

BÜTTNI MEETS . . .

. . . HARRY VASSALLO

During my last visit to Malta I had the honour to meet the Chairperson of Malta's Green Party, Alternattiva Demokratika. In his new office in Sliema I met **Harry Vassallo**.

After a short introduction **Mr Vassallo** started answering to my questions. I realised very quickly that I was interviewing a very intelligent person who cares very much about the problems of our times, and in particular about the political scene in Malta with all its drawbacks. The biggest drawback, according to **Mr Vassallo**, and I tend to agree with him, is the fact that there are only two major parties currently represented in parliament. And due to the constitution and this dual-party system a government turns into an elected dictatorship.

But my first question to **Harry Vassallo** was about his personal background, how he started his political career.

H.V.: *„I think I never did. And maybe every other day I wish I was not in politics. What happened was that I was active in an environment group in the 80s. All around we could see tremendous environmental destruction going on. And it was very hard to draw public attention to it. At that time there was political violence in the country and that was taking up all the people's attention. But like a few other people I realised that the problem was not to participate in the fight, but to make sure that the roots of the fight – the existence of two parties – does not continue into our future. What happened was, when there was a discussion to form a new party I was close to the people forming it. The finger was pointing at me and I was given a choice. And the answer could not be 'no' as far as I am concerned. It was something I had realised a long time before, that we needed a third party in this country to defuse the political situation to be able to use all our resources. And I could not refuse. So I became the editor of the first newspaper published by Alternattiva before it became a political party, a few months before. And that was my role for two years or something of this sort. And I had been on the committee of the party ever since. In 1999 I became its chairperson.“*

With Alternattiva Demoratika being a relatively young party I asked **Harry Vassallo** how he would make the people consider him and his party as a new alternative to the two major parties and even vote for AD on election day.

H.V.: *„It is very hard to expect the whole country to realise our utility. What is positive is that we have support from a sufficient number of people. And in this way we are very lucky in politics that we do not have to try to please everybody. But we can stick to our policies even when they are unpopular and still keep our support. I feel that the electoral system and also the political culture where people choose a government rather than the party they are closest to has been in our disadvantage for many years. But when you look at the results of the European Parliament Elections where we got 9.2 per cent, when people felt free not to vote for a government, but for the party they would prefer, you see that it is a very significant result. At that election we were the fifth largest green party in Europe, and coming from a result in the previous election where we had 0.7 per cent first preference votes. So in a matter of twelve months we lead apparently from 0.7 per cent to 9.2 per cent. It was not the*

miracle that it seems to be. Because I think our background support is around 9 per cent. And if we had an even playing field in the media, I think we would have even more than that. If we were able to discuss and debate with the other political contestants in a fair way, I think we can persuade more and more people. The question is at voting time to persuade people to vote on what they prefer rather than to vote against a party they fear most or to vote for a government. We have English politics in the Mediterranean whereas most European countries articulate their opinions on several political parties, although we have the same different political tendencies. We have the full spectrum of opinion, extreme right to extreme left. But it does not have a way of expressing itself in political parties. Many people feel that their choice is between PN or MLP, because only they are going to govern the country. Or at least they don't want one of those parties to govern the country and so vote for the other one. In the next election we hope that a sufficient number of people will realise that our problem is exactly this. Our problem is that you have a choice between only two. And that they will have the determination that we had nineteen years ago. Because this choice has always been there also for us as citizens to say that we need a third party and this is a maximum priority. We will take any risk, if there is any risk, to make sure that we have a third voice in parliament. Because this is the only way to avoid the serial dictatorships that we have had so far. And we do have legal dictatorships because for five years the government can do anything it likes. And this is what causes the fear and the panic at election time. Now what we would like to see is that in this election a sufficient number of people will have the determination to change our political history. And in the election afterwards we will have a serene election. We will have an election without fear. And people will vote for what they want. And they will reward or punish politicians much more freely than they can do today. Today they reward politicians which they would like to see punished, because they want to punish the other side even more, which is a very sad way of making sure that your country has the best government it possibly can."

After this explanation I asked **Mr Vassallo** how AD reaches its voters. As far as I know AD does not have a TV station like the two major parties PN and MLP.

H.V.: *"We use every means at our disposal and we do have a radio that has a license in our name. But we do not use it as a political party station with proaganda going day and night. In fact, it is one of the more popular ones, because it seems to give a very unbiased news and mostly entertainment. This is Capital Radio. Well, we have some discussion programme in the evening, and that is all. We bring our message out very often through media owned by other persons. I write in many newspapers, several of the party members write in the newspapers as well. We appear on television, when we are invited. And this is a big problem, because I have appeared in political party stations in the last year maybe once only, in 365 days, which is very unbalanced. It is very hard to be in people's minds, especially in the people who are very important to us, those who are not completely committed to another party. Because one finds very often that people, who are not all together fanatically supporting a political party, tend not to follow the news, not to read the newspapers, they barely watch television. And the only way of reaching them is to meet them. And obviously we attend social functions as often as we can, where putting your message across is very hard, because you tend to make small talk and polite conversation rather than to speak politics. We also campaign during the proper times by knocking on people's doors and speaking to them which is very useful to us, because we hear people's opinions. And there they can talk maybe more openly than they would anywhere else, because they are in their own homes. And you get their advice, their opinion, their wishes. And I think this is very important for us to do, not only to reach them, but for us to be in touch with those people. And today we have the internet, which is proving to be a very important source of*

communicating with people, especially for us, since we do not have TV media yet. We have no choice but to develop this maybe better than the other parties. And we are improving as we go along. In various things we have obtained recent results through email messages and the response is growing more and more as more and more people come on the internet. More and more people maybe in the age ranges which are more like to be sympathetic to us, and with a level of education and background which are more like to make a political change to see that they want to support a party which they own, as far as the affinity is concerned, what to do they believe in, rather than the political party which they were born in and which their family belongs to."

Brief answers are not typical for **Harry Vassallo**, and so he gave me another elaborate answer to my question about which the three major issues of the coming years are.

H.V.: *"I think that the coming years it is to make a success of the EU membership and to face the economical difficulties which, I believe, are the inheritance of our political system. For years government after government has been telling us that we are doing very well economically and that it is all thanks to the government that we have done so well economically. And in fact, we have made great steps forward, if you will consider the relatively short span of time since independence for instances. Malta has been in some ways and economical miracle. So it is easy to believe that we are making this great progress. But in fact, if we compare our progress with that of other countries to which we should fairly make a comparison. We should not compare to Germany or America or even Italy. We should compare to Portugal and to Spain, maybe to Greece. They had a standard of living lower than ours. And they have had greater difficulties. Spain and Portugal and Greece have experienced dictatorships, and if you put Cyprus into the equation, half of the country was occupied by a foreign force, they had to maintain an army, which is a great economic burden. They had disadvantages and they are beating us in the race. Now it is important for us to realise what we are doing wrong rather than to congratulate ourselves that we are making progress. We are not making enough progress! And the challenge ahead is for us to step things up. The major difficulty is the illusion we have had until 2003 when the government admitted that our economy is not as solid as it was made out to be. We do not have the resources today which we had before. We have national debt which is a serious burden which we are committed to control. And we cannot invest as much as I would like to see in, for instance, education, in, for instances, changing the attitudes and the culture of business for the new era. Traditionally we compete internally, and therefore we are very competitive and monopolistic whereas now we have to change the culture to co-operate, to have our industries form nodes and networks. To help on another, we lack the culture to do this. I would like to see the networking happen on every level. And one of the things we would like to eliminate is the divides on political lines, that you need the skills of persons that is of another political opinion and you are not confident that you can make a partnership with him, because he is of a different opinion politically. This is a very sad defect in a country of which the resources are only human. We have no natural resources to speak of other than the stone. And we have to use every person and every person must be in a position to give his or her maximum. And this is what we would like to achieve."*

The chairperson of the Maltese Greens talked about Malta's only resources which are human. But in my eyes Malta could utilise further resources, such as the sun, for example. So my last question was why Malta does not utilise these natural resources as much as it could.

H.V.: *"It is very difficult to explain it in a rational way. If you look at other Mediterranean islands, you can have some idea. Compare Cyprus and Sicily. If you go to Cyprus, every roof has, if not a photovoltaic panel, at least a solar water heater. And this is the same in Greece."*

In Sicily it is the same as Malta. Almost nothing. And the reason for that is political rather than geophysical as we have exactly the same sunshine. And today because of EU requirements, and no other reason, the government is committed to have a proportion of the energy produced in Malta from alternative sources. And we have the legislation moving slowly in that direction. The major hurdle has been our energy monopoly, Enemalta, which views this as a disadvantage to it. Because it cannot take full advantage of alternative energy. Because we are not on the European grid and Enemalta cannot sell any surplus that is produced at a point when it is already producing at peak and we have more solar power, more wind power or so on. However, we will find that Enemalta will adjust to become a little bit more flexible, it will be able to take better advantage of alternative power. And we will have many small entrepreneurs, even households, which can become energy generators. We will probably never be able to fulfil our complete energy demand from alternative energy. But it is a crime that we do not exploit it fully. I mean, if anybody listened to the wind last night, we would find it absolutely frighthening. So, the wind power is there. The sun is there. And now we are also beginning to appreciate the potential of biogas, which has the advantage of not being tied down to a particular time. You do not not depend on the wind blowing or the sun shining at that particular time, but you can use the biogas plant according to the best time that suits you. And there are many other means. First of all: Energy saving. Because we have not been thinking strategically in terms of energy. Carelessness and a lack of environmental awarness, but also traditions, like it has always been done this way, so why shall we change it now, are responsible for a tremendous waste of energy. Just look at private homes how they were built a hundred years ago and how they are being designed today. You find air conditioners where you could easily just open a few widows and getting the same effect. In respect of increasing costs for energy, including surcharges, one should be aware more. A lot can be achieved with alternative energy, but also energy saving.“

Unfortunately, this interview ends here. Due to a technical problem with the recording device, the second half of the interview got lost. I have to apologise for this!
However, **Mr Vassallo** made some really good and important statements and everybody should think a a bit about what he said.

I really enjoyed this interview. I wish him and his party all the best for the future.

More infos about **Harry Vassallo** and Alternattiva Demokratika you will also find on AD's website www.alternattiva.org.mt.