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**Party Politics and the European Question:**

**The Case of Malta**

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the text**

Despite its applicant status, Malta has attracted little attention from EU scholars, even those whose interest lies in EU enlargement.<sup>1</sup> While it is all too easy to attribute this to Malta's size, there is no excuse for ignoring a country which has recently topped at least one list of aspiring candidate states.<sup>2</sup> For many different reasons (and not least for its size) Malta provides for a fascinating case study of EU accession. With a population of approximately 380 000 inhabitants, a territory of 316 square kilometers,<sup>3</sup> Malta qualifies not just as a small state, but also as one of Europe's micro states. In many respects Malta is an important and interesting country, as a number of political scientists, sociologists and social anthropologists have discovered. They point, for example, to its distinctive electoral and participatory politics, to the role it has played in matters of Mediterranean or wider European security, and to its unique language, with its origins in both Europe and North Africa. These characteristics are amongst those that have shaped Maltese attitudes to and policies on European integration.

European integration is an issue which in many countries cuts across party political divisions. Malta is an extreme case of a country in which attitudes on Europe map directly onto those of the two main parties. Given the small number of floating voters in Malta, the prospects for Maltese accession remain uncertain unless the link between the parties and the issue is broken. But as this paper shows this is unlikely to happen as it remains in the interests of the two parties for internal political reasons to maintain that link. This paper provides an overview of EU-Malta relations from the perspective of Maltese domestic politics. It reviews some of the issues and arguments used by both supporters and opponents of the EU, before focusing on the party political dimension of Malta's European question.

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<sup>1</sup> Maltese scholars, such as Roderick Pace, are the exception (Pace, 2000). John Redmond is another UK academic working on Malta.

<sup>2</sup> See *Eurobarometer*, May 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Malta is an archipelago of three islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino. It is situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea 80km south of Sicily and 290km from North Africa. It has no significant natural resources, few trees, little surface water (no rivers) and thin, rather poor soil. Its population density is amongst the world's highest. In 1987, Howe noted that this was 1032 people per sq. km. (Howe, 1987: 235). Malta has had a remarkable history: the Maltese are descended from the ancient Cathaginians and Phoenicians. Malta was a theocracy under the Knights of St John between 1530 and 1789, after which it was taken by Napoleon. Lost to the British after two years, it became a British Dependency in 1814. The islands were granted self-government from 1947, gaining their independence in 1964 and becoming a Republic ten years later.

## **Malta-EU Relations: the Story to Date**

Ever since Malta was granted independence from Britain in 1964 the islands' relationship with Europe has been somewhat ambivalent.<sup>4</sup> While the Nationalist Party (PN) has consistently sought closer relations with the Community, the Maltese Labour Party (MLP) has kept its distance (Fenech, 1988). When the PN was in power in 1970 an Association Agreement was signed with the European Community (Council of Ministers, 1970). However, a Labour victory the following year meant that the original aim of the Agreement - to establish a customs union over two five-year periods - was never met. The MLP held power for sixteen years, and during that time there was little prospect of closer political relations developing with the European Community.

Once the Nationalists were back in power, in 1987, the new government decided to apply for membership, submitting an application to the EU's Council of Ministers in 1990. The European Commission Opinion which followed in 1993 was cautiously favorable to Maltese accession, though it pointed to some of the extremely fundamental reforms that would have to be implemented before Malta could join the EU (Commission, 1993). After the European Council's positive conclusions at the June 1994 Corfu Summit, the Council confirmed that negotiations with both Malta and Cyprus would begin six months after the end of the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference, suggesting a start-date of early 1997. Encouraged, the Nationalist government initiated a series of reforms which were highly controversial in Malta, but which the Government argued were necessary - with or without the accession motive. However, the 'government was ... accused of having pursued economic policies designed to impress Brussels but detrimental to national competitiveness and of causing a fall in tourist numbers' (European Parliament, 1999). Particularly contentious was the introduction of a Value Added Tax (VAT) at the start of 1995. Moreover, the political scene was dogged by accusations of corruption within the ranks of the PN (Fenech, 1997b).

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<sup>4</sup> This section of the paper is taken from Cini (2001)

In the elections called by the Nationalist Government on 26 October 1996, the MLP was returned to power with a majority of three seats (Fenech, 1997b).<sup>5</sup> Led by Alfred Sant, they were elected on a platform of opposition to European Union membership. They immediately 'froze' the Maltese application, removed Malta from NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP)<sup>6</sup>, and ended political dialogue with the EU. Moreover, they scrapped the new VAT introduced by the previous government, replacing it with their own rather complicated version of the tax (European Parliament, 1999: 6). Thus the MLP began a process which would reformulate Malta's relations with the EU: first, negatively, through withdrawal from existing structures; and second, more positively, through the construction of a new relationship with the Union, one which was to rest on the establishment of an industrial free trade zone, increased cooperation in a number of key areas and dialogue on security concerns (European Parliament, 1999: 10-11). The Commission's new framework for relations which was outlined by the Commission in February 1998 detailed some of the steps that would have to be taken by the Maltese government to implement this new relationship.

Despite their opposition to EU membership, the Labour government acknowledged that Malta was in dire need of economic reform and industrial restructuring. Thus a series of austerity measures was introduced which sought to reduce the public deficit. These were extremely unpopular, and as a result of these policies and because of internal strains within the Labour Party elite, an early general election was called on the 5 September 1998 (Calleja, 1999). Despite predictions of a Labour victory, the elections resulted in a majority for the Nationalists led by Eddie Fenech Adami.<sup>7</sup> Along with the arrival of the new government came the 'reactivation' of the membership application and the recommencement of steps that the new

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<sup>5</sup> The MLP won 50.7% of the votes, and the National Party 47.8%, with around 2% going to other parties. As a result of the 1987 constitutional reform, this led to the National Party being given an additional 4 seats (out of a total of 65 in the unicameral House of Representatives). See Vella, 1996, 1998a and 1998b for the MLP line.

<sup>6</sup> Malta had joined PfP in April 1996 under the PN government. 30 Maltese soldiers were sent to Bulgaria in June 1996 to participate with six other countries in the 'Cooperation Determination 96' exercise. Note that Malta has now agreed to contribute a small number of troops to the EU's Rapid Reaction Force.

<sup>7</sup> The new parliament comprises 35 Nationalists and 30 Labour members. This gives the Nationalists what in Maltese terms is a huge majority. The PN obtained 51% of the votes and the MLP 47%. Alternativa Demokratika won 2%.

Government hoped would lead to the eventual accession of Malta to the European Union. For the Commission, the 'thawing out' of the old application meant reassessing Malta's position in the light of developments since 1993. Rather than issuing a new Opinion, an update was produced in February 1999 (Commission, 1999a). The February report led to a decision of the General Affairs Council in March which initiated the screening process in the last week of May 1999. With screening complete early in 2000, negotiations were opened in February of that year.<sup>8</sup>

This short introduction to Malta's recent relations with the European Union serves to highlight the rather shaky foundations upon which the Maltese membership bid rests. With Malta's two parties split over whether the island should join the EU, and with public opinion on the island also divided, the future of Maltese 'progress' towards accession is uncertain. An MLP victory in the next general election, which will probably take place in 2003, could mean withdrawal from the accession process at a very late stage, or even from the EU itself should Malta have joined by this point. Yet with both parties committed to a referendum, it is popular sentiment which might ultimately decide the issue. The next elections are likely to be held in 2003 and a referendum has been planned, though a date has not been set. It is most likely that the referendum will take place after the next election, should the Nationalists succeed in forming the next government.

### **Issues and Arguments in the European Debate**

There is a wealth of issues and arguments which are important to Malta's European debate. Three of the most important (1) economy (2) security (3) politics and society. are dealt with below.

#### *Economy*

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing, early May 2001 the negotiations are proceeding well, though the most difficult chapter are yet to be dealt with. Malta is clearly amongst the accession front-runners. See also Commission, 1999b and 1999c

Malta is an island with a lack of indigenous raw materials, an absence of fresh water, and a very small domestic market. Its economy relies on export-oriented industries and most importantly tourism (European Parliament, 1999). With the islands' pre-independence economy so heavily built on military spending, the emphasis since the 1960s has been on creating a 'truly independent civilian economy' (Fenech, 1997b: 154). This began before independence, and particularly under the post-war leadership of Dom Mintoff who was explicit in his efforts to ensure that an economic value be placed on Malta's strategic properties (threatening alliances with the Soviet Union or with the radical Arab states in the process).<sup>9</sup> However, after the closure of the British naval base in 1979 a valuable source of income was lost to the islands' economy, necessitating a rethink of Malta's economic and industrial priorities.

Malta's industrial base comprises a very small number of large firms and a very large number of small firms (in fields such as textiles, clothing, footwear, furniture making, electronics and electrical equipment and ship repair). It is stated that 75% of Malta's firms employ fewer than five people, whereas only 12 firms have more than 300 staff on their books (out of 2300 registered companies) (for example, Bainbridge, 1998). There is a large public sector, comprising roughly 40% of employment on the islands, and public revenue accounts for around one-third of total tax revenue. Malta is still highly dependent on protectionist levies and excise duties both as a way of sheltering uncompetitive small firms, and of raising revenue for the government. Moreover para-statal firms are often highly subsidized.

While both political parties agree that reform is necessary, there is a real dispute about how quickly change should come about, and how far it should go substantively. The Nationalists tend to argue for a sort of big bang approach in which reform, though painful, is introduced quickly in the short term. The Labour party and the Unions argue that the social costs of this short-term strategy would be too high, and that a more gradual process of change is necessary. As it stands, there is no doubt that the accession process has speeded up the process of reform in Malta, though the government line is that reform is necessary for its own sake (Borg, 1999b; Fenech-

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<sup>9</sup> This debate arose out of a row about the lack of Marshall Aid to Malta (as it was not a sovereign state) and Britain's refusal to allocate a proportion of the Aid it received to Malta.

Adami, 1999). The Nationalist Government is particularly keen to reduce the public deficit and to cut the size of the public sector.<sup>10</sup>

Both those supporting and those opposed to EU membership emphasize the economic benefits or disadvantages to be had from participating in the European integration process. From the supporters of the EU, there is a recognition that the world is becoming more globalized, and that Malta as a little island of protectionism is something of an anomaly if it aspires to be a part of the developed Western world, rather than accepting a more demeaning role as less developed island state. Malta's size places it at a disadvantage in this globalized world, and hence there is a need to adhere to a larger bloc for defensive reasons.

Moreover, it is argued that there may be more specific concrete economic benefits which arise out of membership of the EU, particularly in the medium or longer term. As is the case in other candidate states, EU membership is used as a spur to reforms which many feel Malta would need to make regardless, but lacks the will to undertake on its own. This is also used as a justification for reform, where there is hostility to the idea of outsiders in Brussels telling the Maltese what to do. Moreover, economic benefits may also arise in future from Malta's participation in the EU's social and cohesion funds, though thus far the EU's financial support of the accession process has been disappointing.

Opponents to Maltese membership of the EU also focus on its economic consequences, identifying particular issues of practical concern. They are most likely to focus on the short-term impacts of membership and the problems with the process of adjustment and alignment than are the pro-accession camp. They may begin by raising the issue of free movement. This takes a rather different form in Malta, as compared to other prospective EU states. While opponents of membership play down the benefits of Maltese people being able to go and work in the EU more easily, scaremongering about the potential influx of immigrants into Malta is commonplace. This tends to take two forms. First, there is the commonly heard fear Sicilians,

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<sup>10</sup> The recent sale of the state-owned Mid-Med bank to HSBC was controversial even for those supporting privatization, though more for the general belief that it was underpriced. The question of whether the drydocks (employing 3800) should be sold is another issue being discussed early in 2001.

coming to take jobs from the Maltese, will flood the islands. Second, there is the (perhaps) more justifiable fear that rich Europeans will buy up Maltese land.

A second extremely resonant issue is that of value added tax. It is argued that the introduction of VAT in 1995 by the Nationalist Government subsequently lost the Right the 1996 election. The MLP claimed, rather effectively, that the only reason for the introduction of the new tax was that the PN intended to take Malta into the European Union. The PN argument, that this was a necessary tax which many democratic states had in one form or another, that it would allow reductions in taxes elsewhere, and that it would help curb tax evasion was deemed less convincing. The introduction of VAT has done much to alienate some of the Nationalists' traditional voters, retailers and small businesspeople. Thus, according to Fenech (1997b: 443), it has created a new cleavage within the business community between small and large entrepreneurs, to the MLP's advantage.

As a heavily protected market and as a political system in which jobs are subsidized as a matter of routine and where there are a proportionately huge number of (generally under-qualified) public sector employees, the impact of EU membership on employment one of the biggest issues. More generally, the question is one of the survival of Maltese industry and agriculture in the face of competition from outside. With an industrial sector dominated by very small firms and an uncompetitive agricultural sector, the fear of assimilation is a real one.<sup>11</sup>

### *Security*

Just as there is no consensus about the likely impact of EU membership on Malta's economy, Malta's security interests are also contested (Bin, 1995; Redmond and Pace, 1996). Since 1980 Malta has been a self-declared neutral state (Constitution, 1992). However, there is no agreement on the relevance of neutrality for the islands. On the one hand, 'Non alignment and neutrality, with a strong emphasis on the Mediterranean vocation of foreign polity ultimately emerged as the synthesis,

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<sup>11</sup> Although the issues of shipbuilding and agriculture are not explicitly dealt with here, these are particularly controversial issues in Malta at the present time.



shunning both alignment with west or east, and identification with either north or south.’ (Fenech, 1997a: 155). This was based on the following argument:

On its own, Malta had neither the potential nor the need to be aggressive. Conversely, though it did not always follow, no one had an interest to threaten the security of Malta if the island did not represent the interest of a bigger power. It was the presence of foreign forces that rendered Malta threatening to its neighbors, just as it was the role of frontier outpost for the west that might give any relevance to Malta in the eyes of the east (Fenech, 1997a: 156).

In its unilateral declaration of neutrality which was guaranteed by the Italians, and incorporated into the Constitution in 1987, the Maltese asserted a break with the past, replacing a ‘state of security’ with a ‘sense of security’ and sovereignty.<sup>12</sup> Thus it is less security which is the issue, but independence, or at least the illusion of independence. On the other hand, however, the relevance of Malta’s neutrality has been challenged in recent years. For example, Allen (1998) has argued that the rationale behind neutrality no longer exists in the post-Cold war world.

Yet since independence in 1964 the issue of security has never really been high on the Maltese political agenda and it is not an issue which mobilizes the general public even as part of the European debate. However, one aspect of the issue is raised from time to time – that of Malta serving as a bridge between Europe and North Africa/Middle East. Those supporting membership tend to argue that this is something that Malta can offer the European Union, which will bring positive benefits to Malta, giving them a distinctive foreign within the EU’s external relations. Those opposed to EU membership argue that such a role can be better performed outside the European Union, and that Malta’s (non-EU) Mediterranean credentials would be undermined should it join the Union.

Understanding the security identity of the Maltese people implies looking to Malta’s past. Malta’s historical experience is a distinctive one, characterized by the practice and legacy of occupation and colonization. It is a history of dependence, inter-dependence, and more recently of aspiring independence. To understand Malta’s history is to understand the history of the Mediterranean; and as is the case in many post-colonial developing states, the question of national identity has become a major

preoccupation. Yet, it is equally the case that though Maltese sovereignty has been a feature of the twentieth century, Maltese nationhood has been of much longer standing. Even before the Second World War questions of identity dominated Maltese politics. At the time these took as their focus the language issue (Howe, 1987: 236), even if

Only superficially was it a struggle between tradition (Italian) and utility (English). It was a clash of visions for Malta: between those who envisaged Catholic Malta as their Latin Mediterranean *patria*, enjoying a high degree of autonomy, perhaps in some loose federation with Italy; as against those who, while also advocating representation, firmly believed that Imperial and Maltese interests were one and the same thing, that true patriotism meant consolidating Malta's fractious ties with Britain (Caruana, 1992: 19).

In its most extreme manifestation, this took the form of plans to unify Britain and Malta.<sup>13</sup>

At the time this 'clash of visions' meant an inability to 'reach a consensus on self-identity' (Frendo, 1994: 14) and even though the identity question no longer took the same form in post-independence Malta, echoes of it still remain today (Frendo, 1994: 14). This island country 'feels itself ambivalently situated, in a number of key areas, between the apparent "modernity" of the European world, and the traditional societies of what one might want to call the Mediterranean' (Mitchell, 1996: 147). This has been reflected in an academic (and particularly an anthropological) interest in Maltese culture and identity (Boissevain, 1965 and 1977; see also Mitchell, 1996) which has itself provided 'the raw material to fuel the fires of identity politics' (Mitchell, 1996: 142).

How then might we understand the impact of these different facets of Maltese identity on Malta's relationship with Europe and its attitude(s) to European integration? In order to answer this question we might go so far as to identify two constructions of Maltese identity. The first might be called Malta's 'non-aligned Mediterranean identity'. This is associated on the one hand with the island's neutral

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<sup>12</sup> Fenech (1997a: 154) says that 'Malta enjoys a sense of security, rather than a state of security'

<sup>13</sup> The proposal was taken seriously by Britain only until the Suez Crisis of 1956. After the late 1950s, when Britain's foreign policy objectives were changing dramatically, this no longer became a realistic option.

and non-aligned status, and on the other with an anti-clerical tradition. Here, Malta is constructed first as a Mediterranean state and only second as a European one. The Mediterranean ties are paramount as they acknowledge Malta's unique geo-political situation. Important also is a recognition that while Malta's links with the rest of Europe (and Italy in particular) are important, so too is the relationship that Malta has with the Arab states of the Southern Mediterranean and particularly with Libya (Fenech, 1988). The metaphor of Malta as a bridge between the northern and southern shoreline of the Mediterranean (Mitchell, 1996: 142) has found its concrete expression in the proactive role that the island has played and continues to play in promoting Mediterranean co-operation. The examples of the CSCE and, more recently, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership are often recalled in this context (de Marco, 1999).

A second construction of Maltese identity views the island as a European and indeed as a (prospective) European Union state. This identity is a Christian Democrat one, tied closely to the pro-clerical tradition within Malta. The Mediterranean perspective is important here too, but is of secondary relevance as it is claimed that it is only by tying Malta firmly into the Northern Mediterranean camp and by joining the European Union that Malta's bridge-building potential will be strengthened. References to Malta's 'European vocation', though often left undefined, epitomize this version of Malta's identity, even if at times Maltese European identity does seem to be more of an aspiration than a reality. Take for example the current Foreign Minister, Joe Borg's words when he claimed that the inevitable changes that come with being members of the European Union call for 'the dynamic *reinvention*' of both the Maltese people as individuals and Malta as a nation' (Borg, 1999a; my italics).

### *Politics and Society*

Maltese society provides a third insight into Maltese interests, and here too there is little consensus on what is good for Malta. Competing models of modernization reflect both an embracing of and a resistance to political and societal change on the islands. While EU membership is associated with change, opposition implies either an attempt to hold onto the status quo, or a belief that Malta can resolve its own political

and societal problems. Such changes may affect their working lives, their standard of living, the general pace of life on the islands, career prospects and opportunities, and traditions and habits. Although the precise nature of the impact tends to be left undefined, effects may be felt in the way Malta's religious and moral fabric is likely to change; on the clientelism and patronage which is endemic in Maltese politics; on the ineffectiveness of the state (bureaucracy) to resolve long-standing basic problems (such as the state of the islands' roads); or on certain traditions that some inlands feel strongly about (hunting and trapping being a particularly emotive example). Thus change may be a good or a bad thing, depending on one's perspective. Some see Maltese politics and society as an impediment to a better future; others are more willing to celebrate Malta's distinctiveness, even where this is inefficient and 'un-modern'.

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In the examples given above it has been possible to identify some of the arguments and issues which form the basis of the pro- and anti- accession camps. While the Nationalists and their supporters argue for EU membership, the Labour Party uses those arguments opposing EU membership to support their cause. These two positions reflect competing understandings of Malta's values and interests. Indeed, there is no agreement about what constitutes Malta's *national* identity nor its *national* interest. Rather, these concepts are tools used by the two main political parties in achieving their goals. It is to these parties and the wider political system that the paper now turns.

### **Politics and Political Parties**

Malta's political system has a number of distinctive characteristics. One of the most important of these is that it is extremely centralized. With a unicameral House of Representatives, an absence of federalism, no popularly elected President<sup>14</sup> or

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<sup>14</sup> The President is elected by the House of Representatives for a five year term. The last election was in April 1999.

judiciary, a partisan bureaucracy and only two main political parties<sup>15</sup>, the stakes are extremely high when general elections are called (Hirczy, 1995: 259-60). The Maltese people elect their governments using a version of the Single Transferable Vote (STV), and while the electoral system also allows voters to cross party lists when selecting their candidates of preference, in practice this rarely happens, however, as party allegiance is an important part of life for many Maltese.

Despite the proportional system two parties dominate the political scene; and both have been able to form majority governments. Indeed, since 1987, when there was a change in the Constitution, the party winning the most votes has automatically received a majority of the seats via a 'topping-up' process (Howe, 1997: 235). Although voting is not compulsory, Malta has one of the highest turnouts of any democracy (Hirzy, 1995: 255), consistently sitting at around the 96% mark. As governments alternate on the basis of a very small number of floating votes, it is no exaggeration to claim that in Malta every vote counts. As the margins are so small between the two parties, getting voters engaged and 'out' on election day becomes the real test of a party's pre-election campaign, and the lengths to which party officials go to do just that is staggering.

The intense partisanship that characterizes Maltese politics goes some way towards explaining the participatory habits of the Maltese electorate (Hirczy, 1995: 257). It also accounts for the confrontational and extremely competitive style of politics that is endemic on the islands. As Hirczy states 'Partisanship in this polarized polity is so pervasive, ingrained, and linked to class, ideology, and locality that preference patterns are known by street. Loyalties are strong, stable, and rooted in social and family backgrounds' (1995: 258). He goes on to highlight 'the confrontational style of electioneering, the stridency of the campaign rhetoric, and mutual recriminations of party leaders and functionaries. The sheer extravagance of claims about Labour "thugs" and "dictators", on the one hand, and of the Nationalist

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<sup>15</sup> From the 1970s the smaller parties were forced out of office and a process of polarization of the electorate into two main camps was identified. Smaller parties do have a place in Maltese politics, though not one which allows them into the House of Representatives. *Alternattiva Demokratika* (AD) ostensibly offers an alternative to the two mainstream parties, and originally sought to break the two-party hold on national politics. However, after a good showing in the 1992 election, its support has since waned, and it now tends to function more as a pressure group than as a political party.

“saboteurs” and “conspirators” on the other, has helped sustain a high level of antagonism’ (Hirczy, 1995: 259).

The polarized and heated nature of Maltese politics can be traced back to an earlier time. In Boissevin’s influential study of two Maltese villages he explored the relationship between ritual and political factionalism (Boissevain, 1965 and 1977). As Mitchell comments:

...he observed a kind of competition – known as *pika* – between supporters, organizers and enthusiasts of different, local patron saints’ feasts (*festi*, sing. *Festa*). *Pika* led to intense symbolic rivalry manifest in ever-exuberant spending on the main ingredients of *festi*: fireworks and brass band marches. It also at times led to direct, violent confrontation between different *festi* factions, or *festi partiti* (Mitchell, 1996: 144).

These factions may be seen as a ‘symbolic or ritualized manifestation of party-political antagonisms’ (Mitchell, 1996: 144). Boissevin noted how most villages were divided into *partiti*. While one of these would be more middle-class, associated with the authority figures in the local community (lawyers, business people, priests etc), and favoring close relations with the Church, the other would tend to be more radical, even anti-authoritarian, socialist and possibly anti-clerical. As Mitchell states: ‘The division between *festi partiti*, then, mapped on to ideological and party-political divisions between the right-wing Nationalist Party and the left-wing Malta Labour Party’ (Mitchell, 1996: 144). Not only these specific divisions, but the different conceptions of Malta’s interests and identities, also mapped onto the party political divide. What the emergence of the two parties did was institutionalize and then politicize these differences.

Since independence in 1964, both the Nationalist Party (PN) and the Malta Labour Party (MLP) have each spent time in government; and each has ostensibly represented a different section of the Maltese community. The Nationalist Party (PN) is a center-right Christian-Democratic party. They are the party of business and the Church, speaking for the middle-class and espousing middle class values (Fenech, 1997). Although not particularly relevant today, it is worth noting that the party is descended from Malta’s pro-Italian faction which formed the nineteenth century elite

in the country (Howe, 1987: 236). The party is now fervently pro-European and supports Malta's entry into the EU. It currently forms Malta's government.

By contrast, the Malta Labour Party (MLP) is a center-left party whose supporters are still largely working class. Although it is a traditional party of the left, it has taken a particularly extremist line (Fenech, 1997). Loosely drawn from the nineteenth century English language faction, the party's roots are really in the Maltese labor movement, and more specifically in the organization set up to give Maltese dockworkers a political voice. The MLP formed their first government in 1947<sup>16</sup>, arguing in the 1950s under their charismatic leader, Dom Mintoff, for full integration with the UK. When this came to nothing<sup>17</sup>, Mintoff turned his attention to the South, controversially cultivating links with Libya and advocating a form of 'militant anti-colonialism' (Howe, 1987: 236). Under Alfred Sant, the present leader of the MLP, the party has undergone a process of modernization. However, on the European issue, Sant maintains that Malta would be better served by remaining outside the EU. Advocating (laughably to some) that Malta should become a 'Switzerland in the Mediterranean', he claims that the islands interests can be better protected by developing a unique relationship with the European Union, something along the lines of that which exists between the EU and Switzerland.

Even if the party rhetoric suggests that there remain important class and ideological differences between the two parties, the programmatic distinction between the PN and the MLP has been narrowing since the mid-1980s. Both parties have moved towards the political center, reflecting an emergent consensus on the islands, which has been identified as 'catholic, welfarist and social democratic' (Howe, 1987: 236; Fenech, 1997: 442). For example, Fenech argued of the 1996 election that:

As elsewhere in Europe, the distinction between left and right has become progressively less marked over recent years. The conservative PN had long ago adopted a more socially conscious stance, although in recent years this Christian Democratic outlook began to be overtaken by a more liberal trend. On the other hand, the MLP, conscious of the diminishing popularity of traditional socialist tenets, has shed much of its interventionist policies, as

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<sup>16</sup> Although not independent until 1964, Malta governed itself from 1947.

<sup>17</sup> A referendum was held in 1956.

fears of unelectability became real following its poor showing in the 1992 election. The narrowing ideological gap funneled the difference between the two parties into one overriding campaign platform: credibility (Fenech, 1997b: 442).

Yet credibility is not the only platform which differentiates the two parties. There remains at least one extremely important programmatic dividing line: that of Europe. Thus the European issue has become one of the few issues that really allow the two main parties to demonstrate that they are distinct and different from one another.

As mentioned above, in both political camps, politicians claim ownership of the national interest and of national identity in support of their arguments for and against European Union membership. While the Nationalists claim that joining the EU will fulfill that Malta's European and Mediterranean vocation, and that membership is in Malta's national interest, the MLP's position is more sceptical of the supposed benefits. They argue that Malta will be swamped, physically and economically, by outsiders; that Malta is too small to hold its own within the European Union; that it will lose its independence; that its identity will be threatened and its interests ignored within such a large Union of states. Malta's size is important to perceptions of national interests and identity, and to the positions taken on EU membership. The smallness of the islands is used as both a justification for a pro-European line (ie Malta cannot survive outside the EU; Malta is European and its place is with other European states in the EU) and for an anti-European position (ie Malta is small enough to be able to be tolerated as a state outside the EU, whilst having many of the advantages of membership; Malta's uniquely Mediterranean identity will be threatened by the larger states). Malta's size undoubtedly matters in shaping policies and attitudes to European Union membership. The problem is that it matters in different ways to different communities within the islands.

Public opinion on membership would seem to map directly onto party political allegiance, although there can be no assumption that voters would remain tied to their party when a referendum is held. Indeed, it is difficult to predict what the outcome of a referendum would be, as there is a dearth of objective opinion polling in the islands. Fenech (1997b: 444) has gone as far as to state that the best way of getting a feel for public opinion is to look at the odds on offer in the Maltese betting shops. There has



been an attempt to dislodge the European issue from party politics by both camps who feel they have much to gain from winning over voters on both sides of the political divide. However, it has been impossible for either the pro- or anti- campaigns to break that link. The establishment of separate 'yes' and 'no' campaigns might initially have been thought of as a way of taking the debate out of party political hands. However, very quickly it became clear that the accepted pattern of Maltese politics was once again superimposed upon these organizations. While there are some Labour supporters who are in favor of membership, they are quickly branded as traitors by the Party's mainstream. In any case, their numbers are not so great as to constitute a threat to opposition leader Alfred Sant's anti-European platform with the Party.<sup>18</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Maltese attitudes towards European integration map directly onto the two positions of the main political parties on the islands. This is hardly surprising given the extremely polarized nature of Maltese politics. But as the number of voters who change their allegiance at election time is extremely small, the prospects for Maltese accession to the EU are uncertain. Although there is no guarantee that party allegiance will persist when a referendum is held, the next election will itself constitute a referendum of a sort. Should the Labour Party win a majority, the assumption will be that there is a majority against joining the EU. Attempts to break the link between the European issue and party politics has thus far failed and is unlikely to succeed in the future. Moreover, it is in the interests of the political parties to maintain that link, given that Europe is one of the few issues which differentiate the two parties from each other. As both move towards the reformist center-ground, staking out their own political territory in albeit a small number of policy areas becomes increasingly important. For that reason, the MLP would seem likely to maintain their opposition to the EU and

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<sup>18</sup> In addition, the establishment of the Malta-EU Information Centre (MIC) to provide information on the accession process was very quickly branded an agent of government propaganda by the Labour Party; and the political nature of the media (TV stations and newspapers) implies an absence of (recognised) neutral information about politics in general, and Europe in particular, each side accusing the others of misinformation and myth-making.

keep the issue of EU membership high on the agenda in advance of the 2003 elections. This is likely to continue to make the outcome of the referendum uncertain.

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