

## **Introduction:**

Our Republic is a year older. The past twelve months have brought about happiness and satisfaction, but also moments of concern and distress.

They were twelve vibrant months, a year to be proud of our economic growth, which has placed us at the peak of European economic success; with the lowest unemployment rate of all time; and with the achievement of more civil rights, among other achievements.

On the other hand, we faced the brutal killing of the journalist Mrs. Caruana Galizia, which shocked everyone, and which has resulted in negative consequences both in Malta and abroad.

It was also a year in which we were democratically called upon, as a nation, to participate in a general election which, unfortunately, brought about a repetition of historical situations, where we once again witnessed unbridled partisanship at its worst.

Therefore, similar to past years, the speech of the Republic will reflect the thoughts, concerns, pain, as well as joy and satisfaction, which we have experienced as a nation. This critical reflection, is built on your conversations and experiences. I am in a position to do this because of the thousands of Maltese and Gozitan people, with whom I have come into contact.

### **The Rule of Law:**

In these past weeks we have spoken a lot about the rule of law. The rule of law is the deterrent against autocracy and the abuse of power. I believe that the rule of law is as strong as the people acknowledge it to be, how much they believe in it, cherish it, and continue to support it.

If, as a nation, we end up believing that the law of power outstrips the rule of law, it will be difficult to strengthen the rule of law and to maintain its place as a key element in a strong democracy.

### **The Constitutional Renewal:**

I am therefore going to reiterate my appeal for the start of a process of Constitutional renewal. After a number of meetings with the leaders of our country, and other people, both during the past weeks as well as in the past years, I believe there is no time to be lost. The main political parties in our country have, for a number of years, admitted, declared, and promised, that a Constitutional reform should be carried out.

As I have often stated, the Constitutional reform should encourage and involve the full participation of the entire nation. I truly believe that this process should be a public and transparent one.

This is because I believe that the Constitution is not merely a legal instrument. The Constitution is as strong as the people's knowledge of it, making it their living legal, moral and ethical guide, and feeling ownership over it.

Therefore, I hope that the Constitutional renewal will be an educational process for everyone. While legal issues should be discussed and taken on board, the process of renewal should be a continuous and participative reflection on what it means to live in a healthy democracy in the twenty-first century, and how our democracy should continue to be strengthened, by institutions that are trusted by all.

The Constitution is a living document, which builds an active relationship between the State and the people.

**Solidarity with Journalists and Freedom of Expression:**

I wish to express my solidarity with journalists, who like us were all shocked by the brutal murder of Mrs. Daphne Caruana Galizia. We understand that the condemnation for this horrendous act is no consolation for the victim's family. On the other hand the developments that occurred in the investigations should give us hope that justice will be served. I take this opportunity to thank the forces of law and order in our country, as well as the foreign agencies, who have assisted them in shedding some light on this macabre case.

Meanwhile, the work of journalists is essential for democracy. I would like to encourage Maltese journalists to continue to seek the truth scrupulously, in an unbiased and impartial manner. I therefore would like to encourage journalists to be courageous and to keep on giving us the services that they have always given, us without fear or prejudice.

Freedom of expression is sacred to democracy, but it also carries with it responsibilities, based on facts and not half-truths or speculation.

It is important that, as a nation, we understand that freedom of expression should never result in abuse.

### **A Culture of Verbal Violence:**

I have been observing, for some time, that a culture is emerging, where modern means of communication are used to humiliate and vilify those who, through a subjective lens, are considered rivals because of their different opinions.

Unfortunately, this culture of verbal violence is not only becoming an integral part of our lives, but it now seems that we are promoting it as part of our right to freedom of expression, as if this culture is a democratic tool, and a burden which everyone in public life has to bear.

Constructive criticism is essential in a democracy, but calumnies and insults undermine it.

Unfortunately, Malta is affected by partisanship on a daily basis, which is not only undermining the ability of critical thinking, but is also undermining the desire and willingness to dialogue and to work together, to address the challenges being faced by a modern country like ours, in a world filled with uncertainties.

When we call for national unity, this does not mean that we must all be of one mind, or that we must turn a blind eye, or do not express our opinion, or stop thinking critically.

Let us not allow national unity to be betrayed and threatened daily, through the misuse of modern means of communication, which are, unfortunately, being used, to divide us rather than to educate, inform, and allow people to think and act, as free and sovereign citizens.

Partisanship is undermining the democratic fibre of our country and is dividing us into political tribes.

Partisanship is not only closing the door to educational dialogue, but is also threatening every effort being made by the institutions and educational bodies to foster a democratic culture in our children.

I hereby appeal to everyone to send a clear message, that we will not tolerate behaviour and words that threaten our democracy through contempt for each other. I believe that, in doing so, our democracy will be further strengthened.

### **The Scourge of Drugs:**

This was a another Republican year during which, as in the past, we spoke many a time about the scourge of drugs. I want to thank and commend the security forces for their efforts to hinder the work of drug traffickers. I also would like to praise the hard work of organisations such as Caritas and Sedqa in Malta, and Oasi in Gozo, for their endeavours to instil hope in those who get caught in such destructive situations.

The families and individuals who are affected, have asked me to convey the message that drugs have no recreational value, and that drugs are our enemy, and not our, or our children's, friends.

Therefore, I appeal to our legislators, before taking any decisions, to create a safe space for a national debate, in which partisanship has no place, so that not only will we have wider participation, but also make informed decisions based on research and experience.

In this area we are lucky because we already have individuals, families, professionals, and non-governmental organisations, with experience, as well as

national research that can guide the national discussion on which a decision can be taken.

In the various discussions I have had with a number of people who are still in the rehabilitation process, or have already been rehabilitated, they always mention their concerns regarding delays in the field of justice on their pending cases.

Therefore, I once again appeal to our authorities to take the necessary steps, to ensure that we address this problem, which does not pertain to particular individuals or families, but which has a lasting effect on society in general.

**Prostitution:**

In recent months, the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, together with voluntary organisations, individuals, and entities interested in the promotion of human rights, political, local and international activists, and people who have experienced prostitution, have all discussed the liberalisation of prostitution.

We have examined different legal scenarios, we have closely looked at contrasting international realities, and have taken into account the consequences from every possible angle.

The more narratives I hear, some of which make one shudder, of the violent abuse of the female body, the more I am convinced, that with respect for

Maltese women and girls, and with respect for the millions of women who are being violated in all ways, the progressive way forward, in this regard, is to decriminalise the victims.

A number of progressive countries like Sweden, France, Iceland, Canada, and Ireland, during the discussion process about the future of the law on prostitution in their respective countries, decided not to take risks which could threaten the dignity of women, and therefore chose to go for full prevention, in favour of dignity.

As a Head of State who has always been close to the people, where my voice is the voice of the people, I appeal for an open national debate, where everyone can be heard. Let us not risk having contradictions in the sphere of civil rights in our country.

### **Gender Equality:**

Our fight for liberalisation and gender equality, must remain focused on strengthening women's presence in public life, and in areas where decisions are taken; on addressing the gender pay gap; on protection from all types of abuse, such as domestic violence; on more flexibility in the public and private workplace; on acknowledging the work of homemakers; on issues of women's health; and on solidarity with precarious and marginalised women.

This agenda should be supported by an educational process, which from an early age, and at all levels of education, interrogates patriarchy and the abuse of power.

### **The Value of "I Care about You":**

In the past twelve months, I have met many parents, who spoke at length about their aspirations for their children.

They also spoke about their concern for the future. They spoke of their fear, that the value solidarity which has existed among us, is being eroded, giving way to a culture of individualism and egoism which can eventually lead to us not trusting one another.

They spoke to me about the lives of their grandchildren, which they fear will be programmed, organised, and divided among a number of adults, where life will become more virtual and lived in more private spaces. A futuristic scenario rooted in the present; a scenario of Malta which could lose the value of "I care about you"; a value which has historically shown us what solidarity means, which has kept us together in times of trouble, and which has taught us the meaning of the common good.

We also have the responsibility to reflect on the consequences of living a life next to, rather than WITH others. A life where, solidarity takes the form of

occasional charity, where private wealth becomes more important than the common good, where we communicate with gadgets rather than with people.

For example, a life where on social occasions, such as during a family meal, we are more concerned about our virtual “friends” than the family members gathered around the time.

These reflections do not only have personal implications, but have a strong socio-political effect. If we do not reflect critically about what is happening around us in this regard, then there will come a time when values, such as solidarity and social justice will be considered as past values.

### **Liberatory and Intersectional Solidarity:**

This year brought about new milestones for the civil rights of the LGBTIQ community. This was possible because there was the necessary political will, and the understanding that rights are not the monopoly of the majority. I now appeal to this community, who, I am convinced, understand what it means to be discriminated against and rejected, to mobilise itself, as it did to acquire its rights, in order to help other minorities to acquire their rights.

I believe that the sense of activism, which has brought so much success for the LGBTIQ community, should now result in liberatory and intersectional solidarity.

### **Integration Policy:**

We need to show solidarity, for example, with migrants, whose work is devalued and abused, who live in chronic precariousness, and deplorable and dangerous conditions.

On the other hand I must express my satisfaction at the news of the launch of the integration policy, by government authorities. This policy will, I hope, strike a balance between responsibilities and rights; a policy which affirms cultural differences while creating spaces for continuous interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

I also want to express my appreciation to those employers who employ migrants, and who treat them with the dignity that everyone deserves. I would like to thank them, for setting an example, by effectively implementing universal human rights.

**Inequalities:**

We must show solidarity with those who are living in poverty or at risk of poverty. To my great satisfaction, indicators show that progress has been made in this respect. While the same indicators show that a lot still has to be done, to set our minds at rest that everyone can live in dignity, let me also note, with satisfaction that, the government authorities are continuing to strive to address this problem.

We must also show solidarity with people who, in spite of being gainfully employed, are still poor or at risk of poverty. The agreement on the minimum wage is an important step that needs to be acknowledged and praised, but we must admit that we have not completely won the fight against precarity.

This shows that social justice does not start with the distribution of wealth, but when justice is done, when workers should be adequately compensated for the work that they perform.

### **Children:**

On the other hand, despite a number of positive measures being taken to address the problem of poverty or risk of poverty among children, the amount of children at risk of poverty, and the impact this has on their development and educational progress, is worrying. It is scientifically proven, that unless we break the vicious circle of poverty, in all likelihood, children will grow up reproducing poverty, because when poverty becomes intergenerational, it is difficult to eradicate it.

However, I am hopeful that the recently launched Children's Policy will be able to holistically address the challenges that Maltese children are facing.

Now that our country has a Children's Policy, I appeal for a timely and comprehensive law regarding children's rights, which ensures the provision of

the fundamental rights of children. Children must be given space, in a structured way, where we can seriously consider what they have to say.

My various experiences, during discussions with children, have always been enlightening, inspired by their unique and free way of expressing themselves.

### **The Environment:**

Children still speak to me about our natural environment, which they consider an important factor in their lives.

Therefore, on their behalf, I once again reiterate the need to ensure, in every way possible, that development in our country will be sustainable. It is for this reason that I appeal, to one and all, to play our part in the protection of our natural environment, because it is lent to us by our children.

### **Housing:**

The forecast of a healthy economy growth means that the rental market will continue to demand higher rents. This means that if we take our time to address this problem, more people will go from one village to another, looking for affordable rents so that they can have more disposable income, with which to live.

Such a situation could have devastating effects on the children of these families, who will not live in a stable community, where they can feel included. We must ensure that the economic success of our country does not leave victims in its wake.

Therefore, the White Paper on the reform of the rental sector, which has been promised by the government authorities, is crucial, so that the consultation and discussion about solutions in this sector are implemented in the shortest time possible.

The longer we take to find solutions that respect all the parties involved, the more money our country will have to spend, to address the damage which these high rents are causing to vulnerable families.

### **Emotional Poverty:**

Poverty is not only linked to finances and disposable income. Unfortunately, in our society, emotional poverty also exists.

This is evident in, for example, the case of elderly people who are living alone because they have been deserted; of children whose parents are in prison; of children in orphanages; of the sick; and of those with mental health problems.

It is our duty to support and show solidarity with these people, while giving our full support to the NGOs working in these areas, who, through their work, alleviate some of the hardships resulting from emotional poverty.

**Wisdom and Diligence:**

On concluding, I would like to praise the diligence and hard work of the government authorities, and the Maltese and foreign workers, who continue to strengthen the economy, which has made solidarity possible.

Our tremendous economic success makes us proud of our country, which, although lacking in natural resources, has been able, with the diligence, skills, and hard-work of our people, to continue to prosper. This is not only for us, but also for the thousands of other workers, whom we need with us, to continue to create to generate prosperity.

I also want to thank the hundreds of workers in the public and private sectors, who have contributed to make the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, a presidency of substance and great organisational success. It was a Presidency which has given the visibility which Malta truly deserves. Not only has our country benefitted from this work, but so have all the Members States of the European Union.

The record number of tasks we undertook were handled successfully. This should augur well for our country in the future. We have demonstrated that

although we are a small country, by being confident, we have achieved as much as, and maybe more, than other much larger countries.

Last year, with the help of the government authorities and a number of hard workers, we continued to give Malta positive visibility, when we welcomed twelve non-executive European Heads of State, at the annual meeting of the Arriaolos Group.

I would like to thank the government authorities, the Security Forces in our country, and all those who helped my Office, to demonstrate that we are capable of adding substance to the discussion, while we continued to give positive visibility to our country.

Our attention now turns to our beloved and prestigious capital city, Valletta, which will be the main European cultural centre for 2018. I have no doubt that Valletta 2018 will serve as a cultural showcase of quality, and intercultural manifestations with a lasting legacy.

Undoubtedly, we should feel proud of this opportunity, and I am convinced that we will be even prouder when we look back and remember a cultural year the like of which Malta has, to-date, never seen.

**I have Hope:**

Dear people of Malta and Gozo, let us continue working together to make Malta a sustainable socio-economic, ethical, and just model. Although challenges will exist, we should be hopeful.

Our hope should lie in the fact that, together, we are capable of overcoming our prejudices, differences, and partisanship.

We should have hope because we have already achieved great successes. We should have hope because we, as a nation, are well-known for our resilience, which has always helped us overcome our challenges.

Let us, dear people of Malta and Gozo, look to the future with courage, because I am convinced that, united, we are capable of creating a brighter future for each and every one of us, but most of all, for our children.

Long Live the Republic.