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Thousands apply for subsidised broadband offer

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**At one point, the queue spanned from Merchants Street to Republic Street.
Photo: Chris Sant Fournier.**

A clear blue sky provided the right climate for some 4,000 people to queue, some for over four hours, to register for subsidised broadband Internet.

People from all walks of life thronged Merchants' Street in Valletta. The queue snaked round into South Street and parts of Republic Street.

The Government, through the IT ministry, launched the scheme - aptly called Blueskies - enabling those currently without broadband to subscribe for just €3 (Lm1.29) a month.

Registrations for the service were accepted until 2.30 p.m. Gozitans will have the opportunity to apply today at the Gozo Ministry between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m.

Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi said the number of people taking up the offer was further confirmation that the Government was an agent of change and wanted to do its best to eliminate the digital divide.

IT Minister Austin Gatt said Malta had a broadband take-up of 58 per cent, which ranked the island top among the new EU members states in terms of subscription, though the Government was targeting first place among all 27 EU countries.

A number of people in the queue said they welcomed the opportunity to apply for cheap broadband. Some expressed dissatisfaction about having to queue for so long, saying applications could have been submitted at local councils, spread over a number of days or submitted via the Internet.

The visit by the Prime Minister and Dr Gatt turned into a spontaneous walkabout around Valletta - another clear sign that the country is on the verge of a general election.

During a visit to the La Vallette band club, Dr Gonzi joined his father Gigi and his friends for a coffee. He visited the King's Own Band club and the Anglo-Maltese club as well as several of Valletta's traditional shops.

One could tell immediately on whose political side of the spectrum many of the passers-by were: some walked past keeping a straight face pretending not to recognise the Prime Minister. Others waived, smiled or made it a point to shake hands with him.

A woman who was sitting on one of the benches by St John's Co-cathedral was quick to grab her walking stick and limp towards Dr Gonzi, who proceeded to sit down beside her himself. Suddenly, he was surrounded by six of the woman's friends, who were having a coffee nearby.

For Dr Gatt, it was a different kettle of fish. Being his district, he could be heard calling names out loud and saluting passers-by.
