

## 'Judge me by the results'

Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi says he never doubted his backbench loyalty

Herman Grech



"While people were writing about the opera house, I was worrying about the Bulebel factories" - Lawrence Gonzi.

Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi.

**There is a growing chorus of disapproval towards the Renzo Piano theatre and Parliament proposal. With the benefit of hindsight do you wish your brief was different?**

No. I remember one of the first things I did in the previous legislature was to try to rope in Renzo Piano to reanimate an initiative for Valletta initially proposed 20 years ago. But I didn't manage. Now, I gave him a brief where I presented my vision for Valletta.

I wanted the President's Palace to be the centre of Valletta, the centre of Maltese culture and identity. I wanted an entrance to Valletta which respects the enormous wealth and I wanted a solution to the opera house site. I indicated to Mr Piano that my preference was to have the opera house rebuilt housing Parliament together with a cultural space. I gave him a budget and a timeline. I left the choice to him.

**And he was the one who convinced you to leave the opera house site as it is.**

Precisely. He embraced the vision for Valletta. But he came up with a solution which took me by surprise. He said the opera house site should remain a monument to what Malta went through, while providing the space for alternative areas.

**Many are accusing you of ramming the Parliament project down their throats.**

I disagree with that assessment. The debate is mainly circulating over whether we should have a roof over the theatre. What the artistic community is saying is extremely important...

**...But at the same time you're forging ahead with the project, despite their objections.**

Their concerns are that we don't have a theatre with proper acoustics, that we have no world-standard theatres, that we don't have an opera house... This is what they're telling me. Last Sunday, Cameron Mackintosh came out with something we've been working on for months, but which we've been keeping under wraps. He is analysing whether it is feasible to upgrade the Mediterranean Conference Centre precisely to address the artists' concerns.

We are not imposing anything on the artists. I'm determined to give to this island a variety of solutions to have a vibrant artistic community.

**Though the overall reaction to the MCC proposal has been positive, the question is where will the money come from?**

My track record speaks for itself. In six years I've had this debate on every single project. Everyone was sceptical about Mater Dei Hospital and it opened in July 2007. Whether it was public roads, EU funds, the euro, the deficit - I've managed to achieve every single target. I will have the finances to make this quality leap. I give importance to these projects because there is an economic dimension to them.

**Your critics like to describe you as indecisive, and as a result of which seemingly trivial issues are blown out of proportion. Fr Peter Serracino Inglott said last week "the Prime Minister's failure to handle this 'small point' is already leading to an anti-Piano reaction to the whole project". Do you feel it's unfair criticism?**

If a small point described by Fr Peter, whom I respect, persuades people to move against a project... Of course, let's address the small points, but let's look at the bigger picture.

**But Fr Peter is saying it should never have been blown out of proportion.**

I'm not the one blowing it out of proportion. Somebody else is, so it's somebody else's problem. I've brought these issues to the attention of Renzo Piano. I will accept what Mr Piano proposes. I emphasise one point - this project will be signed by Renzo Piano and nobody else.

**When will it be delivered?**

It will be delivered by the end of this legislature. It will be there for everyone to enjoy. It will be there as another quality leap for the country. It will give us a sense of pride and give us a capital city worthy of its name.

**Can you see the MCC (as proposed by Sir Cameron) also delivered by the end of this legislature?**

I need more detailed reports from Cameron Mackintosh. It seems that the answer could be 'yes'. Initially it seems that works at the MCC could take two years to complete, but I speak with caution because I have not seen the final recommendations.

**Moving on to the political scene, it's been two years since you were re-elected to government. In the public eye you've gone from the sympathetic Lawrence Gonzi who listened to everyone, to the hard-headed Prime Minister who listens to only a few advisers. Are they right?**

No. I haven't changed. I'm the one who was privileged to be Prime Minister on the first day of EU membership. We've proved the EU sceptics wrong. Together with the help of ministers, I've attracted record investment to Malta. We had a record year in tourism, a record year for job creation... We've faced the worst international recession in 60 years and today Malta is officially out of recession. That's my answer to the critics. Judge me not by what I say but by the results.

**At the same time, the PN backbench has been riddled with in-fighting. Did you envisage these kinds of problems when elected two years ago?**

The parliamentary group reacted to a decision I took at the very beginning, which was an electoral promise. I promised to keep a small Cabinet, the smallest since independence. There was a price to pay and that means some members rightly had aspirations. I've now found a way which works to try and involve more backbenchers in the work of government. Now we can move forward.

**Are you convinced that each and every member of your parliamentary group is not in it for their own personal glory?**

I'm convinced that's not the case, including those who were ministers in the previous legislature. All of them want to contribute to see this country move forward.

**And you're convinced that's the case.**

Yes I am. We launched a record number of reform programmes. One of them was primary healthcare reform, which was heavily criticised by Jean Pierre Farrugia, Frans Agius, and by my own brother, Michael, who spoke to me on a number of occasions and criticised the contents of the White Paper. Should I be worried about that? Of course not. The idea of a White Paper is to criticise, and why shouldn't the backbenchers have that right?

**It's giving the impression of an unstable government.**

OK, it might be giving that impression but it's not the case. Look at the developments we've had in recent days for the backbenchers to contribute and participate.

**You are being accused of giving them what they want in order to shut them up.**

That's not the case at all. Every one of them wants to contribute at a higher level and that's something good.

**If the move was just...**

This is fascinating - today as we're talking, the BBC is announcing a general strike in Greece. Today I'm being asked about a roof of a theatre and a group of backbenchers. It speaks volumes about our success...

**...because with a one-seat majority most people would say this is an unstable government, especially when you have backbenchers who are protesting loudly.**

Which confirms the success we are registering. With a one-seat majority we are announcing that Malta is out of a recession, notwithstanding the obstacles of the opposition and notwithstanding the sceptical pundits. I say judge us by our results. We are bringing investment into the country, we have saved jobs, and companies didn't close down. We invested taxpayers' money where it's needed. This is the important part of managing a country...

**...but you're also managing a team.**

That we need to address as well, but within a context. I repeat that while we are doing this interview there is a general strike in Greece.

**Yes, but there are also several other countries emerging from a recession.**

So are we. And we are growing as an economy and looking forward with optimism. I think the budget measures will give even better results.

**But we're also facing an unprecedented issue where you have teamed up your backbenchers with the ministers. Do you fear the move could create some discomfort for ministers who are disinclined to share their territory?**

No. This was not a decision taken overnight. I've been working on this for months. When the formula was designed, I spoke with every single minister and MP separately. The decision was a result of a long process of consultation of a system used in other countries, but adapted to our reality. I believe everyone's comfortable with this.

I've now started a series of meetings with ministers and their parliamentary secretaries and assistants in order to discuss the work programme of each ministry.

### **Have any of the ministers complained about the system?**

None. I still have some more meetings coming up. We probably have to fine-tune it along the way. I think it would strengthen the ministries.

### **If this move was just to help the ministers does it mean the experiment to have a small Cabinet has failed?**

I've worked in three different Cabinets of different sizes. This time round I believe we have more focus and coordination. Riding the recession is not an easy task. We're still not out of the woods and better growth rates need to be achieved.

The best formula is to pool your resources - and the small Cabinet delivered. But there are major disadvantages especially when faced, for example, with issues like participation at EU Council meetings and the level of contact with the electorate. We need to remain in touch with the grassroots and that has suffered.

### **Why didn't you appoint them as parliamentary secretaries in your recent reshuffle?**

My decision was to keep a small Cabinet.

### **Is it because you don't trust your MPs to take on the role of parliamentary secretaries?**

The formula works, even if it's not perfect. We have managed this open, most vulnerable EU economy through the worst recession since the 1930s. Just look what happened to Iceland, not only because it was not an EU member but also because its currency could not take the pressure. I speak on facts, not opinions or perceptions of biased analysts who continuously predict disasters.

### **One analyst I wouldn't describe as biased is Lino Spiteri who wrote that the (backbench twinning) measure was purely intended to appease some MPs, especially considering our governing machine is already bloated. Is he far off the mark?**

Lino Spiteri also wrote that Lawrence Gonzi and his team managed to do well during the recession and that in the light of all these difficulties, we used the best methods. I value Mr Spiteri's contribution.

The second part of his article about the backbench is irrelevant compared with the important issues we're talking about. Out there it's the jobs and overtime that matter. Out there, they see the opportunities; out there, giving a solution for the backbench is important for the backbench and not for somebody who's registering for work...

### **... but out there, people are also asking whether our Prime Minister is going out of his way to appease certain disgruntled backbenchers.**

I'm providing a solution that strengthens the group. I can look at everybody in the eye and say 'look, we're delivering'. I suggest people read Lino Spiteri's column well.

### **Do you think you have the full loyalty of the backbench now?**

I have never doubted the backbench loyalty. The important thing is I've listened to their concerns and we can move forward. I'm privileged to be Prime Minister, it's a responsibility, but the bottom line is I care about the people out there.

My entire group is concerned about John Citizen, how we're handling the energy crisis, the job opportunities, and so on. While people were writing articles about the opera house, I was worrying about the Bulebel factories. That's the difference and that's my responsibility.

I think the whole group, even when they expressed their concerns publicly, were doing so in the public's interest. And that's a good thing.

### **Don't you fear they will wake up one day and realise that their role as parliamentary assistants means nothing since they wield no influence?**

If that happens we'd have all failed because this is not intended as a cosmetic exercise. It should strengthen the role of the ministry and enable us to work better. I've told each one of them to let me know if the system isn't working. I intend to make it work and just as I've managed in the past I will also manage with this.

### **Has a feasibility study been carried to see how this system is going to work out?**

We've seen how it works in other countries and adapted it to ourselves. I'm quite confident it will help us in our work towards finding a proper solution.

### **How much will this exercise cost?**

It shouldn't cost too much. We're talking of an allowance to be paid to the parliamentary assistants, probably bringing them in line with what is today given to chairmen of select committees.

### **Will they have their own staff?**

No. The intention is for them to make use of the ministry staff and facilities.

### **Press reports claim you've chosen to put Franco Debono under the OPM's wing to keep him under control after his Parliament vote incident...**

...These are the usual pundits who have been proven wrong so many times that I'm not really interested.

### **Why choose Dr Debono and not anybody else?**

Because those are my choices. That's why I'm Prime Minister. Anyone who wants to do otherwise is invited to take on my job any day.

### **But why him, and not Charlo Bonnici, for example?**

First of all I wanted to move out of set modes. Some people were surprised with the way I teamed people up with ministers. I've explained to them that I might also take a decision later on to shift parliamentary assistants from one ministry to the other so that they experience all the realities of the sector, and not just the ministry.

When I spoke to Franco Debono months ago, I advised him to move away from law and justice, even though he's a lawyer, because in politics you need to discover other realities. In 23 years, I never thought I'd get involved in social policy, finance, the economy. Anyone who has ambition in politics should experience different sectors.

### **Using the same argument you appointed a doctor to assist the health minister...**

That doctor happens to be a brand new member. He joined the team a week ago.

### **What's the message being given to loyal backbenchers like Francis Zammit Dimech and Michael Gonzi who weren't given anything?**

They're all loyal. They're part of a group who were with me through these difficult times. Among them were those who criticised me but I've never shut the door to criticism. As Prime Minister I've changed positions. When we faced criticism from every angle about the golf course I decided to change because I felt it was the best way to move forward.

There's nothing wrong with criticism from my own group. The important thing is to listen to the criticism and act upon it if justified.

### **Two years after scraping an electoral victory the odds are clearly stacked up against you. You've taken unpopular measures; the PN is riddled with in-fighting; and you'll be facing a Labour Party with a new leader. Do you believe you can turn it around?**

I believe I can continue making Malta a better place to live in. I believe I have been shoulder to shoulder with the Maltese people. We've saved jobs, we're not facing strikes, we're not facing a situation where we have to increase taxes and we're not facing a shrinking economy.

We have taken unpopular decisions, we've asked people to make sacrifices. But I think two years into this legislature we're already seeing results. It normally takes longer. Having taken this country out of a recession in these turbulent times is a mega achievement - notwithstanding a Labour opposition that has done its best to make life difficult for us. Once again, the opposition has failed, but the government has succeeded.

*Watch excerpts of the interview on [www.timesofmalta.com](http://www.timesofmalta.com).*

## Comments


C Mallia(3 weeks, 6 days ago) 

I find it rather distracting that most of the questions made were about how the PM is saving his own political skin. Being also the minister for the environment, not one single question was put in this direction.

John Grima(3 weeks, 6 days ago) 

The Prime Minister said: " Their concerns is that we don't have a theatre with proper acoustics, that we have no world standard theatres, that we don't have an Opera House. This is what they're telling me".

Dear Mr. Prime Minister, You are not listening to your people very carefully. The majority of them ARE telling you, very loudly and clearly that they want their heritage back. The Royal Opera House in its original design.


Henrh Fenech Azzopardi(3 weeks, 6 days ago) 

Going through every question and answer fills me with great courage for a bright future. I am convinced that every decision taken by Dr. Gonzi has only the good of our country based on the creation of priority investment which produces work for fellow Maltese. This coupled with education are the ingredients which have proved vital for Malta to come out of the recession unscratched.

It looks so easy when things are performing in the right direction, but nothing falls in place on its own. Vision and decisions are the order of the day and without having to fear for the loss of votes Dr. Gonzi carries on with his routine work and delivers to the best of his ability the right decisions for our country.

The past have shown that unpopular decisions taken have given rewarding interest, and this will be experienced again in the not too distant future. Only this time the future will be nearer to election dates and the people will have to judge Dr.Gonzi by his results more than by his speeches.

There is no doubt that if he was capable to deliver while the world is in recession he will continue to perform now.

Joe Borg 'Zuzu'(3 weeks, 6 days ago) 

Hon. Franco Debono has been the one who raised most valid issues as a backbencher.


The right to a lawyer during arrest, the need to a better parliament, & the fact that backbench's contribution to government should be beneficial.

It is clear that the prime minister recognizes his fine qualities & hence his appointment.

Franco Debono is a great asset to the P.N. & to the country.

johann ferriggi(3 weeks, 6 days ago) 

charlo bonnici got 673 votes and was elected in a by-election.Franco debono got 2065 votes and was elected on his own steam ousting Helen Damato and Louis galea.Where is the comparison?

J Micallef(3 weeks, 6 days ago) 

Good interview. Kudos to the journalist for asking probing questions.

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