

OP

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Joseph's Tower of Babel

On winning his MLP leadership bid, Joseph Muscat did what he felt was the right thing and called for the return of all labour supporters or exponents who had strayed away from the party during the 16 years when Alfred Sant's word was what really mattered in the party.

Attracting back Labour sympathisers who had been miffed by Alfred Sant's surly attitude – or even outright hostility – towards them was obviously a very positive strategy, but attracting back people who were at loggerheads with the MLP on basic policy matters, such as the way it now looks at Malta's EU membership, also sent Labour into confusion.

As regards this issue, the MLP is now in a veritable muddle that is nothing short of a tower of Babel situation, were it not that the people involved are at present not talking publicly about their personal position on this issue.

Joseph Muscat has ended up with Alex Sceberras Trigona being elected the party's International Secretary; George Vella being nominated the party's spokesman for international and EU affairs; George Abela being nominated the party's representative on MEUSAC; and Sharon Ellul Bonici and Maria Camilleri being invited by Joseph Muscat himself to stand as candidates for the European Parliament elections next June.

With the exception of Maria Camilleri, who never made public her position on relations with the EU (if, indeed, she has

a position), it is impossible for the other four to sing as one harmonious choir. Muscat risks a set-up that sends contradictory messages on how Malta is to behave as an EU member, which is today a cornerstone of Malta's foreign relations.

Apart from his notorious exploits as Malta's Minister for Foreign Affairs in the far-off Dom Mintoff-KMB heydays, up to a few weeks before Joseph Muscat was elected leader and asked him to return to the labour fold, Alex Sceberras Trigona has been a vociferous opponent of Malta's EU membership, even claiming that it is somehow unconstitutional. This opposition was made publicly, not only by way of his few contributions to the written press but also during his appearances in Smash Television programmes broadcast by courtesy of the Campaign for National Independence (CNI).

George Vella was also a vociferous anti-EU membership campaigner, and Alfred Sant had the decency of not reappointing him party spokesman for EU and foreign affairs after the 2003 referendum and election debacle and the MLP's turnaround on EU membership. Incredibly, Joseph Muscat put him back again in a position that, in 2003, was judged untenable by Alfred Sant.

George Abela - who always believed that EU membership had more advantage than disadvantages for Malta - had soldiered on as a member of the Malta-EU Steering Action Committee (MEUSAC) before Malta's EU accession.

Even though he was representing no one but himself, it is an open secret that he did sterling work on this committee particularly in areas relating to workers' rights and employer-employee relations. His return to MEUSAC as an MLP representative was a welcome and positive Joseph Muscat move.

Sharon Ellul Bonici, a vociferous eurosceptic who was involved with groups of similar political persuasion at the European Parliament, and who intended to contest the EU Parliamentary elections in the name of an independent eurosceptic group, will now be probably contesting as an MLP candidate after Joseph Muscat himself asked her to do so. Muscat must have been thinking that the MLP could not afford to lose the votes that her candidature would have attracted. I have no doubt that he is worried that the MLP will not repeat the success that it managed to garner in the 2004 election for the European Parliament, and pushing Ellul Bonici to become an MLP candidate must be a reflection of this worry. Where that leaves the MLP's position with regards to the EU and its relations with the European socialists (PES) is another matter.

With this hotchpotch of pro-EU, anti-EU and vociferous eurosceptics, Joseph Muscat's political nous is being re-dimensioned. His 'the more, the merrier' strategy is simply a strategy of short-term convenience – too much of a short-term, in my opinion.

On the home front, Muscat



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also risks a fallout between general secretary Jason Micallef and the proposed hand-picked CEO who is being appointed with the overt intention of taking over a large chunk of the administrative duties of the general secretary. Letting Jason Micallef contest the election for Secretary General and win to retain his post under a set of rules and then proceeding to change the statute and appoint a CEO whose responsibilities water down drastically those of the Secretary General amounts to a double game. More so when the delegates elected Jason Micallef as Secretary General under rules that definitely gave him the sort of power that Joseph Muscat does not want him to

have.

This also smacks of another dangerous game of convenient short-termism.

Writing in *l-orizzont* last Monday, former MLP International Secretary, Joe Mifsud warned that there are many who work behind the scenes who could undermine Joseph Muscat's promised earthquake by stalling the changes to the statute that are still to be proposed. It is obvious that two months after being elected MLP leader, Joseph Muscat is still not yet in full control of the party.

Before Joseph Muscat was elected MLP leader, at a time when for me his election was a foregone conclusion, I had commented that Muscat would have to prove his leadership mettle – and show that the MLP is really off on a new start – only if he had the guts to ditch the very people who were instrumental in his having been elected. Muscat has shown that he is not strong enough to do this and is now pussy-footing to arrive at the same conclusion by ill-conceived and not-so-subtle subterfuges, rather than via outright confrontation – a very Byzantine strategy indeed!

Muscat is undoubtedly risking ending up leading a tower of Babel with everybody saying it his or her way, and with peevish-minded groups and currents all out to undermine each other. The wheel would have turned full circle with the MLP ending up exactly in the same position it was on the day following its electoral defeat last March.

OP

Evarist Bartolo



The separation of Church and State

As a member of parliament I am ready to vote in favour of a bill introducing divorce in Malta. I am all in favour of long lasting marriages (mine has so far survived for over 30 years and despite difficult moments is still going strong). But why should I deny the opportunity to start afresh to those whose marriage has failed? I believe in strong and stable families and am sad to note the obvious: there is enough evidence around us to show that the lack of formal and legal divorce in Malta does not stop families from breaking down. We have no divorce, lots of married couples are separating and an increasing number of families are breaking down.

I hear a lot of rhetoric in favour of marriage and the family from the same people who are ready to support a party like the PN, which talks

a lot about holding the family to heart but still pushes social and economic policies that tear families apart by imposing hardships on them. Unemployment, lack of adequate protection for workers and employees, high taxes, bills and inflation make it harder for families to cope. More couples are finding it difficult to make ends meet. Neo-liberal economic and social policies help to create an environment where more couples separate and marriages break down.

The Catholic Church has every right to talk about the indissolubility of Catholic marriages and has every right to deny its followers the possibility to marry again after their first marriage dies but it should not expect politicians to make laws in parliament as if they are legislating only for practicing Catholics. Catholics have every

right to follow the teachings of their Church and deprive themselves of the right to make use of divorce once introduced in Malta but they should not deprive fellow citizens of the right to apply for divorce once their marriage has collapsed with no hope of putting it together again.

Forty-eight years ago (12 September 1960) a Catholic politician by the name of John F. Kennedy delivered a speech in Houston where he spoke clearly about the separation of church and state. Kennedy is probably still admired by many members of parliament in Malta, but how many of them are ready to learn from him and follow his reasoning when it comes to passing laws that the Catholic Church does not approve of?

It is worthwhile reflecting carefully on the highlights of Kennedy's speech which are

considered to be still very relevant today:

"I do not speak for my church on public matters; and the church does not speak for me. Whatever issue may come before me as President, if I should be elected, on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject, I will make my decision in accordance with these views -- in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be in the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressure or dictates. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.

"But if the time should ever come – and I do not concede any conflict to be remotely possible – when my office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office; and I hope any

conscientious public servant would do likewise."

Kennedy also said: "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute; where no Catholic prelate would tell the President – should he be Catholic – how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote..."

"I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish; where no public official either requests or accept instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source; where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials, and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all."