

Tackling Immigration : Heart or Mind?

My experience of being responsible for immigration matters in the past years has confirmed, if ever there was any need, how emotional the problem relating to the influx of immigrants is. The fear of invasion by immigrants in a relatively homogenous, tightly knit community can never be underestimated. There is also the widespread and obsessive tendency to pin down the cause of this phenomenon to someone or something ; ordinary well-intentioned people ask me, in pubs and in the streets; “ Something has to be done about it ” ... though few suggest what that something is.

It is unfair to state, as some do, that Government has been idle in dealing with this problem. We have maintained, in spite of international and local pressure, an automatic detention policy vis a vis immigrants who enter Malta without authorization, including asylum seekers. For such purpose government has set up three new detention centres to support such policy. Repatriations have proceeded in spite of the enormous difficulties encountered; suffice it to state that had such repatriations not occurred, there would have been roughly around 7000 boat people residing in Malta today which is evidently not the case. We have set up a refugee commissioner`s office which has diligently processed thousands of asylum applications to fulfil our international obligations as UN and EU members. We have opened two large open centres to provide shelter for internationally protected persons; which makes it sound so unfair each time some foreign observer, completely detached from local scenario, visits our country to paternalistically preach to us about the rights of protected persons. Government appreciates UNHCR`s recent interest in Malta`s plight but such interest should be more focused on Malta`s needs rather than a never-ending lament about the existence of Malta`s detention policy.

Nor is the EU the panacea of Malta`s immigration problem; certainly belonging to the Union, in the view of the sudden influx of immigrants in the past four years, is better than languishing outside its doors and facing the problem alone. Michael Frendo and I, have through sheer perseverance and pressure, created a consciousness about the problem

amongst member states. Malta features in all EU declarations and action plans; we are gradually moving towards proper and concrete assistance, including EU sea patrols; which in no way means that we shall not keep calling a spade a spade whenever EU funds are not forthcoming as swiftly as one expects in view of the emergency situation.

Some of my political friends and others who may be styled adversaries, ask me about the absence of any repatriation agreement, ``ad hoc`` or otherwise, in view of the fact that most immigrants arrive in Malta after departing from Libyan ports. This concern is legitimate, and the Foreign Ministry and my own have done whatever is humanly possible to persuade the Libyan authorities that Libya should shoulder, according to its need and capacities, part of the Maltese immigration problem. I fully understand Libya`s predicament; there are daily invasions across her 7000km border; a huge chunk of its population is composed of foreigners unlawfully residing in Libya. It does not have the means to control such vast frontiers including a 2000km coastal border; but government has always insisted that a good will gesture should be made to a small and friendly country like Malta which has stood with Libya through thick and thin in difficult circumstances. That is why Malta supported by Italy was the EU member state which insisted most on the opening of a dialogue between EU and our neighbour country- reviving a relationship which had been dormant for years and leading to the drafting of a EU-Libya action plan.

That is why I have also invited my Italian and Libyan counterparts for a trilateral meeting in Malta to discuss the immigration problem in the central Mediterranean- beyond and part from any dialogue within existing multilateral fora.

Where do we go from here? Government, I believe should continue adopting the middle of the road approach; steer away from xenophobic and racist directions which have merely demagogic value - if `value` is the right word to use in this context. At the same time the national interest should be protected and public opinion never ignored. Fears have to be allayed, but Government must continue defending our interests; Malta cannot act as the lone sentinel of Europe`s borders. The recent diplomatic solution brokered by

the Maltese Government, in spite of international pressure to land in Malta and lump all immigrants aboard the Spanish trawler, is evident proof that the current administration will not give way an inch whenever it feels that the national interest is at stake. In spite of misinformed articles which appeared in the Spanish and British press, that Malta was in breach of some international obligation in refusing entry to immigrants picked up outside our search and rescue zone, we stood firm in our stand and prevailed.

Malta looks forward to burden sharing in the form of free movement of internationally protected persons. It does not want to abdicate its responsibilities regarding its fair share of the burden; if a person lawfully residing in any EU state, even from outside the EU, has a right to move freely within the Union itself, such rights should be extended to internationally protected persons who are residing in Malta in virtue of the protection granted to them by Malta`s refuges commissioner. The seeds for such right have been sown already and it is right and proper that, subject to normal controls and safeguards, eg a minimum period of residence, internationally protected persons should be allowed without undue formalities to freely move within the European continent.

In the meantime people in their rights senses should stop organizing demonstrations against illegal migration; as if anyone in Malta is in favour of illegal migration. If it was possible to solve the immigration issue by holding such public manifestations, I would be happy to organize one myself each day of the year. One should never exploit people`s fears and phobia but should approach this problem with an open heart and a sensible mind.