

RIIA/OERN ELECTION BRIEFING NO 12

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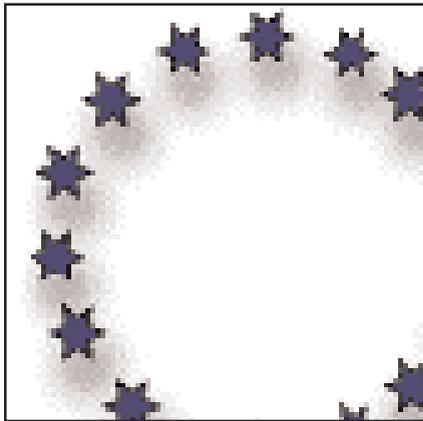
THE MALTESE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF APRIL 2003

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Key points:

- On 10 March 2003, following a 'yes' vote in Malta's referendum on EU membership, the Prime Minister, Eddie Fenech Adami, called a general election for 12 April.
- The incumbent Nationalist Party (PN) won the election with 51.79% of the vote, against 47.51% for the Opposition Malta Labour Party (MLP). The latter had campaigned on an anti-EU ticket, opposing Malta's accession to the European Union. Alternattiva Demokratika (AD), the tiny Green Party, captured a disappointing 0.68% of the vote, despite the expectation that it might win a seat in parliament.
- The political parties ran very different

campaigns. The PN and AD saw the election as inextricably tied to the issue of EU membership; the MLP sought to widen the debate, drawing attention away from this single issue, in the hope of recapturing Labour voters who had voted 'Yes' in the referendum, even though it again campaigned on an anti-EU ticket.

Background

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to discuss the Maltese parliamentary election of 12 April 2003 without also considering the referendum on EU membership that directly preceded it. As many politicians, particularly the Prime Minister, Eddie Fenech Adami, commented during the run-up to the election, 'this poll was no ordinary election'.¹

Malta is a tiny Mediterranean republic and a former British colony. Politically, it is characterized by a relatively pure two-party system, high levels of political mobilization, and the polarized nature of its party politics. Since independence in 1964, power has alternated between the two main political parties, the Malta Labour Party (1971–87 and 1996–98) and the Nationalist Party (1966–71, 1987–96, 1998 to the present). While the MLP has gone some way towards tempering its ideologically hard-line, leftist politics of the 1970s and 1980s, it is probably an exaggeration to see it as being in the 'new Labour' mould. The party has until recently vehemently opposed membership of the EU, as a matter of principle for its leader, Alfred Sant. The PN, by contrast, is a pro-EU party representing (big) business, the Church and the Maltese middle classes. The primary

mission of its leader, Eddie Fenech Adami, in recent years has been to 'modernize' Malta by bringing it into the European Union. Since 1992, elections have also been contested by independent candidates and, more importantly, by a small third party, Alternattiva Demokratika, Malta's Green Party. AD has played a high-profile role in election campaigns and was vociferous in its support for EU membership in the run-up to the recent EU referendum, although its share of the vote has remained around 1–2%,² and it has never won a seat in parliament.

Maltese politics is notable for its extremely high turnout – well over 90% in recent elections – despite the fact that voting is not compulsory. Moreover, the small margin between the two main parties means that governments win and lose elections on the basis of electoral 'swings' of only a few percentage points. As Malta has a population of less than 390,000, and an electorate of under 300,000, a very small number of floating voters or disaffected party loyalists can determine who runs the country. Not surprisingly, encouraging voters to the polls on election day has become a consuming passion for both of the main political parties.

The first campaign of 2003, the referendum on accession to the EU, began on 29 January 2003 and culminated in the poll on 8 March. The result was far from a foregone conclusion in favour of EU membership, and the Nationalists breathed a collective sigh of relief when the result, 53.65% in support of accession, was announced. The turnout was an impressive 91%.³

As the results were just coming through on the day of the referendum count an incident occurred which was to affect the atmosphere in which the general election campaign would be conducted. While there are different (party political) versions of precisely what happened, it is clear that the Labour leader, Alfred Sant, turned up unexpectedly at the count at Ta'Qali and, despite the 'Yes' victory, announced that the MLP would not accept the outcome of the referendum as a majority of the Maltese electorate had not voted in favour of EU membership. More specifically, Sant argued that only 48% of the electorate had voted in favour if one included abstentions and spoiled ballot papers in the total number of 'No' votes. He argued that, as a consequence, the government had no mandate to take Malta into the Union. On this basis, Sant encouraged Labour supporters to go out onto the streets to celebrate their victory. Given Malta's relatively recent history of political violence, this provoked concerns that there would be violent clashes between the two camps. Although few such incidents did occur, there were some scuffles involving journalists and MLP supporters as the announcement was being made.

The day after the referendum result was announced, on 10 March, the Prime Minister called a general election. This announcement had been widely predicted, even though Fenech Adami would later claim that it was only Sant's conduct at Ta'Qali that convinced him to name the day so quickly. The earliest possible date for an election was 12 April, which happened to be only four days before the signing of the Athens Treaty on EU accession.

The results

The Maltese Islands are divided into thirteen multi-member electoral districts, each of which elects five deputies to the Maltese parliament, making a total of 65

seats in all. Malta is one of the few countries in the world to use the Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system, a system of proportional representation which allows voters to vote for independent candidates (not party lists) in order of preference, and in which almost all votes count. The electoral system was amended in 1986 as a consequence of a crisis that had occurred in 1981, when the party winning the majority of votes, the PN, failed to win a majority of seats in parliament. The system now includes a formula which gives a party winning 50+1% of the popular vote the guarantee of a majority of one seat in the parliament.

By early on the afternoon of Sunday 13 April, the day after the election, the outcome was clear. The incumbent Nationalist Party had captured 51.79% of the vote, while Labour won 47.51%. Without delay, Sant appeared on the MLP's television channel, Super One, to concede defeat. The fact that the PN had won only 12,080 more votes than the MLP gives some indication not only of the small size of Malta's electorate, but also of the margins involved. AD was able to win a paltry 0.68%, fewer than 2,000 votes, an extremely disappointing outcome for the party. Even by Maltese standards, turnout was a very respectable 96.2%. Overall then, the results translated into 35 seats for the PN, 30 for the MLP and none for AD.

The campaign

The election result was always expected to be close, with the referendum serving as an important indicator of what might happen in the general election. Yet the 'Yes' vote gave no solace to either of the two main political parties. As some traditional Labour voters had voted in favour of EU membership – and as AD voters, too, had supported a 'Yes' vote in the referendum – there was certainly no complacency over the election outcome in the Nationalist camp. From the outset, the government pushed two main themes: first, that a vote for the PN was a vote for Europe (or, rather, that those wanting to vote for EU membership had no choice but to vote for the PN); and, secondly, that every vote would count in this election. The Nationalists could only be sure of victory if all Nationalist voters (and some pro-EU Labour voters) turned out to vote PN on 12 April.

The PN campaign

The Nationalist campaign was run on a rather general level, with EU membership dominating all other issues. As the EU was felt to be the PN's trump card, this was very much to be expected. The EU theme was reflected in the PN's glossy election manifesto, approved on 24 March. Entitled 'So that Malta grows in Europe', the manifesto was admittedly short on new ideas. Indeed, the PN leadership made a point of stressing that, if the party were re-elected, the electorate could expect more of the same rather than any dramatic shift in policy. Whereas at the start of the campaign Fenech Adami had said that the national unity campaign was over, in fact he continued to play the 'national' card during the campaign in a bid to win over wavering Labour voters. He claimed that a victory for the PN would be a victory for the country as a whole and that Maltese voters should no longer be tied to the partisan politics of the past. To emphasize his point, he highlighted cases where traditional Labour voters had shifted their allegiance to

TABLE 1: MALTESE ELECTION RESULTS, 2003 (1998 IN BRACKETS)

	PN	MLP	AD	Ind.	Total
VOTES	146,172 (137,037)	134,092 (124,220)	1,929 (3209)	20 (27)	282,213 (264,492)
% of vote	51.79 (57.81)	47.51 (46.97)	0.68 (1.22)	0.01 (0.9)	100.00 (100.00)
Seats allocated	35 (35)	30 (30)	0 (0)	0 (0)	65 (65)

Source: www.maltadata.com.

vote for the PN, for the sake of Malta's European future.

The economic record of the Nationalist government was the PN's Achilles' heel, as most Maltese seemed to agree that its performance had, at best, been lacklustre. The government pointed to difficulties at the international level over the previous four years, but also claimed that an impressive number of jobs had been created during its term of office, that wages had increased, and that privatization had brought many benefits to the Maltese people. Fenech Adami also contrasted the PN government with the MLP's period in office (1996–8), criticizing Labour's economic strategy as incoherent and 'gimmicky'. Yet he also took the rather unusual step of apologizing to the electorate for any mistakes that the government might have made. This apparent exercise in humility by the Prime Minister shows how keen the government was to ensure the maximum number of PN votes on 12 April.

The MLP campaign

The focus of the campaign run by Alfred Sant and the Malta Labour Party was different from that of the PN. The party sought to play down the importance of the European issue, claiming that Fenech Adami was 'obsessed' by it and had no other policies to offer the electorate. This was a sensible strategy, given the risks involved should the election turn out to be little more than a re-run of the referendum. Moreover, Sant also recognized that some traditional Labour voters who had voted 'Yes' in the referendum might be persuaded back to vote MLP in the general election (or might, more accurately, be reluctant to vote for the PN). He welcomed back into the MLP fold those prodigal voters who 'had succumbed to temptation'.⁴

The MLP's manifesto, 'For a better future where you come first', was rich in specific proposals. In contrast to the PN document, the MLP document comprised only text, not pictures, and could not in any way be described as glossy. It was also a longer document than that presented by the PN. Substantive issues raised were predictable: the creation of employment opportunities; plans to reduce the tax burden, particularly on small businesses; the repairing of Malta's road system; development of areas and the resolution of specific problems it claimed had been ignored by the PN over the previous four years.

The MLP also committed itself to opposing corruption, claiming that the PN operated on what the MLP

called a 'friends of friends' basis, and that privatizations and contracts for development on the islands had not been subject to transparent and objective criteria.

The party also criticized the PN for increasing the tax burden, referring frequently to the 300 new taxes which the PN had introduced, for squandering money (on EU-related consultancies, for example) and for doing nothing to rectify the stagnation of the Maltese economy. The 'partnership' concept, which, in the referendum campaign, had been the MLP's proposed alternative to EU membership, continued as a sporadic theme in the election campaign. This was to become more important when the referendum issue came back onto the agenda. Initially, Sant had stated that there was no need for another referendum, given that the outcome of the first was both non-binding and illegitimate.⁵ However, by 19 March he had changed, or at least clarified, his position, confirming that a second referendum would indeed take place, but only after negotiations on a partnership arrangement had been concluded with the EU. This second referendum would present the electorate with two options. They would be able to vote either for 'partnership' or for 'membership'. Sant admitted that this kind of question would demand a change in the referendum legislation, as the current system allowed only for a 'Yes' or 'No' response by the electorate. Not surprisingly, the PN claimed that this was unnecessary and little more than a gimmick.

The word 'gimmick' was also used by the PN to refer to a policy announced by the MLP leadership on 30 March but which had not been included in the manifesto: a tax holiday for a range of low earners if Labour were elected. It was condemned as a bribe by the Nationalists. A similar accusation of gimmickry was made when the MLP announced on 6 April that it had signed a pact with the electorate, which included the commitment that an MLP government would resign if it failed to deliver on any of the promises made in its manifesto.

Although there was no violence during the election campaign, the run-up to the election was extremely tense at the political level. Maltese politicians are extremely keen on litigation and numerous libel writs were filed over this period.⁶ However, many of the insults thrown around (and the outrage they provoked) were simply accepted as part and parcel of Maltese electoral politics. By way of example, there are numerous reports of Sant accusing Fenech Adami of running a dirty campaign of hatred, incitement and untruths, using billboards to

smear Labour politicians, and influencing the media to present a false image of the MLP and its leadership. On more than one occasion he challenged Fenech Adami to respect the results of the election (something of a coded message implying undemocratic credentials).

Such claims were by no means one-sided. Like Sant, Fenech Adami demanded that the Labour leader respect the election result. He also stated that Sant lacked a 'sense of ethics' and that he was 'out of his senses', referring in particular to the MLP leader's conduct at the referendum count (at Ta'Qali), where, Adami claimed, Sant had behaved irresponsibly in encouraging Labour supporters to come out on the streets to celebrate their 'victory'. Fenech Adami was astute in referring frequently to the sporadic election violence that had plagued Malta in the 1970s and early 1980s, making the link between that period of violence (under an MLP government) and the current MLP leadership. He claimed, moreover, that in announcing an anti-EU referendum victory, Sant had acted purely out of self-interest in order to save his position as Labour leader.

The AD campaign

Alternattiva Demokratika stayed out of the slanging match to a certain degree. Like the PN, it campaigned on a pro-EU ticket. However, to distinguish itself from the PN it placed greater emphasis on other policy issues. Initially, there had been speculation over whether the PN and AD would forge an electoral alliance. Although talks took place, this did not happen. In an interview later in the campaign, Fenech Adami said that conditions made by both parties could not be met and so the idea of an alliance had come to nothing. The possibility of a coalition remained, however, assuming AD managed to win a seat in the parliament. Given that the AD vote might have amounted to around 2% and given the narrowness of margins, this would obviously have been a sensible strategy for both the PN and the AD.

The focus of the AD campaign was on this one hoped-for seat. Despite winning between one and two per cent of the vote in general elections since 1992, AD had never managed to get into parliament, as its support was not concentrated in any one district. Thus a major plank of the party's electoral strategy was to convince voters, particularly pro-EU voters, to offer their second preference to the AD. It was felt that if enough voters did this they might win a seat in the 8th district, which was being contested by all three party leaders. To that end, the party argued that the era of bipartisan polarization should come to a close and that the AD was 'coming of age' as a political force in Malta. At every opportunity it stressed the fact that Malta's electoral system allowed for cross-party voting, even if the Maltese electorate had little experience of engaging in this practice and despite the fact that many apparently did not even know they could vote for more than one party at a time.

The AD needed to differentiate itself from the other parties, especially the PN, in terms of policies, since it could not rely solely on the EU vote. Alongside its commitment to sustainable development (and sustainable tourism), it also portrayed itself as the party of stability, transparency and responsibility, a party that would keep a check on the other parties once in parliament/government. It also actively supported measures in favour of social inclusion and civil participation.

The campaign and the media

Whereas the AD was unhappy with some of the treatment it received from the media, its complaints paled into insignificance when compared to those of the MLP. Once again, litigation played an important role. For example, Alfred Sant filed a libel writ against NetTV, the Nationalist TV station, on 19 March, and called for a level playing-field in programming for the public service broadcaster, PBS. On 24 March, the MLP accused the English-language newspapers and the Church radio station, RTK, of portraying the MLP unfairly. Things really came to a head, however, towards the end of March, over the 'Xarabank' programme, run on the PBS station. Accusing the programme-makers of bias, Sant refused to participate in planned programmes on the election campaign, and tried to prevent programmes from being aired, arguing that the MLP had not been involved. The Broadcasting Authority supported the MLP case, which provoked vociferous protests from the producers of the programme. It also led 75 journalists to sign an open letter condemning Sant's attitude to the media (he frequently refused to talk to non-Labour sources). A further incident occurred when Sant walked out of an interview with *The Times of Malta*, accusing the paper of attacking him. All of this backed up Sant's more general argument that the Maltese Establishment was trying, and indeed was able, to skew the referendum and election results against the MLP because of a pro-Nationalist bias in the media. It is worth adding that after conceding the election to the Nationalists, Sant attributed the result to the biased Maltese media.

Towards the end of the campaign, there was a feeling that everyone was running out of steam. After all, the Maltese had been on the campaign trail for well over two months. For all political parties, the main preoccupation seemed to be the mobilization of supporters on election day. After the election, this was criticized by one journalist as a 'frenzy' involving a 'barbaric' targeting of the weak and vulnerable, even those who had been hospitalized, including pregnant women about to give birth, which involved exerting pressure on them to struggle to the polling stations.⁷ Given the narrow margins between victory and defeat, such 'attention to detail' in Malta is perhaps understandable.

There is one issue that did not play a particularly important role in the election campaign – the Iraq war. Iraq was simply not a campaign issue and the media reported the war and the election under two quite discrete headings. Neither of the two main political parties used the situation in Iraq as a focus for their campaign, and neither openly opposed the war. This stance was criticized by the AD, and on the far left by former Labour leader Dom Mintoff's 'Malta Arise Front', which claimed that Malta's neutrality should have been a bigger issue in the campaign.

Future perspectives

As soon as the election was out of the way and Eddie Fenech Adami had been sworn in, he set off for Athens, where he signed the EU Accession Treaty on 16 April, along with 24 existing and prospective EU members. This ensured that Malta's accession to the EU would take place on 1 May 2004. Before the Prime Minister left

Malta, he named his cabinet. Barring unforeseen crises or reshuffles, this is the government that will take Malta into the European Union.

One of the most interesting questions, however, concerns the future of the Malta Labour Party over the coming year(s). The requirement that the MLP hold a leadership election after their defeat seemed to open the door to a new era in Labour politics, given reports in the press of anger in the party ranks over the loss of the

election and over Sant's hard-line position on EU membership. Yet on 15 May 2003, despite a ballot offering a choice of three candidates, Labour supporters re-elected Alfred Sant as their leader with a majority of 68%. However, this does not mean that the MPL's position will necessarily remain anti-membership. Indeed, early indications suggest that something of an MLP U-turn is already well under way

Endnotes

¹ Interview with Eddie Fenech Adami in the *Malta Independent*, 30 March 2003.

² In fact, the AD vote has declined in every election since 1992 (including the most recent 2003 election).

³ On the detail of the referendum see M. Cini, 'The Maltese EU Accession Referendum', Oposing Europe Research Network Referendum Briefing No. 2, OERN, University of Sussex, March 2003, available at www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/SEI/oern/ElectionBriefings/index.html.

⁴ See *Malta Independent*, 18 March 2003.

⁵ See *Malta Independent*, 11 March 2003.

⁶ These are too numerous to list but, to give a flavour, Sant issued a writ against Frank Cassar for saying on NetTV that Sant wanted a 'bloody election' and that he had taken 'criminals' to the referendum count on 9 March; a lawyer sued for libel when Sant accused him of having been 'bought off' by the Nationalists; the Finance Minister, John Dalli, issued a libel writ against the MLP over claims made about his honesty on billboards and its website; Sant issued a libel writ to *The Times of Malta* over claims made in a letter they had published; Sant issued a libel writ against the Prime Minister for defamatory remarks he claimed the latter had made. These writs were all issued within the space of a couple of weeks. See *Malta Independent*, 25 March, 26 March, 3 April and 8 April 2003.

⁷ See *Malta Independent*, 13 April 2003.

Convened from the Sussex European Institute, the Oposing Europe Research Network is a group of academic researchers studying party politics within the European Union and candidate countries and seeking to understand in particular why Euroscepticism exists in some states and not in others. Like the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the Network itself retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. The views presented are those of the authors.

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