

Post-Script: The Malta Labour Party after 1998

It has been more than two years since I concluded my thesis on “Ideological and Strategic shifts from Old Labour to New Labour in Malta”. An analysis of the Malta Labour Party’s ideology and strategy following its electoral defeats in 1998 and 2003 is therefore warranted.

The Malta Labour Party during the 1998-2003 Legislature

After the 1998 General Election the Malta Labour Party was back in opposition after only twenty-two months in power. The Nationalist Government, dubbed illegitimate by Labour’s reconfirmed leader Alfred Sant due to what he considered as gerrymandering, had a comfortable five-seat majority. The Nationalist Party was back in power, two years after it had been governing Malta for nine years.

Eddie Fenech Adami’s Government could expect no quarter from Sant’s Labour. Following its electoral defeat, Labour’s leader emphasised that there would be no consensus with the Nationalists, who, according to him had conspired to bring Labour down from power. One visible example in this regard was Labour’s refusal to nominate a Deputy Speaker in Parliament, thus going against a practice that had been previously agreed upon by the two parties in parliament.

A sense of bitterness prevailed in Alfred Sant, and this was evident in his communication. In an interview with Roger Mifsud, in *The Times* on October 28th 1998, Sant proclaimed that next time round Labour would be more hard-nosed and would have to be sure it is working with people it trusted. He emphasised that in Government, “[w]e were seriously sabotaged”. Dom Mintoff “handed a gift to the PN. It was betrayal”. Sant’s anger towards Mintoff was indeed shared by many Labourites.

In another interview in *The Times*, this time with Vanessa Macdonald on September 4th, 1999, Sant stated that he was “not interested” in the “problem” concerning his contact with Dom Mintoff after the 1998 General Election. He reiterated that New Labour had been hijacked during its 22 months in government. During a television programme on *Smash Television* on October 26th, 1999 – the third anniversary of Labour’s 1996 electoral victory - Alfred Sant called on Dom Mintoff to apologise for the events which took place in 1998.

In his New Year’s Day message for 1999, Alfred Sant said that the biggest challenges facing Malta included the safeguarding of the conditions of work and the conditions of the self-employed, the elderly and those depending on social security. The economy was clearly high on Labour’s agenda.

Yet there were other areas – especially strategic - that were being given importance by Labour following the 1998 debacle. The General Conference held during January and February 1999 was characterised by important decisions. One such decision was the

unanimous approval of the proposal that the Party should commence participating in Local Council elections.

Important statements were also made during the General Conference, clearly indicating the road that Labour would be taking in the near future. One such statement was Sant's announcement that a referendum on European Union membership would not be binding as the Government was illegitimate. Sant added that there was no chance of EU membership before 2008.

Alfred Sant proclaimed that when Labour was in Government between 1996 and 1998, "we did not help our supporters enough", and that a future Labour Government would serve all the people, but "would be quicker in addressing the injustices suffered by Labourites". This statement, a sort-of confession that the Labour Government had not reached many Labourites' expectations, was very well received by the Labour delegates. Labour was to be more inward-looking again, moving towards the Old Labour dictum '*min mhux maghna huwa kontra taghna*'.

However, not all Labourites welcomed this statement. On May 9th, 1999, former General Secretary and respectable academic Dominic Fenech warned in *It-Torca* that Labour would not win the next election if relied only on its core ("*ta' gewwa*"). Fenech added that Labour should once again open its doors and demolish its bastions.

Indeed, signs of Old Labour had started re-appearing. Joe Brincat (who had resigned from Labour's parliamentary group in 1995, openly opposing Sant) was once again re-elected Deputy Leader for Party Affairs, a post he had occupied twice before, including once under Dom Mintoff. There were other symbolic representations of Old Labour coming out to light. On November 8th, 1999, former Prime Minister and Mintoffian Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici addressed the Annual General Meeting of Labour's Qala club. Labour's traditional symbology was also re-appearing. In a paid advert for the Paola Local Council election on November 13th 1999, Labour's traditional emblem (the Torch), was there for all to see. This was the first time Labour was to contest that town's Local Council elections. Incidentally, Labour obtained 57.5% of the vote.

Ironically, although Labour was without its patriarch, Dom Mintoff, yet in various ways it was re-embracing certain characteristics reminiscent of Old Labour. Apart from Mintoff's conspicuous absence from the Labour Party, in the first year following the 1998 defeat, the General Workers Unions was also not being as major a presence in the party as before.

Indeed, on May 1st, 1999, the General Workers Union - save for its Dockyards section, (led by the militant trade-unionist the late Tony Coleiro) and a few other officials - did not participate in the Labour Party's traditional Workers' Day rally in Valletta. Amidst much speculation on the relationship between the two traditional components of the Labour Movement, both organisations met on May 4th, and agreed to keep in regular contact.

During the rally on May 1st, Alfred Sant said that there was a Maltese way to modernise the country, and that Labour would follow that way, restructuring the economy in accordance with the country's limits, pace and needs. Sant emphasised the importance of retaining Malta's freedom and the need for equal opportunities and justice. He also gave importance to the HSBC issue, which had become one of the most controversial issues in Malta. Mid-Med Bank, a major bank in Malta which was nationalised by Mintoff's Government in the 1970s was being sold to HSBC by the Nationalist administration in power at that time.

Labour gave much importance to the HSBC issue, marching in protest on the streets and in front of various branches of the Mid-Med Bank. Earmarking major bones of contention in an interview with the *Malta Independent* on May 2nd, 1999, Alfred Sant highlighted the strategic importance of Mid-Med Bank in Malta, stating that only 40% of the bank should be privatised and that the Worker-Director principle should be upheld.

On May 12th 1999, Alfred Sant wrote to HSBC, stating that a future Labour Government would take measures to reduce the dominant position of HSBC in the banking sector.

As the months progressed, Malta's accession process to the European Union – a major selling point of the Nationalist Party's electoral campaign in 1998 - was becoming ever more important. Following the Vienna European Council's declaration in December 1998 to welcome Malta's decision to reactivate its application for EU membership, the Cologne European Council, in June 1999, stated

"[T]hat, on the basis of the Commission's updated opinion on Malta's accession application, it has now been possible to make a start on analytical examination of the Union's *acquis* with Malta. The Commission will also submit a report, in good time for the Helsinki European Council meeting, on Malta's progress in preparation for accession, to form the basis, together with the corresponding reports on the other applicant countries, for any decisions to be taken by the Helsinki European Council".

In the meantime, on October 14th, 1999, Sant commented on the European Commission's update report on Malta, reiterating that Labour would make Malta a 'Switzerland in the Mediterranean'. The Labour Party's strategy for a special relationship with the European Union was henceforth being maintained by the Party.

Writing in *The Malta Independent* on September 24th, 1999, Alfred Gixti – a member of Labour's administration – attempted to define the Labour Party's proposal for a special relationship with the EU as being "third way", "because it is neither xenophobically anti-EU nor grovelling pro-EU, but based on a realistic assessment of the best interests of Malta and its people".

On November 8th, 1999, the Malta Labour Party presented a briefing note on its vision for Malta's foreign affairs to the European Socialists in Helsinki. Here, Labour stressed Malta's relations with the European Union, the Mediterranean, China and the United States of America.

In the meantime, EU Enlargement Commissioner Günter Verheugen – who was to become a prominent figure in the Maltese political scenario - said that he asked European Socialist Leaders to attempt to overcome MLP's isolation in its anti-EU membership stance. Furthermore, in a letter dated December 7th, 1999, to the Maltese Prime Minister, Britain's New Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair declared his full support to Malta's EU membership bid. Another exponent of British New Labour, British Minister for Europe Keith Vaz, met Alfred Sant on July 6th, 2000, and told him that he disagreed with his views on EU membership..

On February 15th, 2000, the accession negotiations for EU membership were formally opened with Malta. By the end of 2001, Malta had closed twenty chapters of the negotiations, including the controversial chapter on free movement of capital, obtaining a permanent special arrangement. Negotiations with the EU seemed to be proceeding well, with the Laeken European Council stating that it agreed with the European Commission, in that "if the present rate of progress of the negotiations and reforms in the candidate States is maintained, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic and Slovenia could be ready" to end negotiations by the end of 2002 and take part in the elections for the European Parliament due in June 2004.

Indeed, Malta closed its negotiations during the Copenhagen European Council between December 12th and 13th, 2002, when the negotiations on Agriculture, Taxation, Customs Union, Financial and Budgetary Provisions were formally closed. The number of chapters closed therefore reached thirty.

In the meantime, Labour remained as committed as ever in its opposition to EU membership. On March 6th, 2000, when European Commissioner Romano Prodi addressed Malta's House of Representatives, Alfred Sant reiterated that "the best option for Malta is the establishment of an industrial free trade zone with the EU".

During the negotiations process, the Malta – EU Steering and Action Committee (MEUSAC) was formed. Representatives of the Government, as well as representatives from civil society were invited to form part of this committee. Trade-Unions, Non-Governmental Organisations, special interest groups were represented in MEUSAC. Labour, unlike the Nationalist Party and *Alternattiva Demokratika* (now chaired by Harry Vassallo, replacing Wenzu Mintoff who had returned to the Labour fold) refused to form part of the committee. The same approach was adopted by Labour with regard to other consultative bodies, such as the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development.

Labour was opting for a confrontational approach, where the partisan political divide was becoming as pronounced as during the 1980s. Pro-EU membership exponents – including civil society organisations, intellectuals, journalists and opinion-makers, even if from a Labourite or leftist background – were frequently being labelled as Nationalist agents or opponents of the Party. Even Commissioner Verheugen was not spared. On February 13th, 2000, during a meeting with Labour supporters in Cospicua, Alfred Sant made a

direct reference to the Commissioner which would hit the headlines in Malta's media, being quoted frantically by Sant's political adversaries. Sant's words to Verheugen were

“You are welcome to come with [Commissioner] Prodi and disagree with us, but you shouldn't talk too much, because whoever has a long tongue should either bite it or we will bite it for you”.

Old Labour's '*Min mhux maghna huwa kontra taghna*' approach seemed to be back with a vengeance.

This approach was given an important symbolic blessing in Labour's 2000 General Conference with the slogan, “A Society with New Opportunities”. On January 28th, a motion entitled ‘Injustices in Our Country’, was approved by the Party's delegates. Emphasising that Labour's mechanisms should be strengthened to enable the Party to investigate injustices committed against Labourites, the motion specifically committed the next Labour government to carry out political and administrative measures to amend injustices within a year from being elected. The motion added that those responsible for causing injustice, would pay for their deeds.

Adding Old Labour spice to the motion, Alfred Sant declared on January 30th that Heads within the Civil Service would be requested to resign when Labour was in government. During his speech, Sant received a standing ovation on announcing that a new Labour Government would treat Labourites the same way that the current Nationalist Government was treating Nationalists. However, Sant added that Labour's next electoral victory would not be a victory for the MLP alone, but for all the Maltese people.

Notwithstanding his latter statement, Sant and the Labour Party were giving the message to Labourites disappointed with New Labour's inclusive ‘Citizen’ (rather than ‘Labourite’) oriented approach between 1996 and 1998, that the next Labour Government would be truly theirs. Labourites will be served justice, said the writing on the wall.

But where was Labour heading, ideologically?

In the aftermath of the 1998 election, Alfred Sant was interviewed by Saviour Balzan, in *The Malta Independent* on November 22nd. Here Sant emphasised Labour's ‘modernist’ mission. He said that the leftism of the MLP in the past had been grossly over-exaggerated. Stressing that Labour was not hard-left, he earmarked the fact that unlike British Labour, it had not been characterised by the socialist Clause 4. Alfred Sant added that the New Labour Party recognised the role of economic globalisation while retaining its core values. The state's new role, for Sant, was that of a regulator and steersman, and the country's major challenge was modernisation.

Sant was clearly trying to state that there had been continuity in the Labour Party throughout the years. This argument was also used in his weekly article dated October 11th, 2000 in *The Times*, which was dedicated to Labour's 80th anniversary. Here, Sant stated that like other socialist parties, the Malta Labour Party was adjusting to change. He

defined what he saw as the three essential principles, namely (1) that Maltese working people were to have as much control as possible over their society; (2) the creation of local productive capacity central to public policy; and, (3) social justice. Sant added that “[t]hose who attach much importance to the labels “socialist” and “new Labour” fail to realise that there has been remarkable continuity over the years in Labour’s efforts to put our three essential principles into action. It will continue to be like so in the coming years.”

In his New Year message for 2000, Sant emphasised that education is the tool for the coming century. Sant also stressed the importance of Malta’s independence and freedom, the need to improve relations with European and Mediterranean neighbours, the need to increase opportunities, and the need to maintain the principles of social justice.

During this period Labour was also emphasising issues such as social class, anti-neoliberalism and anti-militarism. For example, as regards social class, in his Parliamentary reaction to the Nationalist Party’s budget for 2000, Sant said on November 30th, 1999, that the people had been deceived and betrayed through anti-social measures, the most prominent of which being the increase in Income Tax. Sant added that through privatisation “fat cats” would be made fatter.

As regards neo-liberalism, an example of Sant’s criticism is his article in *The Times* on April 19th, 2000, whereby he criticised the Nationalist Government’s neo-liberal privatisation approach to satisfy EU regulations. Here, Alfred Sant also put forward a critique of global corporations, stating that the economic and social costs due to their dominance through privatisation was being forked out by workers, employees and citizens at large. However, it should be emphasised that Sant did not put forward an anti-privatisation approach. What he stated was that privatisation should involve all social partners.

As regards anti-militarism, Labour declared its opposition to the Malta Drydocks decision to start bidding for US Navy contracts in December 1999. Deputy Leader George Vella said that in the first instance this should have been considered by Parliament in view of its implications on neutrality.

Conversely, Labour was also utilising discourse that was associated with the political right. Labour’s approach regarding foreigners in Malta was a case in point. To give an example, on January 27th, 2000, different MLP Parliamentarians spoke in xenophobic terms. Angelo Farrugia said that “while the government is being stingy with the Maltese, it is rolling out the carpet for refugees”. Jose’ Herrera urged to have a clause saying that those who apply for refugee status frivolously, be considered as criminals. Herrera added that Malta could be swamped with applicants.

Perhaps more surprising was Alfred Sant’s declared concern on the controversy between Austria and the European Union due to the fact that Haidar’s far-right Freedom Party had been elected to power as part of a rightist coalition in the country in question. Sant criticised the European Union for exerting pressure against Haidar’s party, stating that the

EU is not respecting Austria's sovereignty and that this did not augur well. In his weekly article in *The Times* on February 9th, 2000, Sant also said that he disagreed with Haidar's policies, but the fact remained that he (Haidar) had been elected democratically. Sant's approach was contrary to that of the political mainstream (including centre-to-left parties) in Europe.

In the meantime, Local Council elections were held on March 12th, 2000. The Nationalist Party kept its relative majority, but lost 1.3% of its support. In the twenty-two councils that were being contested, the Nationalists won twelve, with Labour winning ten. In his weekly article in *The Times* on March 15th, Sant declared victory, adding that Labour was winning back its traditional voters and was emphasising efficiency, management and transparency.

As regards traditional Labour voters, further attempts were being made over and above the 2000 General Conference to settle discrepancies that existed within the Party. Mintoff and the General Workers Union were vital players in this regard.

Any disagreement with the General Workers' Union seemed to have been shelved. Indeed, the Union participated in full armour during Labour's demonstration on May 1st, 2000.

Just two days prior to that, like a bolt out of the blue, Alfred Sant paid homage to Dom Mintoff, when speaking at an exhibition to commemorate Labour's protest strike on April 28th, 1958. Alfred Sant spoke on the importance of Dom Mintoff and his comrades in the workers' struggle against colonialism over forty years before. In what appeared to be a clear attempt to reconcile Labour's vision with Mintoff's, Sant added that forty years before Mintoff had written in an English newspaper about his vision of Malta as a 'Switzerland in the Mediterranean'.

Dom Mintoff did not wait for much long to speak about Alfred Sant and the Labour Party. Indeed, on July 4th, 2000, after two years of silence he spoke in public during an interview on state television. Mintoff did not return Sant's compliments. He urged that co-operation needed to take place to solve the problems facing Malta (something that was definitely not on Sant's agenda). He expressed disagreement with Labour's foreign policy, defining the Party's free-trade concept as a flop (Mintoff used the word '*qassata*' – a traditional Maltese pastry, in this case the word was metaphorically used to ridicule).

Mintoff also gave his version of events in the 1996 and 1998 elections. Stating that he had not agreed with Labour's 1996 manifesto, Mintoff said that he had contested on his own manifesto for the General Elections. As regards the 1998 elections Mintoff said that he was sick at that time, and therefore could not contest. Otherwise, Mintoff added, he would have fought from within the Party.

When asked by the press on Mintoff's comments, Alfred Sant said that he was not conversant with pastry. The only MLP personality to react officially on Mintoff's

interview was former Minister and then Shadow Minister for Finance Leo Brincat, who said that Mintoff was cut off from reality. Back to square one.

In the meantime, internal trouble was rearing its ugly head again for Alfred Sant. This time it was from former Minister of Finance Lino Spiteri, once again.

In various articles in *The Sunday Times* and *The Times* during July and August 2000, Spiteri alleged that Sant's election as leader of the MLP in 1992 had been characterised by vote rigging. At first there was no official reaction from Labour, but eventually, something had to be done to limit the damage being done to the Party and its leader. After weeks of being challenged by the Nationalist Party and various opinion-makers, the Labour Party's first official reaction came from Deputy Leader George Vella, who said that Labour would soon react. In the meantime in *The Sunday Times* dated July 30th, Lino Spiteri named Labour's Cospicua Mayor Paul Muscat as being involved in vote rigging during the 1992 leadership contest. That same day, Alfred Sant spoke up. He declared that he had written to the Vigilance and Disciplinary Board on July 20th, 2000, asking it to investigate the case. Paul Muscat was questioned by the Board on August 2nd.

On August 28th, 2000, the Vigilance Board issued its report, finding no irregularities. However, Paul Muscat took most of the blame for what had happened during the 1992 leadership contest. The Labour Party decided to discipline him by barring him from representing it in any capacity. In return, Muscat stated that he would appeal to the Appeals Board, and almost 2,000 residents signed a petition for him to stay on as Cospicua Mayor. Muscat had obtained 31.7% of Labour's votes in the Cospicua local council elections only the previous March.

In the meantime, Alfred Sant defined the story in question as a "diversionary tactic". The issue kept dragging on. On the one hand Lino Spiteri named former MLP officials who knew of vote rigging. On the other hand, Paul Muscat contested Spiteri's writing, stating that what actually happened was that he (Muscat) had invented a story on vote-rigging.

On October 3rd, 2000, Labour's Appeals Board confirmed the ruling against Paul Muscat, stating that Muscat's fabrication had harmed the party, exposing it to attack. Muscat did not back down. He declared that he would be staying on as Independent Mayor in Cospicua. The Party reiterated that he should step down, but to no avail. It was only towards the end of the local council's three-year legislature that Muscat was out-voted as Mayor in the Labour-dominated Local Council.

In the midst of the Paul Muscat controversy, the Malta Labour Party organised a mass-meeting at Il-Baviera in Valletta on September 10th. In what appeared to be a direct appeal to Labourites for loyalty to the Party and its leadership, Alfred Sant said that Labour's vision was the same as that of Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici. Sant added that Labour would win the next election, and warned ambassadors not to interfere in Maltese politics. A few days later, on September 17th, whilst declaring that the environment would be forming part of Labour's Social Policy document that was to be approved by

the Party in October, Alfred Sant again paid tribute to Dom Mintoff and called for unity in the Party.

Sant's declaration on the environment followed Labour's position against the development of a Golf Course on agricultural land in Tal-Virtu', Rabat, which was being hotly contested by farmers and various organisations, including *Alternattiva Demokratika* – The Green Party, Progressive Farmers Union, *Moviment Graffiti*, Friends of The Earth, Nature Trust and the University Chaplaincy. On August 5th 2000 Labour's environment spokesperson Joe Mizzi declared the Party's opposition to the Golf Course in question, adding that a golf course should be developed on the Maghtab landfill, rather than Rabat.

The 2001 General Conference was approaching. The direction being adopted by Labour, namely the '*Min mhux maghna kontra taghna*' strategy, was being confirmed. Through the General Conference, it could now be personified: Manwel Cuschieri was the name.

Manwel Cuschieri, a former unsuccessful Labour candidate during the 1981 and 1987 general elections, had worked within the Party's fund-raising structures for a number of years. In 1992 he supported Sant's candidature for leader and objected to Lino Spiteri's request to talk to the general conference over anonymous accusations signed by a certain 'EC'. However, Cuschieri he gained fame and support especially from hard-core Labourites through his radio programmes on Super One from 1997 onwards, where he specialised in anti-Nationalist and anti-Mintoff populist rhetoric that was very much synonymous with '*Min mhux maghna kontra taghna*'. Cuschieri, Labour's Vice-President, was uncontested for the Post of President during the 2001 General Conference. He was therefore elected to the post, replacing Mario Vella, who was not contesting.

During the General Conference, Labour also decided that Malta's accession process to the European Union should be decided through a General Election. The forthcoming national referendum on the issue was officially being written off by Labour.

In the meantime, Labour's boycotts of MEUSAC, MCESD and other bodies was eventually extended to 'Where's Everybody?', the media company that produced television programmes characterised by notoriously high viewership ratings, such as *Xarabank* (Malta's most popular television programme – characterised by discussion that is frequently controversial); *Bondiplus* and *Viva Malta*. Eventually, Labour also boycotted *L-Istrina*¹, a massive charitable event during the Christmas period which was hosted by presenters such as *Xarabank*'s Peppi Azzopardi and in which a myriad of Maltese personalities and organisations participate.

Labour's hostile approach was indeed a far cry from the New Labour inclusive approach during its years in opposition between 1992 and 1996. However, there were various strategies that were similar to the ones used by the victorious New Labour in the 1996 electoral campaign. For example, Labour made frequent reference to what it considered as scandals. Issues such as the sale of Mid-Med Bank to HSBC, the Presidential Pardon

¹ Translated from English 'New Year's gift'

to *Zeppi l-Hafti*² over a 1994 murder attempt involving Richard Cachia Caruana (Prime Minister Eddie Fenech Adami's Personal Assistant), and other alleged scandals were frequently highlighted by the Party, especially through its media.

Labour also kept on emphasising that the Nationalist Government was betraying the national interest by wanting to join the European Union at all costs. As part of its strategy, Labour argued that the Nationalist Government was involved in fudging. According to Labour budgetary figures were being doctored and the price index was being manipulated, deceiving Maltese people in the process.

During 2002 and 2003, talk of the forthcoming referendum and General Elections was dominating Maltese society. A general election was constitutionally to be held by January 2004 at the latest. The European Union issue dominated the island. Malta was divided in two camps: on one side there were those in favour of membership – including the Nationalist Party, *Alternattiva Demokratika* – The Green Party, *Union Haddiema Maqghudin*, the Federation of Industry, the Chamber of Commerce, the Malta Employers Association, the Malta Union of Teachers, the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions, the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association, the Association of Farmers, environmental NGOs and, notably, Labour's important 1996 ally the General Retailers Trade Union; On the other side there were the Malta Labour Party, the General Workers' Union, the Campaign for National Independence (led by Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici), the hunters and trappers' lobby (even if not officially), *Ghima* (made up of a section of entrepreneurs within industry that caters for the local market, such as a section of the furniture industry), the Progressive Farmers' Union, and Dom Mintoff's *Front Maltin Inqumu* (Malta Arise Front). The latter organisation was formed just as Malta was concluding its negotiations with the European Union. Old Labour stalwarts such as Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici, Sammy Meilaq and Philip Muscat, were also active within its ranks. FMI argued for a re-negotiation of the treaty with the European Union.

Surveys such as the Euro Barometer were showing that a majority of Maltese voters supported EU membership. People who were younger, had a good level of education and who formed part of the middle classes tended to favour EU membership more than people with a lower level of education, who tended to be in their mid-years and who were generally working class.

Early in 2003, a publication entitled 'Confessions of a European Maltese' – authored by Alfred Sant – was released on the market. The book, an auto-biographical portrait of Sant as a young traveller in European countries, seemed to be aimed at middle-class readers, not only because it was written in English, but also because of its style. It was as if Sant wanted to show that by opposing EU membership one is not less 'European' than others. Incidentally, Alfred Sant was defined as being the 'quintessential European intellectual' by previous MLP President Mario Vella in an article in *The Times* during the 2003 electoral countdown.

² Translated from English, 'Joe, the barefoot one' – Joseph Fenech's nickname.

In the closing chapter of “Confessions of a European Maltese” (which is less autobiographical and more argumentative than the previous chapters) Sant attempts to create a synthesis of being European and Maltese. In this regard, he states that “Before being European, I have always been, and have always considered myself as Maltese”.

Sant adds

“A small nation can give best evidence of its European character by enhancing, not diluting, undermining or signing away the specificity of its differences with the rest. The biggest damage being done today to the European genius is when the splendid diversity of the European space, is converted into bureaucratic uniformity.... All European societies, urban and rural, are becoming alike. The European Union with its project to create a single continental market, and soon a single continental state, has of course provided the major impetus behind this transformation”.

Here, Alfred Sant gives importance to the fact that Malta is a micro-state, which has various implications which it can exploit and should not forego.

“A micro state, if it has the leverage, can get a good party of what it wants; failing such leverage, it will be expected to conform. Once it conforms to all the exigencies of a wider entity, the scope for manoeuvre and leverage will have been foregone. And with that, will have gone for ever – certainly in the case of a micro state – the margins for diversity that have allowed development and autonomy to flourish in the European context.”

Alfred Sant depicts his argument by referring to Labour’s negotiations with Britain in the 1970s to withdraw from Malta as military base. He adds that it will not be possible for such negotiations to take place within the EU, even if Malta were to use its power of veto. Indeed, Sant says that the implications were the right of veto to be used by Malta would not be beneficial to the country.

“Either there would be an eventual fudge, by which the island’s requests would be transformed into a format that would leave us where we started.... Or any resulting ‘good’ deal for Malta would be undermined by the collaterals and resentment, that would leave us gasping for breath, due to the burdens that they impose on us”.

“Confessions of a European Maltese” ends with a direct appeal that only the Maltese themselves can Malta’s future.

“We Maltese can best participate in the European space, in a way that is consonant with our position and size, by being who we are, and by developing ways of life that really reflect our situation. By being so and by doing so, we indeed can widen and deepen our share in the European heritage, and fully benefit from it.... Nobody will build Malta’s future for us. Only we can do it. And we will do that by giving witness to the specific nature of our character and environment, with confidence that in doing so, we are through an expression of what makes us Maltese, also confirming that we are European.”

Enter 2003 and Judgement Day was approaching. Speculation on the dates of the referendum and the general election was rife. Eventually the date of the referendum was announced. It would coincide with the local council elections on 8th March.

During the Nationalist legislature 1998-2003, the economy was in many ways similar to that of the 1990s. However, gone were the days of boom as in the early nineties. The economy was slowing down. The world was in a gloomy post-11th September 2001 scenario. Official figures show that GDP increase at current market prices had slowed down to 2.8% in 2002, down from the percentage in the previous five years which varied between 7.2% and 7.3% in 1997 and 2000 respectively to 4.6% in 2001. Levels of taxation had increased during this period, even though income tax bands were eventually reformed in the Budget for 2003. On the other hand, unemployment had remained under 5%. In 2002 the unemployment rate read 4.7%. Malta's structural deficit had been officially reduced from Lm140 million in 1998 to Lm87.7 million in 2002.

The Malta Labour Party's official slogans for the referendum campaign, were "*Partnership l-Ahjar Ghazla*"³ "*Futur Ahjar - L-Ewwel Int*"⁴. Aggressive campaigns were carried out both by the 'Yes' and 'No' camps, including mass meetings, public debates and advertising.

Labour, insisting that it was only the Nationalists that would be bound by the 'consultative' referendum, eventually gave its directives to Labourites regarding voting. They were to choose between voting 'No', invalidating their vote, or abstaining from voting. In this respect, it is interesting to note that this was to be only the fifth referendum ever to be held in Malta. Technically speaking, no referendum ever achieved absolute majority of votes in terms of registered voters, mainly due to high numbers of voters who did not cast their vote. (For example, see footnote for results of 1964 Independence and 1956 Integration referenda)⁵. Hence, to many observers it seemed that Labour was playing a card.

³ Translated from English - 'Partnership the best choice'

⁴ Translated from English - 'A better future – you come first'

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Independence Referendum 1964	% of Registered Voters	% of Votes Cast	% of Valid Votes
Registered Voters 162,743	100.00		
Not Voting* 33,094	20.34		
Votes Cast 129,649	79.66	100.00	
Invalid Votes 9,016	5.54	6.95	
Valid Votes 120,633	74.12	93.05	100.00
In favour 65,714	40.38	50.69	54.47
Against 54,919	33.75	42.36	45.53

*of these 5,899 did not obtain voting papers

At a press conference on March 6th at Labour’s General Headquarters, Leader Alfred Sant and Deputy Leaders George Vella and Joe Brincat explained Labour’s ‘Partnership’ policy.

Alfred Sant explained that through Labour’s Partnership policies, “you and your family will come first”. He added that the Malta Labour Party did not want Malta to enter a blind alley through which “you and your family” would end up alone and squashed by the burden of taxes.

Sant emphasised that Labour wanted to work with all ‘creative forces’ in Malta, and emphasised that it is the ‘big bosses’ in the importation sector and the Nationalists, who always had it good who kept stating that there was no alternative to EU membership. Sant added that Malta should build on George Borg Olivier’s Independence, on Dom Mintoff’s Freedom and on the work done by thousands of Maltese and Gozitans.

Alfred Sant proceeded to explain why EU membership was bad for Malta’s economy – a very important consideration for Maltese people, who tend to give importance to materialist values.

He explained that through EU membership the cost of living, prices of property, stagnation, the burden of taxes and unemployment would increase. Less cash would be in hand and Malta would have to fork out an additional Lm25 million to catch up with EU regulations. The self-employed, workers in factories and those in financial services were singled out by Sant, who then proceeded to explain that Partnership represented Labour’s intention to bring appropriate relations for our country with the EU, USA, Russia and North Africa. A balance between benefits and obligations would be found within such relations according to him, and Malta would continue on the path adopted by

Integration Referendum 1956	% of Registered Voters	% of Votes Cast	% of Valid Votes
Registered Voters 152,783	100.00		
Not Voting* 62,440	40.87		
Votes Cast 90,343	59.13	100.00	
Invalid Votes 2,559	1.67	2.83	
Valid Votes 87,784	57.46	97.17	100.00
In favour 67,607	44.25	74.83	77.02
Against 20,177	13.21	22.21	22.98

*of these 3,287 did not obtain voting papers

(Source: www.maltadata.com)

Labour between 1996 and 1998, with negotiations based on the method used by Switzerland.

At the same press conference, Alfred Sant criticised various organisations that had previously stated that they would not speak on the issue at stake but spoke in favour of full membership “as soon as the strings were pulled.”

During the press conference, George Vella emphasised the importance of defending Malta’s freedom, singling out the self-employed, workers, families, farmers and fishermen, industry and students as categories and sectors that stood to lose through EU membership. On his part, Joe Brincat, stressed that Malta should remain a neutral country and not join the EU.

Eventually, the referendum took place. The question that Maltese and Gozitans were to vote on was “Do you agree that Malta becomes a member of the European Union in the enlargement that will take place on May 1 2004?”. Alfred Sant, following one of his Party’s three directives, abstained from voting. The following table shows the result of the referendum.

EU Referendum 2003	% of Registered Voters	% of Votes Cast	% of Valid Votes
Registered Voters 297,881	100.00		
Not Voting 27,231	9.14		
Votes Cast 270,650	90.86	100.00	
Invalid Votes 3,911	1.31	1.45	
Valid Votes 266,722	89.54	98.55	100.00
In favour 143,094	48.04	52.87	53.65
Against 123,628	41.50	45.68	46.35

(Source: www.maltadata.com)

The referendum was approved both in terms of vote cast (52.87%) and valid votes (53.65%). In terms of conventional interpretation of referenda, a majority of Maltese supported Malta’s entry in the European Union. Malta proved to be the most Eurosceptic of the ten acceding countries, but at the same time its referendum was the one with the highest turnout among nine referenda that were held among the countries in question (Cyprus did not hold a referendum)⁶.

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Country	% Turnout	% Yes Vote
Slovakia	52.1	92.4
Lithuania	63.3	89.9
Slovenia	60.4	89.6
Hungary	45.6	83.7
Poland	58.8	77.5

However, in terms of registered voters, 48.04% of voters declared themselves in favour. Labour picked upon this point and declared that Partnership had victorious. Alfred Sant arrived at the counting hall at Ta' Qali and declared victory, and Labour celebrated by holding an open air celebration addressed by Alfred Sant in front of the premises of Labour's Super One television and radio stations.

The situation in Malta was surreal. Persons from both camps were celebrating on the streets. In line with its General Conference decision in 2001, Labour still held steadfast that only a General Election could decide the fate of Malta's entry in the EU.

A Press Release that was issued as Labour's official declaration on the referendum result, confirmed this approach, stating that "[t]he Maltese Government has failed to obtain the absolute majority in favour of full membership of the EU." Emphasising that the referendum in Malta was of a non-binding nature, the press release added "Government obtained only 48 per cent of the total eligible votes in favour of its referendum question. Labour advised voters to either vote no, spoil their ballot, or abstain from voting at all. Dr Sant himself did not vote in the referendum."

Labour's press release proceeded to mention the Common Agricultural Policy, the free circulation of workers and residents and the free purchase of property in Malta by EU citizens as main reasons why Malta should opt for Partnership and refrain from becoming a full EU member.

Alfred Sant insisted that the Government had no moral, constitutional or political grounds to take any further steps in favour of Malta's accession to the European Union. He challenged the Government to call a General Election without any more waste of time.

"A new Labour Government would take concrete and effective initiatives to address the real challenges of the working families, the self-employed and small and medium-sized enterprises in bettering their quality of life," added Labour's statement.

Labour also held a press conference with regard to the Local Councils elections, which the Party declared had brought about a "very good result for Labour". During these elections, Labour lost two councillors, but won a majority in two new councils, Rabat and Mtarfa.

Czech Republic	55.2	77.3
Latvia	72.5	67.0
Estonia	66.9	63.0
Malta	91.0	53.6

(source *The Times*, September 22nd, 2003)

In the Local Council elections, the Nationalist Party obtained 49% of the vote, Labour 47% and *Alternattiva Demokratika* (which had contested in one third of the localities in question) and independents obtained 4%. The Green Party, which had started contesting local council elections in 2002 after a five-year absence managed to elect councillors in three localities in which the electorate is predominantly Nationalist – Sliema, B’Kara and Lija. (Incidentally, the author of this publication was elected in Sliema on behalf of AD in these local council elections).

Was Labour’s interpretation of the referendum legitimate? In legal terms, Labour was correct that the referendum was not constitutionally binding. In crude political terms, it was clear that only a General Election could resolve the issue. Otherwise Malta risked further uncertainty and a political stalemate. It was therefore not surprising that Prime Minister Eddie Fenech Adami proclaimed the date of the next General Election: April 12th 2003.

With no political party obtaining an absolute majority in the local council elections, the role of pro-EU membership Party *Alternattiva Demokratika* was put in the limelight. If neither the Nationalist Party nor Labour obtained 50%+1 of votes in the General Election, the Party with most votes would be declared winner, provided that only two parties were elected to Parliament. Potentially, if Labour won 49% of the votes, the Nationalists 48% and AD 3% but no parliamentary seat, Labour would be in power even though there were be a pro-EU majority in terms of votes.

For this reason, talks between the Nationalist Party and *Alternattiva Demokratika* were carried out with the possibility of forming an electoral alliance. In the meantime *Alternattiva* adopted a strategy that emphasised the importance of second-preference votes which would enable the Greens to get a parliamentary seat, hence helping ensure a pro-EU parliamentary majority. The talks proved to be unproductive and the Nationalists (including Prime Minister Fenech Adami during the Party’s final Mass Meeting before the General Election) warned pro-EU voters that any vote, whatever preference, to AD would put EU membership at risk.

During the run-up to the General Elections, the Malta Labour Party kept emphasising its ‘Partnership’ option. Materialist issues such as employment, tax incentives, security and appeal to national pride (through discourse on the ‘national interest’) were given emphasis by the Party.

Labour’s final press conference before the elections was held at Labour’s General Headquarters on April 10th. Alfred Sant, who was accompanied by George Vella and Joe Brincat said that in Government, “We shall deliver what we promise”. He emphasised the need for honesty in Malta’s leadership, and referred to the main issues highlighted by the Party during the short electoral campaign.

During his discourse, Sant pledged his commitment to be hard on crime and eliminate corruption and arrogance, adding that once in Government Labour would wage a

merciless war on drugs. Referring to recent alleged scandals, Sant added that the country was shocked to learn how drug “industrialists” serving prison-sentences had corrupted Judges and that Azzabi (an Arab foreigner who was in prison on drug charges) had escaped.

Sant added that once in Government, Labour would be offering incentives to create employment. Fiscal incentives would be given to industry, and farmers and fishermen would be exempt from Income Tax for a period of five to ten years. For the first two months of a Labour Government workers and families would be exempt from income tax, the self-employed would be given a tax credit and a bonus would be given to those who did not pay income tax.

Sant also stated that top priority would be given to education – which was characterised by high rates of illiteracy and lack of skills, and the environment – the Magtab and Qortin rubbish dumps would be closed within a year and nine months. The latter proposal seemed to be a direct reflection of Malta’s negotiations with the EU on the environment, whereby Malta had committed itself to introduce a proper waste management strategy. This would include the introduction of engineered landfill facilities and the closure of the landfills referred to by Sant, which were not up to EU standard.

During the press conference, Sant said that a new Labour government would not sign the agreement made by Fenech Adami with the EU, but would be ready to go to Brussels to do all that was possible to open up new roads between Malta and the EU. However, Sant did not use the exclusive discourse that had been used by the Party all through the 1998-2003 legislature, especially with regard to those who supported EU membership, irrespective of whether they were Nationalist or not. As a matter of fact, Sant stated that a new Labour Government would be ready to work with all social forces with good intention, even those who had voted Yes in the referendum. Indeed, added Sant, a referendum between Partnership and full EU membership would be offered once the Partnership framework would have been agreed upon. Besides, Sant added that many of the thirty-one organisations that were supporting EU membership had already talked to Labour about plans following the elections. He also made reference to a pact that George Vella, Joe Brincat and himself had recently signed in the presence of a Notary with the Maltese and Gozitans during a ceremony attended by Labour’s candidates. “We will not tolerate violence”, added Sant.

Gone were the statements which implied that Labourites would be given priority by a Labour Government. Gone were the negative remarks made to all those who supported EU membership. But perhaps this was too little, too late. To many it was clear that this was not the New Labour of 1996.

On April 12th, the General Elections were held. The Nationalist Party emerged victorious, once again, winning an identical number of seats, 35, as in the previous election, against Labour’s 30. The Nationalist Party won 51.81% of the vote, an increase of 0.02% over 1998 (146,172 votes against 137,037 votes in 1998). Labour won 47.51% (an increase of 0.54 over 1998 (134,092 votes against 124,220 in 1998). Consequently, Prime Minister

Eddie Fenech Adami and Foreign Affairs Minister Joe Borg signed the EU Accession Treaty on behalf of Malta, in Athens on April 16th.

Alternattiva Demokratika (AD) obviously lost a number of votes to the Nationalist Party. This was mainly due to the EU issue. But there were other factors that contributed the vote decrease. These included AD's extensive campaigning for second preference votes and also the fact that the Party had been too closely associated with the Nationalists while playing down more radical issues that the Greens were usually associated with. Indeed, AD's share of the vote, 0.68% declined for the third General Election in a row, down from 1.22% in 1998 (1,929 votes, against 3,209 votes in 1998). AD's share of second preference votes was insignificant in terms of electability.

As had been the case in the previous four consecutive elections, people who tended to shift their vote chose Nationalist or Labour, and not *Alternattiva Demokratika*. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that the safest way to ensure that specific material interests are safeguarded by voting for a Party that is regarded as being able to effectively and concretely carry out such policies. It was only a Nationalist victory that could get Malta into Europe. Conversely, Labour was the choice for those who opposed membership. For many, taking risks was not an option. *Alternattiva* was considered as having nothing concrete to offer in this regard, given that its chances to get elected were close to impossible. Besides, its moderatism may have alienated the type of voter that felt excluded from the political mainstream for a myriad of reasons. In addition, public statements by Chairperson Harry Vassallo wherein he appealed to pro-EU voters who would not vote AD to give their first preference vote to the Nationalist Party may also have helped in alienating some voters, particularly since AD was also very much in conflict with the Labour Party. Apart from lack of agreement with Labour on the EU issue, AD was also involved in a legal battle with Labour during the Referendum and General Election over the voting rights of Arnold Cassola (Secretary General of the European Greens in Brussels, who was considered by Labour as not having the right to vote. Cassola, represented by Harry Vassallo in court, eventually won the case.)

What strongly appeared to be the case in the referendum was confirmed in the General Election. Surveys had shown that middle-class voters tended to favour EU membership. Malta is a society characterised by growth in the middle class as from the 1980s. Organisations associated with the middle-classes, whether self-employed (such as the General Retailers Trade Union) or professional (such as the Malta Union of Teachers) supported EU membership.

The pro-EU membership camp emphasised that Malta's economy would stand to gain through membership, enabling Malta's export-oriented economy to have greater access to EU markets and to act as a credible bridge in the Mediterranean. Youth would have increased opportunities for study and employment purposes, enjoying the same rights as their European counterparts. The EU would also help improve standards in areas such as the environment, workers and consumers rights, and gender equality - areas associated with post-materialist values which were becoming increasingly important to Maltese citizens, particularly the highly educated, young and expanding new middle-class.

Moreover, the pro-EU camp insisted that Malta would be a net receiver of EU funds at least for the initial years. In addition the Maltese also managed to win favourable derogations and transition periods in areas such as the environment, purchase of property, free movement of workers and foreign policy. In short, EU accession was projected as being a concrete and credible project that reflected both materialist and post-materialist values.

Labour failed to win back categories of voters that had characterised its 1996 victory. The Party's exclusive strategy reminded many of Old Labour. In 1996 Labour had won the sympathy of civil society organisations, middle-class voters, and various sections of the media. Now, Labour was in open conflict with too many sectors and interests. The Nationalist Government may have been past its sell-by date to many, but at least it had a concrete forward-looking project in EU membership. To the contrary, Labour's 'Partnership' project was too vague to many. The fact that Labour had changed its slogan more than once (replacing the previous 'Switzerland in the Mediterranean' slogan) did not help, too.

The Party's strategy did not win it many allies, apart from organisations that were already identified with the Party, such as traditional ally the General Workers Union and the Campaign for National Independence. One group of allies that seemed to have kept supporting Labour both in 1996 and 2003 was the hunters' and trappers' lobby. No official directive was announced by hunters' and trappers' organisations, but it was made clear to members that EU membership would be detrimental to their practice. A victorious electoral alliance could therefore not be achieved, let alone a hegemonic project. Labour's strategy resulted in defeat.

The Malta Labour Party accepted defeat immediately once the electoral result was clear. This was proclaimed by Alfred Sant, George Vella and Joe Brincat in a televised address. Subsequently, in an interview on Super 1, Alfred Sant said that in the future, just like in the past, Labour would keep on defending the interests of Maltese and Gozitan workers and their families. He singled out the EU issue as the main reason for the Nationalist Party's victory and said that the Party would be updating itself.

A day later, on April 14th, 2003, in an interview on Manwel Cuschieri's show on Super 1 Radio, Sant proclaimed that "my intention is that I will not re-contest for the post of Labour leader." He added that he would however be remaining in Labour's Parliamentary group. Alfred Sant, Labour's leader since 1992, announced that the Party should choose a new leader and leadership. The end of his era seemed to have arrived.

The Alfred Sant years were characterised by the construction of New Labour, the electoral victory in 1996 and a short-lived Government lasting 22 months, as well as a second consecutive defeat for the Party in 2003. By that time Labour had moved away from various strategic characteristics that had given it its 'New' tag, especially the move away from an inclusive towards an exclusive approach. However there were various characteristics of New Labour which had remained in place. Most notably, Labour's

bureaucratic apparatus, characterised by professional employees and a media machine was there to stay. So was it Old Labour or New Labour?

Post-New Labour? The Malta Labour Party 1998-2003

An analysis of the Malta Labour Party during the 1998-2003 legislature will hereby be proposed, utilising an approach similar to the one used in the “Ideological and Strategic Shifts from Old Labour to New Labour in Malta” thesis by this author. The Malta Labour Party during the period in question shall be defined as “Post-New Labour”.

As in the 1990s, during the period in question Malta was characterised by an increasingly liberalised economy, with higher consumption rates than previous periods as well as a predominantly middle-class society. However, as in the late nineties, Malta’s economy was slowing down, and the country’s national deficit was a major problem.

The majority of Maltese and Gozitans kept prioritising materialist and traditional values. Like in the 1990s, however, post-materialism was increasingly present, particularly within the new middle class, the young and the better educated.

But something not so evident in the 1990s was the very high level of political polarisation, especially due to the European Union issue.

What was the Malta Labour Party’s role within such a context? How did it react in relation to such overdetermining characteristics? What influence did it exert within that conjuncture?

As regards ideology, New Labour gave priority to pragmatism over socialist ideology. It was pro free market, emphasising the need for stable democracy that optimises efficiency, deficit reduction and pluralism. Unlike Old Labour, it was no longer state interventionist. Both Old and New Labour prioritised materialist aspirations. Both had strong nationalistic tendencies, both emphasised the role of industry, and the importance of a strong welfare state.

Like New Labour, Post-New Labour was pragmatist. To give an example, at times it appropriated populist ideology that is normally associated with the political right, such as the usage of xenophobic discourse especially with regard to foreign workers in Malta. At the same time it emphasised its traditional role as shield to Malta’s workers, giving top priority to the role of industry as a motor of Malta’s economy, the welfare state as a pillar of social justice, and nationalism, to defend the national interest.

As regards nationalism, a characteristic of both Old and New Labour, Post-New Labour utilised conflict-oriented discourse that was synonymous with Old Labour, appealing to anti-colonial sentiment. Yet, similar to New Labour, it emphasised the need for free trade, albeit giving more importance to the need to protect vulnerable sectors of the Maltese economy.

With regard to strategy, Old Labour was exclusive, appealing mostly to Labourites and its traditional ally, the General Workers Union, while adopting a confrontational approach to non-Labourites and non-working class elements (save for the promoters of national industry). Conversely, New Labour was strategically inclusive, attempting to appeal to all 'citizens' and to various social classes, categories and civil society organisations. Post-New Labour was strategically exclusive, giving the impression that once in Government, it would mete out justice to Labourites. Post-New Labour also utilised a hostile approach to supporters of EU membership, even making it clear that the result of a referendum (which, legally speaking, was not binding) on the issue would not bind the Party.

Both Old and New Labour were characterised by the strength of their leader. Mintoff was a charismatic leader, an authoritarian father figure. Sant, on the other hand, used modern managerial methods and a party machine. In Post-New Labour, Sant's power was confirmed. The party machine supported his leadership – as witnessed in the Paul Muscat incident mentioned above – and reproduced the Post-New Labour ideology, particularly through the Party's media apparatus.

Manwel Cuschieri was a powerful symbol of Post-New Labour, both in strategic terms of exclusionary politics as well as in terms of reproduction of ideology.

The downfalls of both Old and New Labour were characterised by Labour's failure to satisfy materialist aspirations, even though Labour itself prioritised materialist values. During the 1980s days of centralised policies, economic stagnation and relatively high unemployment rates, Old Labour failed to be hegemonic especially with regard to the middle classes and the upwardly mobile working class. Between 1996 and 1998, New Labour's austerity measures alienated working-class voters and the self-employed. Post-New Labour, on the other hand, was never elected to power in the first place. Its Partnership policy did not manage to win the minds and hearts of a majority of Maltese and Gozitans. The European Union project was perceived as being more concrete and stable. Middle-class voters tended to be more in favour of EU membership. And Maltese society was predominantly middle-class (albeit characterised by various categories).

The political adversary of Old and New Labour, namely the Nationalist Party adversary, presented itself in the 1980s as a populist, modern, moderate alternative promoting national unity. In 1998, it presented itself as being socially conscious, moderate and credible. In 2003 it presented itself as having a concrete project – EU membership.

The New Labour Government was consistently characterised by internal party-struggles. A major example was the opposing stands taken by moderates like Lino Spiteri and George Abela and Mintoffians Dom Mintoff and Alex Sceberras Trigona. Besides, as opposed to New Labour's 'Citizen'-oriented approach, many Labourites expected preferential treatment to be given to them by the New Labour Government. Post-New Labour resorted to the Old Labour's inward-looking '*min mhux maghna kontra taghna*' approach, but at the same time it remained in conflict with both Dom Mintoff on one hand (who however, did not support EU membership) and Lino Spiteri on the other hand

(especially through the Paul Muscat incident). Former Deputy Leader George Abela, although not in direct conflict with Labour, formed part of the MEUSAC core-group. Labour boycotted all MEUSAC sittings.

As shown in 'Ideological and Strategic Shifts from Old Labour to New Labour in Malta', the transition from Old Labour to New Labour was characterised by both ideological and strategic shifts and evolutionary processes. Following 1998, New Labour's Alfred Sant remained at the helm of the Party. However, Labour adopted characteristics of both Old Labour and New Labour. Post-New Labour was created. Would this project last long?

The Malta Labour Party after the 2003 electoral defeat. Back to New Labour?

Following the 2003 defeat, the time seemed ripe for the election of a new Labour leader. John Attard Montalto, first, and next Angelo Farrugia expressed their interest for the post. But speculation was rife that Sant would reconsider the possibility of staying on as leader. Labourite mayors asked him to reconsider to do so. People phoned on Super 1 and wrote in *l-orizzont* in his support (even though others disagreed). In the meantime Sant led Labour's march during the Party's traditional Mayday activities.

Eventually Sant changed his mind and decided to re-contest for the post of leader, together with Farrugia and Attard Montalto. This would be the first time in Maltese history that a party leader would be contested by other candidates while he was still holding the post. But Sant proved to be too strong an adversary for them.

Indeed, on Friday May 16th 2003, Sant was reconfirmed Labour leader, obtaining the support of 67.9% of delegates' valid votes. Angelo Farrugia obtained 24.1% of votes, while Dr John Attard Montalto obtained 8%.

However, while Sant was retained as Party leader, various changes would characterise the top posts within the Party. Deputy Leader for Parliamentary Affairs George Vella, Sant's deputy ever since he had been elected leader, did not recontest his post. Neither did General Secretary Jimmy Magro, who was aiming to be one of Labour's candidates in the forthcoming European Parliamentary elections.

The first changes that took place, therefore, were within the Deputy Leaders' posts. On May 23rd, 2003, Charles Mangion – a notary - was elected Deputy Leader for Parliamentary Affairs, obtaining 54.2% of valid votes. Joe Brincat (the Deputy Leader for Party Affairs) obtained 13.4%, Leo Brincat 26.9%, and Jose' Herrera 5.5%. Upon election, Mangion mentioned the need for Labour to be strengthened and to be more inclusive. He also mentioned the need to develop policies that attracted the highest support possible from Maltese and Gozitans, and emphasised that Labour would not forget its principles

The new Deputy Leader for Party Affairs was Michael Falzon – a lawyer who had been in charge of Labour's electoral office for successive elections and who was associated with George Abela (part of 1996's winning team, who resigned as Deputy Leader in 1998

and who supported Malta's EU membership bid). In the election for the post Falzon obtained 45.3% of votes, as against Manwel Cuschieri's 7.7%, Evarist Bartolo's 19.01%, Joe Debono Grech's 16.2% and Alfred Mifsud's 11.8%. Given that no candidate had obtained 50% of votes, the two candidates obtaining the highest number of votes had to face each other. It was Michael Falzon against former Minister Evarist Bartolo – a close ally of Alfred Sant - Falzon obtained 67.2% of valid votes, while Bartolo's obtained 32.8%. Upon being elected Falzon declared that he wanted to create more space for different opinions in MLP thereby fostering a feeling of inclusion among all Labourites. He also emphasised the importance of retaining Labour's principles.

Both Labour's deputy leaders seemed to have an ideological and strategic mission. Both evidently wanted Labour to re-embark on the New Labour road of inclusivity. Both wanted the Party to remain loyal to its principles. The voting patterns of Labour's delegates were rather striking in this regard. While Sant won the leadership contest (albeit winning 67% of the vote, as against the 98% share of the vote in 1998, when he was uncontested), allies of his such as Evarist Bartolo, Manwel Cuschieri and Leo Brincat were outvoted in the Deputy Leadership contests.

In the meantime, as 2003 progressed, Labour's apparatus was to show its power against internal dissidents once again. The judge was Labour's Vigilance and Disciplinary Board. The guilty party was Alfred Mifsud, who for some years had headed Labour's media company and who had contested the last General Elections unsuccessfully. Mifsud had frequently been dubbed as Sant's possible successor. He had spoken not so favourably terms about Labour's leader following the 2003 defeat. Mifsud also had harsh words against Joe Brincat, whom he accused of working against him during the General Elections. Moreover, he also criticised the way the leadership contest had been conducted.

Writing in his weekly column, in *The Malta Independent* on September 5th, Mifsud stated that the Party's Vigilance and Disciplinary Board had found him guilty of criticising the Party in a damaging way, but denied him the possibility of having a hearing. Mifsud declared that he had subsequently decided to resign from all positions within Labour.

Mifsud added

“And it is just as well that this is being written on the fifth anniversary of the 1998 election. This was the day when the Samsons within Labour brought down the temple on all Labourites' heads and gave them the government back on a silver platter to the PN. In the process they denied the country the essential alternation of power without which democracy will lack true substance. The absence of a true post-1998 exercise of analysis and accountability led to an even more painful and damaging experience in 2003. It was truly a case of giving the second consecutive election to the PN this time on a golden platter just when the majority was really in favour of a change of administration. Labour actually forced people not to vote it in. On the fifth anniversary of such [an] infamous day should Labour not reflect whether it needs to suffer a third consecutive defeat before shaking off its lethargy?”

The stance taken Labour's new leadership team risked creating a major conflict once again during October and November of the same year. This time it involved former Labour Prime Minister Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici. The issue at stake was Labour's position on the EU. Labour's leadership argued that in line with the decision taken during the 2001 general conference, the Party had to accept the fact that Malta was to become a EU member, given that the pro-EU argument had been victorious in the General Election. Labour therefore had to update its strategy accordingly. To the contrary, Mifsud Bonnici argued that Labour should keep on opposing EU membership as negotiated by the Nationalist Government and should press for a renegotiation of the treaty, as had been done by the same party in 1972 when it had changed the Independence agreement negotiated by Borg Olivier.

In a one-to-one radio discussion on October 18th 2003, Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici warned of a forthcoming split within the MLP if the faction arguing for a renegotiation of Malta's accession treaty with EU was not allowed to express its views within the Party. He complained that Labour had a propaganda machine that enabled it to put forward its views, while he had struggled to do so, because such facilities were not available. The party apparatus was once again being criticised. It was being confirmed by none other than Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici, that Labour's leader was still as powerful as ever.

During the programme, Mifsud Bonnici declared

“The [Labour] Party has to understand that either it gives space to the minority or that minority will lose its faith in the party and will leave the party.”

The issue would be decided upon during Labour's General Conference the following November 9th. The conference, which would also elect a new General Executive, was risking being characterised by open conflict. On the one hand there was Labour's General Executive and Parliamentary Group, using the 2001 General Conference as their point of reference. On the other hand there was Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici, arguing for renegotiation of Malta's EU Treaty, in line with the position of *Front Maltin Inqumu*, led by Dom Mintoff. The FMI continued to organise public meetings after the 2003 general elections.

Eventually, compromise was reached. A secret ballot was approved by the conference delegates. It consisted of the General Executive's and Parliamentary Group's motion, but also incorporated an amendment proposed by Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici. The approved motion stated that that annual General Conference was urging the Labour Party in opposition as well as in government to work untiringly with every means and wherever possible, to do its utmost to mitigate all the negative aspects of the package that the Nationalist government had agreed upon with the EU. The Labour Party would make sure that the agreement reached with the EU would not be disadvantageous or harmful to the people of Malta and Gozo, and particularly to workers.

There was a noticeable drop in the number of delegates who voted for the motion on Labour's policy with regards to EU membership. While on Thursday November 6th 871 votes were cast during the General Conference, on Sunday November 9th – when the EU motion was voted upon – 668 delegates turned up, of whom 17 opposed the motion, 2 votes were invalid and 2 abstained.

In the meantime, the General Conference elected a new administration for the coming year. Stefan Zrinzo Azzopardi – a thirty-year old partner in a law firm – was elected President of the Party, beating Manwel Cuschieri, 434 against 426 votes. Jason Micallef, a thirty-four year old media personality, was elected General Secretary, replacing Jimmy Magro (who did not contest the post), and obtaining 271 of 861 valid votes. Other elected members on the National Executive included Louis Gatt, Vice President; Tommy Dimech, Finance Secretary; Ray Azzopardi, Public Relations Secretary; Joe Mifsud, International Secretary; and Aleks Farrugia, Education Secretary. The new executive also included Alfred Grixti, Claudette Baldacchino, and Wenzu Mintoff (once again in Labour's top echelons after his *Alternattiva* years), among others. Strikingly, Jimmy Magro failed to get elected to form part of the National Executive for the first time since 1976. Magro had also been a party official for 14 years and a key element of the party bureaucracy.

It was evident that Labour's delegates had voted for a change in the Party's leadership and administration structures. While Alfred Sant had survived – once again confirming the power the leader has within Labour – others perished. Upon victory, Stefan Zrinzo Azzopardi told *The Times* that Manwel Cuschieri and himself represented two different philosophies on how the Party should be managed. He added that Labour's administration should get closer to the grassroots. Jason Micallef, also speaking to *The Times*, said that Labour had made a fundamental mistake by antagonising the media and that the Party needed its backing. In the same vein as the two new Deputy Leaders, Labour's new President and General Secretary were emphasising the need for politics based on inclusion. A call for New Labour, it seemed.

Alfred Sant closed the General Conference with carefully chosen words. He emphasised that the Labour movement would cement an alliance between low-income earners and the middle class. "The Labour Party had to represent the centre as well as the left of the political spectrum" He also paid tribute to his erstwhile close ally Manwel Cuschieri "one of the captains who were in charge of promoting the party's message, which he did with great mastery."

On November 14th, 2003, the Malta Labour Party formally joined the European Socialists. Both sides agreed that any changes in EU common foreign and security policies should respect Malta's neutrality .

On November 19th, 2003. Labour elected its candidates for the forthcoming elections for the European Parliament. Only four candidates managed to obtain the 70% benchmark imposed by the Party (the Party's usual benchmark for approval of candidates was 60%). The elected candidates were Joseph Muscat, Louis Grech, John Attard Montalto and

Glenn Beddingfield. Muscat and Beddingfield formed part of Labour's media apparatus, the former being the editor of Labour's online daily *Maltastar*, the latter being a journalist with Super One. Louis Grech – a new face in politics and well-known for his charisma and good-looks, - was a former Chairman of Malta's national airline. John Attard Montalto, a former close associate with Dom Mintoff, New Labour minister, and candidate for the post of Party leader, was representing Labour as observer in European Parliament sittings together with fellow Parliamentarian and former Deputy Leader George Vella at that time.

Among the candidates who failed to get elected⁷, there were none other than Manwel Cuschieri and Jimmy Magro, the former being the Post-New Labour symbol of '*min mhux maghna kontra taghna*', and the latter having already commenced a personal campaign for the European Parliament elections. Both were rejected by Labour's delegates⁸.

Was all this a call back to New Labour? Would the Party, led by Alfred Sant re-adopt its victorious strategy?

In his New Year's Day message for 2004, Alfred Sant said that Labour was ready to work hand in hand with all progressive forces and all those with good intentions. With reference to major issues and debates characterising the island following the 2003 General Elections, he added that Malta needed more employment opportunities, tax revenue was to be expended in a responsible manner, and that social services should be sustained.

In an interview in The Times with Vanessa Macdonald on January 19th 2004, Alfred Sant appeared up-beat in his opinion of Labour's chances of winning the next General Election.

"There is never a time to admit defeat", he told Macdonald. His interviewer then asked him,

"Can you name any other politician in the world who has stayed on and won despite two electoral defeats?"

"Churchill, de Gaulle, Mitterrand, Chirac, Mintoff, Nixon....", quipped Sant.

"So you still feel there is a chance for you to win an election?"

"A very good chance."

⁷ Labour, with Alfred Sant's backing, is at time of press considering whether more candidates should be allowed to contest the European Parliamentary elections.

⁸ During 2004 Labour decided to increase the number of European candidates to eight, the elected candidates being Joe Debono Grech, Wenzu Mintoff, Robert Micallef and Owen Bonnici.