

# An MP with a sense of duty

Nationalist MP **FRANCO DEBONO** speaks frankly to **Chiara Bonello** about party financing, parliamentary resources, the right to legal assistance and environmental issues and other matters



"I got into politics very early, and ran for my first election at the age of 23, while still a law student. For the next 10 years I persevered, waiting patiently, working relentlessly, and in the meantime concentrating on my profession" Franco Debono said.

Dr Debono has worked exclusively in the field of criminal law, and set up his own law firm. He was voted into Parliament at the last general election, as is the youngest Member of Parliament on the government side.

"I have always had to work very hard to get results, both in my legal practice and in politics. I am a very hard worker and my loyalty to the party is not only unconditional, but also unconditioned."

However, since his election Dr Debono has done anything but rest on his laurels, as he has raised various issues in Parliament, and seen action taken on a number of them.

"All the issues I raised are in line with my party's beliefs and principles, from the right to legal assistance during interrogations, to the dignity of Parliament and the environmental concerns of the south," he said.

The former is based on the right to justice and is a fundamental human right, something the PN has always believed in and fought for, as issues concerning Parliament and the environment are pillars of its creed.

In general, our country is faring well, he said, notwithstanding the recession and the reforms being carried out in various sectors, from the rent laws to public transport to the Planning Authority.

However, his main areas of interest are constitutional matters, justice and the environment.

## Parliamentary resources and dignity

Since it is clear that Parliament, the highest and most representative forum of discussion for the people, lacks adequate facilities to fulfil that fundamental role in a democracy, he suggests a change in parliamentary procedure, radical amendments to the outdated standing orders, live-streaming of debates and a more user-friendly website, as well as a summary of the speeches of the different speakers, and similar information, together with a pool of researchers who could help MPs draft better quality speeches.

Dr Debono commented that the institution has seen an injection of fresh energy since Michael Frendo's appointment, and that Parliament is not an institution for MPs, it belongs to the people.

Turning to backbenchers Dr Debono, who is now parliamentary assistant in the Office of the Prime Minister, says he had felt, and had expressed his opinion first internally, then openly, that there had to be better use of their zeal and enthusiasm.

This was addressed to a satisfactory extent by creating the new role of parliamentary assistants, he said, which also helps them gain valuable experience.

Dr Debono explains that in his opinion a historical decision by Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi was that of appointing a smaller Cabinet. In a small state, there is no room for jumbo Cabinets. However, this resulted in a larger backbench.

The whole point is that one doesn't need to be in Cabinet to give a valid contribution. Given the necessary resources, one can be

effective and contribute positively even from the backbench.

Another historical decision was to appoint George Abela, from the opposite political camp, as President of Malta, he said, which shows political maturity.

The appointment of the President, which currently only requires a simple majority, needs to be changed, Dr Debono said. This is highly inadequate, he said, as not even a quorum is needed, just the majority of those present and voting, so he has been suggesting a two-thirds majority requirement, failing which the choice would be made by an absolute majority.

## Important issues

Asked about the incident that occurred last December, when he absented himself from a vote, Dr Debono points out this was a minor vote and that if anything, he stood to lose by not voting since he wouldn't have been appointed chairman of the Parliamentary Committee. It was neither a money bill nor a vote of confidence.

The message he wanted to send however concerned issues of urgency. He insists his action was proportional to the importance and urgency of the issues, and in certain cases effective. These included the right to legal assistance, the dignity of Parliament and the pollution problems in the South.

Some have questioned why he raised certain issues openly, rather than within the confines of the party. Certain matters, he said, were raised internally, but other issues, by their very nature, were parliamentary and national issues, and not internal party affairs.

This episode enhanced intra-party democracy and showed that the Nationalist Party tolerated loyal dissent as a form of allegiance.

## The situation in the south

When he visited homes in Birzebbuga and Marsaxlokk before the last election, he said, all he heard was the concern about the pollution problem and lack of infrastructure.

In Zurrieq, people complained about Valletta Road mostly, which has now been resurfaced.

"These people felt the impact of the progressive heavy industrialization of the area, and all I could promise was that I would raise these issues if I was elected," he said.

They felt these concerns should be given more importance.

"Putting these items on the national agenda was something I wanted to do, after I was elected," he said, "and although certain industries in the area have a great economic relevance and can't be done away with, other measures can be taken to counteract and balance this, and mitigate the negative effects."

"I was the only backbencher to speak in the power station extension debate, and even criticized certain aspects in line with the auditor's comments. I took the opportunity to urge the government to reconsider the use of heavy fuel oil and use diesel instead, while accelerating the preparations for natural gas."

"A Member of Parliament has dual allegiance – to the party and to his constituents. Members of Parliament are not party officials, they are representatives of the people, respecting and being loyal to their party at the same time."

"The removal of the gas depot from Qajjenza and Marsaxlokk promenade, which started recently, is nearing completion. I am optimistic that in the near future works will start on sports and social facilities in the area."

## Justice and legal issues

The Committee of Codification and Consolidation of Laws is also another of Dr Debono's ideas. It is currently going through the laws, removing what has become redundant and updating where necessary, he said, a lengthy and laborious process.

Dr Debono said the committee is currently working on the codification of an administrative code, including the eventual Whistleblower Act, which Malta has never had and which would constitute a comprehensive system that would see to the deficient areas.

Legal assistance during interrogations was an urgent issue, which, being a fundamental human right, could not wait, especially since the law had been enacted for eight years already.

Dr Debono thinks that more fine-tuning is needed but now that the important step has been taken, further amendments can be calmly discussed.

This could possibly include mandatory

recording of statements, both in audio and video format, and upgrading the right to legal assistance itself, in that during the interrogation the person can have his/her lawyer present, and even the possibility of reconsidering the whole investigative set up, appointing magistrates with an exclusive investigative role.

He praised Minister Carm Mifsud Bonnici's great contributions in the area of justice and home affairs.

## Party funding

One of the most pressing and important issues in Maltese democracy is that of party financing, he said, because regulation is non-existent.

This gives room for what is known as trading in influence, since nobody knows who is financing what and how.

The aim is transparency and accountability. In 1995, the Galdes report, commissioned by the Fenech Adami administration, dealt with all these issues and was tabled in Parliament but no follow up action was taken.

The Prime Minister has already said he agrees with some form of regulation, and it seems everyone is in agreement on this point, so possibly one could see progress in this area in the near future.

A party must publish its accounts annually; in many countries donations above a certain amount are prohibited. There will be no disclosure of low amounts, as this would be an infringement on privacy and democracy.

These changes are urgent, he said, and there must be an enforcement mechanism, including strict penalties, in place.

## Party structure

The political language and dialectic has changed, and parties have opened up, leaving the highly polarized eighties fortunately behind, he said.

"It is time to reconsider the internal structures of our political parties," Dr Debono said, "and to look into whether they are fulfilling, in the best possible manner, their constitutional role, and carrying out the reforms and updates needed."

The question of whether there is room for new structures in political parties, such as more research bodies and reconsidering the role and function of sectional committees, must be addressed.

Turning to political party stations, Dr Debono explains that things that were valid in the 1980s are not necessarily still valid today. To say the least, it is time to reconsider their role too, he said.

One of his favourite sayings is "we are not two tribes occupying the same territory, but one people with different opinions".

## Divorce

Regarding divorce, which is being much debated, Dr Debono said he is not in favour of divorce. Having said that, there is nothing wrong in holding a democratic debate on such an important topic, and he agrees it is the electorate who should decide, although not necessarily in a referendum.

## Environmental issues

Dr Debono's interest in the environment stems from his scientific background dating back to his student days; in fact he is reading David Bohm's *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, and his passion is biodiversity, especially birds.

He said that Einstein's famous quote 'the environment is everything that is not me' is today finding resistance in the sense that there is an implicate wholeness in creation, and the environment is us too. This outlook is highly relevant for the National Environment Policy currently being drawn up.

The Mepa reform is the main issue in this regard. However, he mentioned a very interesting proposal, that of re-introducing species that have been wiped out by man's activity, and a project currently underway to re-introduce a formerly resident species, the barn owl.