not in power, and continued to draw their salaries and exercise patronage. One of their acts during their tenure of office had consisted in changing the venerable Italian names of streets into English, as if history could be countermanded by a stroke of the pen. This continued under the Provisional Government, and the people of Malta were subjected to the humiliation of Crown Colony Government of the severest type in the years 1930 and 1931, for the simple reason that they had refused to side with Ministers and the Imperial authorities against the Church of their forefathers. Then, when public opinion was becoming impatient of this state of things, a Royal Commission was appointed to investigate the cause of the existing crisis and the possibility of restoring self-government to the Maltese Islands. The incongruity of this last function of the Royal Commission must be apparent: the people of Malta, who were on the point of passing judgment on

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their own Ministers after three years of administration, were divested of their right of self-government and were subjected to an investigation as to whether they should or should not be entrusted with self-government.

The leader of the Imperialists, both when in the Opposition and when in office as Prime Minister after 1927, enjoyed the privilege of sitting in the Parliament of Malta and in that of Great Britain. When he was in the Opposition, he sat in the House of Commons as a Conservative member for Lancaster. Created Baron Strickland of Sizergh soon after his election to the Premiership, he sat in the House of Lords. When His Majesty's Government in England decided to send a Royal Commission to Malta during the provisional Crown Colony Government, though still acting as Prime Minister, Lord Strickland, from his seat in the House of Lords, succeeded in getting the language question inserted in the terms of reference of the Commission. Every person in Malta realised that this could only mean that the Italian language was going to serve as an excuse for the mess that the Strickland administration had left behind it. This suspicion became stronger when whole sittings of the Royal Commission were absorbed by discussions on the language question. At one moment, it seemed that the investigation was simply and solely about the language question and nothing else. On the other hand, the Imperialistic Press in Malta made no secret about its aims. It boasted publicly that even though their administration should be broken up by the findings of the enquiry, their attitude against Italian would be vindicated in principle.

That boast eventually proved too true: the Compact Administration was broken by the findings of the Royal Commission; the keeping of the Ministers in office, if not in power, against the will of the people was severely criticised and put an end to; the legislation of the three years Compact Administration was declared null and void; the suspension of the Constitution and the staying of the elections were deplored and the restoration of self-government

recommended. That, however, was not all. Though the Royal Commissioners, in the passage already quoted, declared that the Italian language was in no way connected with the crisis which they were out to investigate, they deemed it their duty nevertheless to make suggestions in connection with the position of Italian in the schools and in the Courts. In the elementary schools, they pretended that Italian should be done away with altogether; and in the tribunals that Italian should be substituted by Maltese. The Imperialists and the Socialists were right: *il fumo fu dato ai Nazionalisti; essi ebbero l'arrosto.*

The resentment created amongst the majority and the cultured section of the Maltese ran high, but they had hopes that the dark cloud would have been avoided, inasmuch as the Royal Commissioners, in putting forward their suggestions, were most careful to clothe them with a constitutional and democratic form. But even the very headings of the various paragraphs of the Report in this connection are symptomatic of this. The first one is headed: '*Imperial Authorities can make the Change,*' and the other, immediately following, '*But clearer expression of local opinion may be advisable.*' Even more than the titles themselves, the statements therein contained bear us out:

The difficulty that arises in our minds is whether the present time is a suitable time for any change. We are not anxious that advantage should be taken of the present interregnum unreasonably to impose upon Malta a change which would be viewed by some people with dissatisfaction.' (Page 128 of the Report.) '. . . Expressions of local opinion should not be overlooked and, before the Imperial Government exercise their reserved powers on the subject, it may be advisable that opinion upon it should be more clearly expressed in Malta.' (Page 129 of the Report.) '. . . If and when the Secretary of State for the Colonies is satisfied that sufficient expression of opinion is given in support of an alteration in the elementary schools, and that there is a desire on the part of the people in the Island for an alteration, we consider that, under the powers of Section 68, the terms of Section 57 should be so altered as to allow of a change in the method of teaching in the elementary schools and

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the requirements for proceedings for the secondary schools.' (Chapter XIV, II (3), of same Report.)

The report of the Royal Commission was published on the 11th of February, 1932. In the following March, H.M. Government decided to adopt the suggestions contained in the report, those on the language question included. Such a declaration, coming from honest people, was interpreted to mean that once the constitution was restored and the elections set in force again, the modifications regarding the language would be adopted *if a natural expression of opinion in the polls approved of them*. On the contrary, in open violation of the ministerial pledges of 1920 and 1921, and of the very recommendations of the Royal Commissioners, H.M. Government, in that very month, promulgated, by means of Letters Patent, the suggestions of the Royal Commission, banishing Italian from the elementary schools and imposing Maltese in lieu of Italian in the tribunals. Let it be recalled that those Letters Patent went even further than the Imperialists themselves. These wanted, in the elementary schools, the option between English and Italian; they wanted to put, along with Italian and English, Maltese in the Courts. *Sic volo sic jubeo!*

The Maltese, however, have such a high idea of British justice that even in the face of such despotism they dared to hope. They thought that the result of the elections would either confirm or reject the Imperial policy, and that England, in deference to English principles not only of Constitutional law, but of honour and common fair-play and justice, would have found the way to consider the Letters Patent as non-existent if on the clear issue of the elections the people were against them. The Nationalist leaders protested against the Commissioners' Report the very next day after its publication; they protested against the Letters Patent, on the very day of their announcement; they protested in the press and to the authorities, and declared that they would fight the elections on the issue of the Letters Patent.

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The Nationalist Party went before the electorate on the straight issue of the repeal of the Letters Patent of 1932. At the very first meeting by which it opened its electoral campaign at *Porte des Bombes* on February 28th, 1932—attended by thirty thousand people—and held immediately after the publication of the Report of the Royal Commission, the Party passed the following resolution:

‘ The people of Malta and Gozo, while taking note of the facts placed on record above, protest with all their might against any diminution of the use of the Italian language, which should be maintained in all sections of public education and administration and throughout the Courts for good and incontrovertible reasons, historical, ethnical, cultural and practical.’

In all the mass meetings which immediately followed and which were continued, week after week, in the principal towns and villages of Malta, the Nationalist Party invariably submitted, and succeeded in having carried by huge majorities, a motion to the effect that the meeting:

‘ Re-affirms the resolution unanimously carried by the people of Malta and Gozo at the memorable mass meeting of the 28th of February, 1932; registers its approval of the prompt protest made on the third March immediately after a report of the said statement had been received, by the Nationalist Leaders, Sir Ugo Mifsud and Enrico Mizzi, in the name of the people to H.E. the Governor, declaring that the Maltese people will continue to fight with all their might and main for the vindication of their constitutional rights and the safeguarding of the Italian language; their need for that language being based on well-known and incontrovertible reasons, ethnical, historical, cultural and practical.’

Every electoral programme of the Nationalist Party, particularly since its fusion before the elections of 1927, starts with the solemn statement of the four fundamental points of the party. One of these points is exactly that which refers to the language question, and is so expressed:

‘ Second—Defence of Maltese Nationality (which is eminently Latin) and of the Italian language, and full and faithful application of the *pari-passu* system—*i.e.*, simultaneous teaching of both the English and Italian languages.’



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That point was not only repeated in hundreds of thousands of electoral programmes printed in English, Maltese and Italian for the election of 1932, but the following declaration was added to it in bold type:

**'No other Imperial measure has been so bitterly resented by the overwhelming majority of the people than the mutilation of our constitutional rights and the imposition of the iniquitous Letters Patent of May 2nd, 1932, hostile to the Italian language. Those Letters Patent have been promulgated by the Imperial Government in spite of the numerous popular protests which you, electors, have participated in at the great public meetings held by the Nationalist Party, and in spite of the representative bodies of the Islands. On this account, should we be elected and called upon to form the Government, we shall consider ourselves entitled to ask for and obtain the immediate revocation of these Letters Patent and to press for the integral restoration of the 1921 Constitution as it was originally granted to us, saving of course the exclusive right of the Maltese people to improve it as they may desire and think fit.'**

On this clear issue the elections were fought. Their result was one of the greatest victories ever recorded. The Nationalists secured twenty-one out of 32 seats in the Legislative Assembly, and in the Senate out of seventeen (when the two members of the Clergy are excepted) they secured nine against six. The Socialists only succeeded in securing one in the Assembly and two in the Senate as the representatives of the Trade Union Council. But the Imperial Authorities refused to attach to the result of the elections the importance which it deserved. They had rushed their undemocratic legislation by Letters Patent on the eve of the elections, and as soon as the elections were concluded, they procured the asking of a question in the House of Commons (through Lord Strickland's son-in-law, Lieut.-Comm. Bower), in order to be able to state that the Colonial Office would permit no change on the language question. The Minister went so far as to state that the decisions reached were the result of technical opinion and that politics did not come into them at all. Between 1921, when the solution already recorded had been incorporated in the Charter of 1921, and 1931, when these Ministerial

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statements were made, only ten years had elapsed. No change of opinion took place to authorise Ministers to pursue the course they had taken. All expressions of public opinion on the question, from 1921 to 1931, particularly that of the last elections of 1932, had been against the measures of the Imperial Government. *Sic volo, sic jubeo!*

A delegation of the Nationalist Party proceeded to London to discuss matters with the Home Authorities. The delegation was composed of men who are neither to be bullied nor to be terrorised. They laid their point clearly and forcibly. The Colonial Office could not argue successfully against any one single argument brought forward by the delegation. Four memoranda were presented, the most important one being that which concerns the language question.

The delegation left London on the completion of their mission when the Secretary of State for the Colonies was away in Ottawa at the Imperial Conference. On their reaching Malta they were accorded a demonstration by immense crowds of supporters who gathered at the Custom House to welcome them back. They addressed the crowds from the official residence of the Prime Minister and stated that though they could not profess to be satisfied with the atmosphere which they found in the Colonial Office, nevertheless, such was the righteousness of their cause and the soundness of the arguments advanced that they had reasons to believe that in the end better counsel would prevail. Meanwhile, Parliament had as yet to be opened and the difficulty may be imagined—a Ministry entrusted with a specific mandate by almost three-quarters of the electorate, could not frame a policy to be inserted in the Opening Speech because the Colonial Office had decided beforehand on an adverse policy. The Government tried to do its duty and fulfil its pledges in such a manner as not to infringe the letter and spirit of the new Letters Patent debarring Italian from the elementary schools. The means excogitated was to allow 'voluntary' teaching

of Italian after school hours. This limitation of the time of teaching was rendered necessary because His Excellency the Governor, following instructions from the Colonial Office when the Letters Patent were promulgated, laid down by circular the hours during which tuition in the elementary schools was to be imparted.

The question of voluntary teaching after school hours was a way out of an impasse imposed on Maltese Ministers by the undue and unwarranted interference of the Colonial Office. When a pupil has left school, nobody has the right to see whether he is going to play cricket or football, or whether he is going to church or to fish or to study Japanese, Chinese or Hindustani. By no stretch of imagination could serious objection be ever taken to the device which Ministers very ably and diplomatically adopted. The Opposition papers let the cat out of the bag when, in protesting against such provisions and in denouncing the same as being contrary to the Letters Patent, they pretended that Italian should be left for those who had the means and time to learn it. But the question of time does not come in at all. The pupils who attend show by their attendance, that they *have* the time. It is the business of nobody but themselves to say whether they have time or not. The first question, namely that of means, gives the key to the justification and reasonableness of the Ministerial provision. The thing is evident. But if the child of parents who can afford to pay for him to learn Italian is to enjoy this advantage, why should the children of the poor suffer that disadvantage for the only and simple reason that they have not the money?

This argument leads us to approve the stand of the Nationalists from the democratic and social point of view. All professions reached through the University necessitate a full knowledge of English and Italian; the Civil Service, which is one of the few good openings in Malta after the professions, cannot be thought of without more than a working knowledge of English and Italian; the commercial field, with all its bearings and connections with the

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neighbour peninsula, besides the Empire, presupposes good speaking and writing in at least English and Italian; the banks in Malta require from their clerical staff English and Italian; thus the church, the legal and medical professions, the notarial class, the class of civil engineers, the civil service, banks, commerce, which are the best positions, cannot be entered if English is not coupled with Italian and Italian with English. The theory of those who say 'let the teaching of Italian be left for those who have the means for it' practically means 'leave the plums for the children of the rich, and the rest for the poor.' This construction gains added support from the fact that all other schools in Malta have Italian in their curriculum. At the very institution, St. Edward's College, established by Lady Strickland to provide a thoroughly English College in Malta, Italian is taught. It goes further, Maltese is not only not taught, but those pupils who dare speak it are frowned on. Why? The reason is evident. The children who have 'means' frequent these schools. They can pay. They have the means. Anathema on the children of the poor. For them there are only the elementary schools, and from these schools Italian is debarred. Incredible but true, Maltese Ministers were made to understand that their device might not be *res grata* with the Imperial Authorities. The protests of the Opposition were forwarded to the Colonial Office. Lord Strickland was now in England. The people did not hide their joy at what they pretended to have—good news about their protests. Ministers did not lose faith. October was fast approaching and schools had to be opened. The voluntary system for Italian was made public and is maintained as not being against the Letters Patent. A circular in the three languages—English, Italian and Maltese, was sent to all parents and guardians of pupils in the elementary schools. The circular stated that in view of the Letters Patent debarring Italian from the elementary schools, the Government had decided to open voluntary classes of Italian after school hours, and pupils through their parents or guardians were to declare their intention

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on the subject. To help those who were against Italian to give their full number, it was also stated that the 'noes' only were obliged to register the objection, so that it might be numerically recorded. *Such was the response, that all parents, whether for 'no' or for 'yes,' reported personally or sent word with their children.* Some of those who said 'no,' when not actuated by the principle of antagonism to the teaching of Italian, gave even the reasons for their being unable to let their children reap the benefit of the Government's action. There were those who found the hour chosen incompatible with the need of their boy or girl at home; others said that after school their child had an employment for a few pence which afforded them some help; others brought forward other reasons. The following is the result in connection with the circular as published officially in the *Government Gazette* of October 14th, 1932: —

'With reference to Government Notice No. 349 of the 4th instant anent the voluntary course of Italian in all the Elementary Schools of Malta and Gozo, it is hereby notified that according to the reports received from the Secretary to this Ministry and from the Director of the Elementary Schools, it results that out of 19,387 pupils registered in the said schools, since the 1st instant 12.9 per cent. will be unable to join the voluntary course of Italian owing to the objections raised by their respective parents. the remaining 87.1 per cent. are, however, favourable to the said course and will therefore be able to join it according to the provisions of the Circular dated the 1st instant, annexed to the Government Notice abovementioned.'

C. MIFSUD BONNICI.