

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

By Dr. Tonio Fenech

Perhaps the greatest challenge presented by EU membership is the question of our national identity. Malta and the Maltese have a lot to offer, but only if we assert our own cultural and national identity, and fight for a Europe that is stronger *because* of the rich diversity that teems within it.

Whenever I have made such a statement in the past, it has not been uncommon for me to hear, by way of reply, that such matters are purely academic and unimportant, as long as we have a fair say in the way decisions will be taken in the European context. My retort is invariably that such complacency is not only plain wrong, but could also be quite catastrophic for our sense of Nationhood. Indeed, how can we make our own contribution to European progress, if we are not convinced of, or even comfortable with, our own distinct cultural and national identity?

If we believe that the Maltese Nation has something of its own to contribute to the challenges facing Europe in the future, our sense of Nationhood will be the only thing that will have earned us our true place among the European family of nations as a nation among equals. We must assert our identity, otherwise our contribution will be lost in the noise made by far stronger and louder players. In such a situation, all post-independence efforts will have been in vain, and we may just as well have integrated with Britain way back in the 1950's.

This reflection on the importance of identity has indeed been triggered by a more personal identity issue: For I have received so many mis-directed congratulatory phone calls and e-mails, that I felt compelled to establish with all and sundry that I am not Tonio Fenech the newly elected MP (to whom I convey sincere congratulations), but a name-sake. Clearly, it was a question of identity for me, and I feel it will be a question of Identity for Malta within the European context.

A new “language question”?

Interesting times are indeed a-coming, and I look forward to seeing them unfold just as I look forward to seeing how the non-affiliated press in Malta will align itself in Malta's future politico-cultural debate. Since cultural considerations often determine political affiliations, I feel it is clear that the pattern in which political allegiances have tended to evolve since independence will almost certainly change in the future.

We will quite possibly see a re-alignment of the Maltese political landscape in a manner that can resemble the old language question of the 1920's, with new versions of “pro-British” and “pro-Italian” sentiments dominating the scene. Of course, the debate will have little to do with language, but can in many ways be a broad embodiment of a subtler and more basic question of orientation, which distinguishes Continental from Anglo-Saxon approaches to most issues. That is whether norms of behaviour should result from or whether they should create

principles and ideals. An alternative way of putting this, perhaps at the risk of oversimplicity, is to say that Anglo-Saxon thinking has traditionally been described as “bottom-up”, being based on pragmatic considerations with rules and principles being derived as a result, while on the Continent more importance is given to theoretical justification, the general methodology being “top-down”, or taking the ideal as a starting-point, and thereafter developing norms of behaviour.

Are we to inspire and innovate or are we to conform?

Our Nation has been influenced by both philosophical and cultural heritages, and therefore has the credentials, and potential, of making its own distinct and innovative contribution. The challenge, and my hope, is that we can form a third way (with apologies to Giddens), a view-point that embraces at the same time as it moves beyond other view-points, to come to innovative conclusions. We have led the way before, with the concept of the common heritage of mankind in the International Law of the Sea being a fine example where the Maltese Nation inspired the World to develop innovative criteria surrounding the development of legal norms of international behaviour.

Eddie Fenech Adami and his team have done extremely well in laying the seeds in the right place. However, his future successors will have a tough challenge indeed. Unity does not necessarily imply uniformity, and tomorrow’s leaders will need to find the courage to assert this principle with vigour. They will need to have vision in tapping the right intellectual resources on the island, if what they want is innovation rather than complacent conformism to be the Hallmark of our identity within Europe. This clearly implies the taking of bold decisions involving risk, criteria which are very often anathema to your average politician...

In short, I sincerely yearn for and look forward to seeing the Maltese nation asserting itself within the European family, giving its own distinct innovative contribution within the broader European Dimension, as so passionately encouraged by none other than the Pope himself.