

SPEECH BY THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER TO THE EU JOURNALISTS' SEMINAR

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HOW MALTA IS DEALING WITH IMMIGRATION ISSUES

It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to address the EU Journalists' Seminar on Migration Issues. May I also especially welcome our friends from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. This is a vitally important and topical subject. And the way in which the media reports it has very wide-ranging effects.

Migration poses one of the key challenges of the twenty-first century. Its global economic and social repercussions affect the countries from which migrants migrate, the countries to which they migrate and, of course, the migrants themselves.

For Malta it is, I dare say, probably the most important social and cultural challenge it has faced for a very long time. I am delighted therefore to be invited to speak to you about the government's policy for dealing with irregular immigration.

I propose to do this in two parts. First, I shall speak about Malta's policy on irregular immigration in the international context since foreign policy and domestic policy on this subject are inextricably linked. The one impinges on the other. Secondly, I shall go on to talk about Malta's policy domestically – our objectives, our efforts to cope with a humanitarian problem not of our making.

Starting then with the international context and our policy there. Let me begin by reminding you that Malta itself faced the opportunities and

challenges of migration in the middle decades of the last century. We are not unfamiliar with migration. And neither are we unsympathetic to it. We benefited directly from the economic and social advantages that flowed from such emigration – not only in easing unemployment in our own country, but also from the influx of sums of money sent back.

The Maltese diaspora as a result of those two or three decades of emigration is now to be found in countries as far afield as Australia, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere, contributing culturally, economically and socially in a positive way to the life of their country of adoption.

We are understandably proud of the contribution we have made to those countries to which our migrants went – legally, not irregularly, and in a controlled and well managed manner.

That is of course the prime difference between then and now.

Today, however, Malta is confronted by the new and often tragic phenomenon of irregular – sometimes illegal – immigration. Since 2002 we have had over 7000 irregular immigrants reach our shores. To get a measure of what that figure means you have to appreciate that – relative to our population size – this figure equates to almost 1.5 million arriving in Germany or 1 million in France or the United Kingdom, or 700,000 in Spain during the same period.

The socio-economic impact on one of the most densely populated countries in the world, placed at the southern-most tip of Europe and at the cross-roads of migratory routes from Africa through the central Mediterranean cannot be ignored or under-estimated by any

responsible government. Neither are there any easy answers – any quick fixes.

It calls, we believe, for a concerted response from all the countries involved, and our government's policy in the international context is therefore firmly directed to this end. No country can on its own hope to deal with the causes and effects of a problem which affects millions in so many different countries and whose social, economic and historical causes are so deep-seated.

We therefore firmly believe that a coordinated and unified approach should be adopted internationally which addresses the countries of origin from which irregular immigrants depart, the countries of transit through which they pass (in our case chiefly Libya, about which I shall say more later) and their destination countries.

Our policy is to advocate and work for the adoption of a holistic approach to irregular immigration. And we press this policy at every opportunity whether in the United Nations, the European Union or the various Mediterranean fora which Malta attends. Where Malta's commitment to international organisations has been established and where it has international obligations which it is duty-bound to honour. Malta played a prominent part in the recent Africa-EU Summit on Migration and Development held in Tripoli three weeks ago.

Internationally, there are five separate elements to our policy. These can be broadly defined as, first, the need for comprehensive arrangements for the return, re-admission and re-integration of irregular immigrants to their countries of origin. There must be a willingness on all sides to tackle the issue at its source. Second, the need for improvements to the efficiency and effectiveness of border

management in countries of origin and of transit. Third, and directly related to the second, the elimination of human smuggling and trafficking. Fourth, the need for improvements to the management of irregular immigrants by transit countries. And fifth, the better management, reception and integration of migrants in destination countries if it can be shown that they have genuine cause to migrate and, importantly, the destination country wishes to receive them.

While it is easy enough to define broadly these key areas for action, it is, as ever, more difficult to decide what actions actually need to be taken in detail to produce real remedies on the ground. But it is our policy to press for a number of specific actions to be adopted as the necessary first steps in the process of devising a holistic and integrated approach to illegal immigration.

For example, as we saw in the recent Africa-EU summit, we press for a regular and constructive dialogue between countries of origin and destination countries to strengthen cooperation and to identify common solutions. We believe most strongly that the generous allocation of development aid for the eradication of poverty in the countries of origin must be encouraged. It lies we believe at the heart of the humanitarian problem. But we also see no reason why this aid should not be tied to returns and re-admissions as an incentive to closer cooperation. This was an issue on which African and EU countries had a different perception, perhaps not unexpectedly, at the Summit in Tripoli. While African countries pressed hard for a specific migration fund for this purpose, Europe could only promise at this stage to look at the feasibility of such a proposal. This is a challenge to which imaginative solutions must be found.

As to the need for the strenuous elimination of human smuggling and trafficking, we seek ways of closer security cooperation between destination countries, transit countries and the countries of origin to eradicate these criminal and inhumane operations. Malta is working hard – together with other EU countries – to obtain Libya’s cooperation in discouraging human traffickers who exploit thousands of people annually and place them under life-threatening conditions in open boats often in treacherous seas. Illegal immigration is simply not acceptable to destination countries, like Malta, which are placed in the invidious position of having to manage a human tragedy not of their making.

We work internationally for the better integration of migrants in destination countries through the adoption of a long-term, sustainable – I stress sustainable – migration management approach, as well as through the establishment of a regular dialogue on migration policy between countries of destination and the countries of origin and transit most affected.

We firmly believe that detailed action on an international scale increasingly needs to be taken in a determined and coordinated manner globally if constructive solutions are to be implemented. All our work in international fora is therefore directed to these ends. Our membership of the European Union has given us a bigger voice and an opportunity to share the burden with others.

We feel that there is more that the EU can do to help us to meet the burdens arising from irregular immigration. If I may just mention three. There are others, but I shall just focus on the three most important from Malta’s point of view.

First is the need to revise the Dublin II Convention. As you probably know, this obliges the country which first receives an asylum seeker to handle his case and to be obliged to deal with its outcome whatever that may be. This unfairly penalises Malta which is a front-line state and, unlike any other country in Europe, has no hinterland to absorb those who come here or into which they can move on. We wish to see immediate changes to the Dublin II Convention pending the completion of its full-scale revision as recommended by the European Parliament some months ago. These changes should allow for greater flexibility in the way it is applied, based on an equitable mechanism allowing a quota of those landing in Malta to be processed by other nations in the EU. Malta is not averse to bearing its share of the burden, but the present arrangements place a disproportionate load on our limited resources. We hope the EU study on migration policy will produce the necessary results and will lead to the changes we seek.

Second, we wish to see the establishment of a fully operational Mediterranean Coastal Patrols Network under FRONTEX to police the front-line – Europe’s front line – in the area just outside Libya’s territorial waters to the south of Malta. While recognising fully Libya’s own problems, we hope that it will cooperate in such an operation, starting in earnest next spring. We believe that it is as much in Libya’s interests as Malta’s to ensure that those who are engaging in criminal human trafficking and smuggling should be interdicted, discouraged and deterred from carrying out their illegal trade in human beings. We also believe that this is what Libya itself would wish for despite the difficulties it has in securing its long and porous borders.

Thirdly, we wish to see a greater willingness by our EU partners to take a number – no matter how small – of those who have been granted asylum or protected status in Malta for resettlement in their own

countries. Two or three nations have done so already. But if the other twenty-odd EU countries were willing to commit themselves to taking just 30 refugees each a year from Malta our problem would be greatly reduced.

We must, I believe, as a Union, demonstrate that burden-sharing is not simply empty rhetoric, but that it has substance and meaning. Irregular or illegal immigration into our countries, which poses a common threat and common problems for every member, is an opportunity for us to demonstrate a unified approach. It is an opportunity for governments to connect with the concerns of our citizens which we should seize.

Given this policy approach internationally, how does the government deal with the issue domestically? Malta is inevitably a participant in the process of globalisation. It cannot escape it. We accept that we will continue to experience migratory flows for several more years to come, possibly for another generation.

What are our policy objectives? How do we deal with the realities raised by domestic concerns? How do we balance the need for humanity and compassion with the genuine worries of our own people? These are the issues that confront government – any government, as current events in every country in Europe have shown.

The government's policy is driven by five over-riding objectives. First, to ensure that the ultimate national interest is safeguarded, including enhanced security measures and border control. Second, that there is fair, just and humane treatment of irregular immigrants. Third, that standard procedures and practices are established for dealing with asylum seekers. Fourth, that we encourage the social inclusion of asylum seekers and the subsequent integration of those eligible for

refugee status. And fifth, that the orderly removal of irregular immigrants who are ineligible for refugee or protected humanitarian status is implemented expeditiously, effectively and in a humane manner.

But there is a caveat which needs to be made at the very start. It is one from which no government, whether rich, poor, or middling rich, is immune. This concerns resources. The actions which we take to meet the policy objectives I have just outlined are inevitably constrained by the limited human and financial resources available. It is none-the-less our policy to take every practicable step possible, within the resources allocated, to meet all our obligations and responsibilities. Although there may be occasional gaps between our good intentions and their implementation, we are determined to work hard to implement the policy objectives I have just set out. While we are working hard to put in place the organisational structures and infrastructure to deal with the problem – the provision of adequate Closed and Open Accommodation Centres, the processing of requests for asylum in an expeditious and humane manner, a fair and open Appeals procedure and efforts to integrate those who stay here – there is, I accept, still more for us to do.

In the last minutes I wish to deal with just two more issues arising from the problems caused by irregular immigration on which we are taking action. I make no mention of our policy of detention since my Adviser, Martin Scicluna, will, I gather, be talking to you about this, this afternoon.

The first is the sensitive and subjective issue of racism, xenophobia and multiculturalism or, more accurately, multi-racialism. The government is committed to raising civic awareness about the problems, our obligations and the need for compassion and understanding of irregular

immigrants. There has to be an on-going campaign aimed at providing information and promoting better understanding of the human tragedy of the world-wide problems of refugees in general, and irregular immigration to Malta in particular. The Government will not tolerate racism.

But we need time. Public perceptions on such major issues of policy are slow to change. The substantial, unexpected and uncalled for increase in the number of irregular immigrants in the last five years has led to a period of turbulence which we have to overcome. There must be a lengthy process of education. This is the only way that the natural tensions which may have arisen can be defused and any fears, concerns or prejudices that may exist are assuaged. And the media has a vital part to play in this.

But we must accept that this will be a long process. Look at the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, liberal Holland and Sweden, and others, - even Switzerland - all of whom have had several decades of experience and are still not over the difficulties and tensions which multiculturalism and multi-racialism create. Why must we expect Malta to be different? The government is determined, as a matter of policy, to fight racism wherever it raises its ugly head and to remove those concerns that give rise to misplaced xenophobia, but time must be allowed for people to adapt and to learn.

As to integration, this is a dynamic two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants, as well as by us. A sense of tolerance, understanding, acceptance and respect among our citizens towards irregular immigrants needs actively to be fostered. But it also requires the immigrants themselves to be willing to integrate with our basic European values, to have a knowledge of our history, our

language, religion and our institutions. To be prepared to assimilate in a country of equal opportunity on an equal basis and in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. You cannot have integration without cohesion and a willingness by asylum seekers to adapt to the new culture in which they have come to live.

To sum up, therefore, I have attempted to describe the policy which Malta follows, both internationally and domestically, to deal with the huge challenges posed by irregular immigration in a small, densely populated country with limited human and financial resources. The over-riding objective of our national policy is to fulfil our moral, international, legal and humanitarian obligations as a society towards those who are worse off than ourselves, while ensuring that the government's paramount duty to safeguard the best interests of its own people is assured.