

In search of real solutions

The problem of irregular migration has again hit our shores during the summer months. Just before summer, only 100 migrants were kept in detention under the Immigration Act. Today this figure has soared to more than 800 immigrants, an influx that is an enormous burden on our country and is sapping the human and other resources.

Government has wisely adopted the middle of the road approach to this issue. It has granted important rights to persons who deserve protection, particularly through the enactment of the Refugee Act 2000. It shouldered, not shirked its responsibility to protect those in need. At the same time, it remained firm on two issues: (a) that any person who enters Malta illegally must be kept in detention until his status is determined and (b) that Malta must remain intransigent *vis-à-vis* those asylum seekers who lose their case and are declared to be economic migrants rather than political refugees.

For doing so, my Ministry has been subjected to endless criticism by local presumed philanthropists and a few international organizations. Most of them unfortunately, do not care about the enormity of the immigration problem facing us. Few understand that the problem of irregular migration assumes gigantic proportions when one considers that Malta is the smallest and most densely populated nation in Europe. No Maltese interior minister may ignore these undisputable facts, which is why the policy of detention will continue, not for its deterrent effects, but in order to regulate the release of immigrants in our small community. Almost all irregular migrants have no travel documents and establishing their identity and nationality is a laborious task. Releasing them would create chaos and confusion. Sifting them to separate the genuine from the false asylum seekers is a must in such a small country.

The Opposition until a few weeks ago was in agreement with the Government on the general lines about this issue; not that, on some occasions it did not attempt to run with the hares and hound with the hounds as happened with the repatriation of Eritrean nationals in 2002. Then, out of the blue, one fine Sunday, the Leader of the Opposition criticized Government that it was being passive while hundred of immigrants were reaching our shores, that it was squandering resources in the AFM and that therefore a national conference was needed. Not the right choice of words to appeal for a national conference! This Ministry refused to be drawn into this kind of discussion motivated solely for political ends. Government, however, did not shut the door; it appealed to the Opposition to come out with its own policy first. This, along with a national policy proposed by government, could be discussed anywhere in any forum or conference, national or otherwise. In any case a report could be drafted following such discussion, preventing the issue from being treated as a political football by any party in Malta.

The recent events regarding the ship *Cap Anamur* and the mv *Lydia Oldendorff* have shown that the Maltese Government held its ground on the sensitive issues of immigration. Discussions are ongoing with Libya not only for a more proper control of its own sea borders, but also for a gradual introduction of a repatriation policy which would also include non-Libyan nationals who come directly to Malta via Libya. These are not easy discussions and results cannot be expected immediately; but the thrust has been launched following the Prime Minister's recent visit to Libya. Not bad for a 'passive' immigration policy!!!

Dr Gulia must learn not always to echo his master's voice. Up to some months ago, his views were synchronized with those of government. Last May he wrote: *"I have been myself a fervent supporter of the Home Affairs Minister's position on illegal immigrants. That will not change.... I do commiserate with the Deputy Prime Minister on the hard decisions he has had to make during the last few years because of a handful who have been making it terribly difficult for him and the Commissioner of Police to handle (The Times 22.05.04).*

Dr Jose Herrera, (*The Times 23.10.04*), who has joined the fray has asked what would happen if hundreds were to arrive on our shores at one go ; and rather illogically links this to the fact that there has not yet been a national conference. As if such gatherings can prevent these landings!

But now that Alfred Sant has broken his silence and is trying to exploit the fears of our country men, Dr Gulia has answered to this rallying call. I sincerely wish that better counsel prevails, for such artificial division of opinion will only strengthen the hands of those who are not in mainstream politics but expound extreme views which, though appealing emotionally, are totally impracticable, similar to Bossi's surreal solutions to this problem, better relegated to Fantasyland.

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