

PRIESTS AND POLITICIANS: ARCHBISHOP MICHAEL GONZI, DOM MINTOFF,  
AND THE END OF EMPIRE IN MALTA

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The political contest in Malta at the end of empire involved not merely the British colonial authorities and emerging nationalists, but also the powerful Catholic Church. Under Archbishop Gonzi's leadership, the Church took an overtly political stance over the leading issues of the day including integration with the United Kingdom, the declaration of an emergency in 1958, and Malta's progress towards independence. Invariably, Gonzi and the Church found themselves at loggerheads with the Dom Mintoff and his Malta Labour Party. Despite his uncompromising image, Gonzi in fact demonstrated a flexible turn of mind, not least on the central issue of Maltese independence. Rather than seeking to stand in the way of Malta's move towards constitutional separation from Britain, the Archbishop set about co-operating with the Nationalist Party of Giorgio Borg Olivier in the interests of securing the position of the Church within an independent Malta. For their part, the British came to accept by the early 1960s the desirability of Maltese self-determination and did not try to use the Church to impede progress towards independence. In the short-term, Gonzi succeeded in protecting the Church during the period of decolonization, but in the longer-term the papacy's softening of its line on socialism, coupled with the return to power of Mintoff in 1971, saw a sharp decline in the fortunes of the Church and Archbishop Gonzi.

Although less overt than the Orthodox Church in Cyprus, the power and influence of the Catholic Church in Malta was an inescapable factor in Maltese life at the end of empire. Dominated by Archbishop Michael Gonzi, the Catholic Church enjoyed a continuing social and political role, so much so that it became one of the key actors in the process of Maltese decolonization. Indeed, the end of empire in Malta came to resemble a three-cornered contest between the British colonial authorities, the emerging nationalists, and the Church. Of the nationalist groupings, it was Dom Mintoff's Malta Labour Party which clashed most bitterly with the Catholic Church in Malta and its domineering head, Archbishop Gonzi. An analysis of the rivalry played out between Mintoff and Gonzi, over such key questions as Maltese integration with Britain, the island colony's political orientation, and its progress towards full independent status, will rest at the heart of the article. While Gonzi strove to exclude Mintoff and the Malta Labour Party (MLP) from power, he demonstrated a flexible frame of mind on

the question of Maltese independence which belied his often uncompromising image. By the early 1960s, far from seeking to retard the island colony's move towards self-determination, Gonzi tried to preserve as much of the Catholic Church's privileges and position as possible within an independent Malta which in turn necessitated co-operating with Mintoff's principal political opponent, Nationalist Party leader Giorgio Borg Olivier. British policy-makers were in many ways equally pragmatic, acquiescing in Malta's move towards independence under the Nationalists, rather than attempting to impede this process in alliance with the Church. In this sense, the British did not seek actively to exploit the Church and Gonzi for their own imperial purposes.

Although Gonzi later claimed that he had not been interested in politics, his political career began in 1921 when he successfully contested the Senate elections (Koster 1984: 83). Ironically in view of his later conflict with the Malta Labour Party, he fought the election in the Labour Party's interest. Although he resigned in 1924 to take up the position of Bishop of Gozo, he remained immersed in politics. In 1930, Gonzi was instrumental in issuing a Pastoral Letter which forbade people from voting for the Maltese Prime Minister and leader of the Constitutional Party, Lord Strickland, who had strongly criticized clerical involvement in politics (Boissevain 1965: 11-12). Unsurprisingly, Strickland perceived Gonzi as an inveterate foe and mounted a determined campaign to prevent him from succeeding Archbishop Caruana of Malta. In May 1939, the Colonial Office prepared a note on Gonzi which stated: 'He is a keen, even fanatical, Roman Catholic priest, who will put what he regards as the interests of the Church above everything else' (Fenech 1976: 22). The accuracy of this prediction was to be confirmed following Gonzi's succession to Caruana in 1943. In the record of a meeting between the Archbishop and the Secretary of State for Colonies, James Griffiths, in 1950, a Colonial Office official emphasized that Gonzi 'made no attempt to excuse plunging straight into politics, and appeared to think it perfectly natural for an ecclesiastical dignitary to tell the S. of S. what he would like to see happen in Malta's political life.'<sup>1</sup> Reporting a conversation with Gonzi, Governor of Malta Sir Robert Laycock noted: 'the Archbishop began by professing that he was a man of peace who never interfered in politics, and then went on to talk politics for half an hour'.<sup>2</sup> It soon became apparent that it was the exclusion from power of Labour leader Dom Mintoff that particularly exercised the Archbishop.

Born in 1916, the son of a Maltese cook in the Royal Navy, Mintoff was brought up in a poor district of Cospicua. An early example of his political leanings was provided in 1936

when he sent a memorandum to the International Secretary of the British Labour Party, William Gillies, in which he stressed: ‘The workers still hope for the day when they will regain the freedom from the influence of the old clique of legal and clerical elements’.<sup>3</sup> Two years later he penned a letter to the editor of the *Malta Chronicle* in which he exhorted ‘the progressive elements to group together and change Malta’s mediaeval social system into something for all the world to envy’ (Koster 1984: 135). Having received a Rhodes scholarship, he travelled to Britain in 1939 where he met leading left-wing radicals such as Dick Crossman and Nye Bevan.<sup>4</sup> Following Mintoff’s return to Malta in the second half of 1943, Lieutenant-Governor Sir David Campbell reported that Mintoff had been ‘greatly disappointed by the reception given him by the workers and that, apart from a few young students and a very limited number of the more extremist socialists, he cuts very little weight in Malta’.<sup>5</sup> Not allowing early setbacks to discourage him, Mintoff soon rose to prominence in the Malta Labour Party. By 1947, he was not only deputy leader of the MLP, but also, by virtue of the party’s victory in elections of that year, deputy prime minister.

As early as September 1945, Gonzi expressed his fear of the growth of ‘Left-Wing extremism’ in Malta, depicting Mintoff as ‘really a Communist’.<sup>6</sup> An indication of the enmity between the two men was provided in 1948 when the Archbishop, to the fury of Deputy Prime Minister Mintoff, successfully persuaded the Labour Government of Paul Boffa to revise down the Income Tax Bill (Pirota 2001: 597, note 43). Mintoff was convinced that Gonzi had no right to interfere in such matters, a sentiment which rested at the heart of much of their ensuing conflict. In May of the same year, Gonzi publicly admonished Mintoff for attending a gathering of Labour supporters at which the *Red Flag* was sung (Pirota 1987: 150). Mintoff’s successful ousting of Boffa in 1949 and his assumption of the Labour Party leadership, a position he would hold for a further thirty-five years, ensured that the disputes between Gonzi’s Catholic Church and Mintoff’s MLP would be a characteristic feature of Malta’s political life in the era of decolonization.

Although the MLP, which had split as a result of Boffa’s ouster, lost the 1950 election, Gonzi remained highly suspicious of Mintoff. During his meeting with James Griffiths in the immediate aftermath of the election, the Archbishop launched a ‘measured tirade against Mr. Mintoff’, depicting him as an ‘extreme Left Wing Socialist’.<sup>7</sup> He also speculated whether ‘it would not be desirable for H.M.G. to use all the influence they had, without breaking democratic forms, to keep Mr. Mintoff out of office.’<sup>8</sup> Mintoff was in fact kept out of office by a coalition formed by the Nationalists and Boffa’s Malta Workers’

Party. Nevertheless, an official of the Colonial Office noted in 1952 that a ‘struggle for power’ was going on ‘beneath the surface between the Archbishop and Mr Mintoff’ (Pirotta 1987: 320). Summarising the divisions between the two men, Joseph Pirotta has appositely remarked that ‘While Mintoff’s self-imposed mission was that of establishing the supremacy of the secular State, Gonzi was the jealous guardian of ecclesiastical supremacy’ (1987: 320). Their differing visions for Malta were given a sharper focus by the victory of the Labour Party in the 1955 elections. Following his appointment as Prime Minister, Mintoff’s determination to separate the functions of Church and state was symbolized by his failure to make the customary courtesy call on the Archbishop (Pirotta 1991: 366). Relations also deteriorated over the contentious issue of Maltese integration with the United Kingdom which Mintoff assiduously pursued in the early stages of his premiership.

Gonzi quickly made it clear to the British colonial authorities that he intended to oppose the integration scheme ‘tooth and nail’.<sup>9</sup> In conversation with Mintoff, the Archbishop referred to integration as the ‘absorption’ of Malta into the United Kingdom, expressed his fear that Malta would be reduced to the status of an English county, and warned of the dangers of the application to the island of UK legislation on matters such as civil marriage and divorce.<sup>10</sup> Governor Laycock predicted that the Archbishop would, when the time was ripe, ‘do all he could to oppose the Maltese Government’s programme’.<sup>11</sup> Summing up Gonzi’s attitude towards the MLP programme, Laycock observed:

His fears are probably that on the one hand, as a result of their implementation, taxation will fall more heavily on the Church than it does at present, and on the other, that any form of closer association between Britain and Malta will in fact involve an increased seepage of “advanced” and possibly anti-clerical notions into the Maltese who are at present 100% Roman Catholic.<sup>12</sup>

Laycock proceeded to record Mintoff’s belief that the Archbishop’s real aim was to ‘drive a wedge between the Maltese and Great Britain’ since he realized that closer association between the two would ‘inevitably lead to [the] introduction of progressive ideas tending to weaken the Church’s grip on the Maltese people’.<sup>13</sup>

With considerable justification, the Lord Chancellor, Lord Kilmuir, warned British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, that the ‘greatest potential obstacle in the way of integration is the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church’.<sup>14</sup> Governor Laycock went so far as to record that it would be a ‘complete waste of time to recommend any drastic changes to the Consitution [sic] ... unless they have at least the acquiescence of the Church’.<sup>15</sup> Justifying his position,

Laycock pointed out that the Church was 'still by far the strongest single influence in Malta where it is ruled, if not with a rod of iron then certainly with a very firm hand, by His Grace the Metropolitan Archbishop'.<sup>16</sup> The Governor also recorded that the Archbishop 'undoubtedly fears and mistrusts Mr. Mintoff whom he regards as a dangerous atheist and an enemy of the Catholic Church'.<sup>17</sup> Both Mintoff and Gonzi had assured Laycock that, while men of peace, they would 'fight to the last for their principles'.<sup>18</sup> Ominously for the integration scheme, the Governor concluded that both men had 'showed their teeth and, although Mintoff's might seem sharper initially, I believe that the Archbishop's might grip firmer in consequence of his fundamental hold over the people which can be exercised at any time through the Parish priests or by the issue of a pastoral letter'.<sup>19</sup> The accuracy of Laycock's words was soon to be demonstrated.

Although the Malta Round Table Conference, which deliberated the island's future towards the end of 1955, came out in favour of integration, it did stipulate that the Maltese people should show their 'clear and unmistakable' support for the scheme.<sup>20</sup> Despite having committed his party in its 1955 general election manifesto to 'submit any eventual agreement with the British Government for the approval of the people of Malta in a national referendum' (Pirota 1991: 21), Mintoff pressed ahead with a vote on integration before negotiations on the integration package had begun in earnest. By so doing, he not only played into his opponents' hands, but also exacerbated the already strained relations between the MLP and the Church.<sup>21</sup>

On 21 January 1956, Gonzi and the Bishop Pace of Gozo issued a joint Pastoral Letter in which they expressed their concerns regarding the position of the Church under integration, especially their fear that the British Parliament would seek to legislate on matters such as marriage. Mintoff subsequently issued a warning to the Archbishop that clear-cut instructions to arouse the faithful in opposition to integration would be considered an 'intervention in politics and dishonest moral pressure' (Pirota 1991: 149). Gonzi remained unmoved, Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd noting a 'rapid deterioration in relations between the Maltese Government and the Archbishop' which culminated in the latter issuing a public demand for a postponement of the referendum on integration so that he could secure the written guarantees for the Catholic Church that he considered necessary.<sup>22</sup> Priests were reported to be 'acting against integration with knowledge, if not actual encouragement of Archbishop and also Bishop of Gozo',<sup>23</sup> even refusing absolution to parishioners who intended to vote in favour of integration. Drawing his own conclusions, Lennox-Boyd

remarked that the Catholic Church opposed integration ‘not so much on its own merits but from fear of the secularising tendencies of a successful Maltese Labour Government’.<sup>24</sup>

Mintoff’s refusal to postpone the referendum provoked Gonzi into making a broadcast on the eve of the vote in which he not only claimed that the Maltese premier and his Cabinet had declared ‘war’ on the Church, but also advised the populace not to vote for integration (Pirota 1991: 159-60). Opposition to the concept of integration also derived from Giorgio Borg Olivier’s Nationalist Party which instead favoured Malta’s achievement of ‘quasi Dominion Status’ in which Britain would only handle defence and foreign affairs affecting the island, and even then in consultation with the government of the day in Valletta.<sup>25</sup> This approach was in keeping with long-standing Nationalist policy which as far back as the 1930s had demanded the transfer of responsibility for Malta from the Colonial Office to the Dominions Office (Smith 2007a: 118). In the course of his opening address to the Malta Round Table Conference, Borg Olivier underlined that the Nationalists, having achieved 50,000 votes out of 120,000 in the most recent general election, were a ‘very strong party’, and went on to warn that ‘there was a much fiercer opposition to integration amongst the Maltese people than the opposition of the Turkish minority in Cyprus to Enosis’.<sup>26</sup> Borg Olivier also ventilated his concerns regarding the position of the Church under a policy which would ‘arise out of mixing of two peoples together, out of having two peoples ruled by common legislation’ (Pirota 1991: 106).

Despite the qualms of the Church and the Nationalists, Mintoff, with nearly three-quarters of the votes cast in favour of integration, appeared to have achieved the ‘clear and unmistakable’ endorsement recommended by the report of the Malta Round Table Conference. On closer inspection, however, the result seemed considerably less decisive. Although the percentage voting against was relatively low, the very high abstention rate meant that less than half of the total electorate (44.24 per cent) actually voted in favour of integration.<sup>27</sup> Ruminating on the results, Lord Kilmuir informed Eden that ‘I cannot judge what part the Roman Catholic Church in Malta played in persuading those who voted against or abstained, but there is much evidence tending to suggest that the intervention of the Church was, in the last days of the referendum campaign, unmistakably hostile to Mintoff and greatly influential.’<sup>28</sup> He went on to observe that ‘If integration is to be really acceptable throughout the Maltese population, we shall have to work for reconciliation between Mintoff and the Archbishop.’<sup>29</sup> The difficulty of achieving this was soon to be revealed.

In May 1956, Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office, Eugene Melville, toured Rome and Malta to report on the question of religious assurances to the Catholic Church under integration. Following his encounter with Gonzi, Melville remarked upon the ‘depth of bitterness which the Archbishop feels towards Mr. Mintoff, both as a man and as a political leader’.<sup>30</sup> ‘There is in my view’, he continued, ‘no possibility whatsoever of a real reconciliation between these two men.’<sup>31</sup> Meville proceeded to explain that in addition to being antipathetic as men, they had entirely different conceptions about non-interference in politics. ‘The Archbishop’, he expatiated, ‘is concerned to preserve the traditional position of the Church in Malta and this undoubtedly involves a wide incursion into fields which Mr. Mintoff, with his more modern outlook, regards as exclusively political.’<sup>32</sup> Gonzi himself gave a graphic example of his willingness to stray into the political sphere, telling Melville that he wanted to ‘punch Mr. Mintoff’s nose’ and that if he was pushed too far he would “smash” Mr. Mintoff and his Party’ (Pirota 1991: 193). For good measure, he told Melville that Mintoff was ‘no Catholic’, that the policy of his government was ‘anti-clerical’, and that he ‘could not do business with that man’ (Pirota 1991: 192). Governor Laycock was forced to concede that ‘the Archbishop will never change his views on the Prime Minister or his fundamental objection to the whole concept of integration’ (Pirota 1991: 195). As regards the possibility of a reconciliation between Gonzi and the Labour leader, Laycock opined: ‘I do not for one moment suppose that the Archbishop would miss an opportunity, should it present itself, of discrediting Mintoff or that Mintoff will readily give up his avowed intention of secularising the island’.<sup>33</sup>

Although integration ultimately foundered for a variety of reasons, not least British concern regarding the potential costs of meeting Mintoff’s demand for ‘economic equivalence’ with Britain, coupled with growing scepticism towards Mintoff himself as a partner in the experiment in closer association with the mother country (Smith 2007b: 61-3), the opposition of the Church also played a role. As early as 1955, during the Malta Round Table Conference, Lennox-Boyd had admitted that he ‘could not imagine any solution working which did not command the support of the Catholic Church’ (Pirota 1991: 104). In an effort to reassure the Holy See concerning the position of the Catholic Church in Malta under integration, Her Majesty’s Chargé d’Affaires handed the Pro-Secretary for Extraordinary Affairs in the Secretariat of State of His Holiness an aide-memoire which included the assertion that there was ‘no possibility that the association with the United Kingdom might bring about any alteration in the status and rights of the Catholic Church in

Malta or that the United Kingdom legislation on such matters as civil marriage and divorce might be extended to Malta' (Pirota 1991: 486). Despite this reassurance, there remained strong British concerns that 'even if H.M.G. and the Maltese Labour Government agree about the introduction of integration, the plan may yet be torpedoed by the Archbishop'.<sup>34</sup>

The poisonous relations between Mintoff and Gonzi, which rested at the heart of the conflict between the Church and the Malta Labour Party, were exemplified by disputes about the ownership of St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta culminating in the Labour Government's refusal to return two paintings by Caravaggio to the Cathedral following their restoration in Rome. They were only returned shortly before the Mintoff's government resigned on 21 April 1958. Although Mintoff's government continued on a caretaker basis this was to be a very short-term measure. On 28 April, he launched a 'national day of protest', as a result of which Laycock was given permission to declare an emergency and take control of government into his own hands. The following day, Gonzi strongly condemned the violence which had attended Mintoff's day of protest. Lennox-Boyd immediately asked Laycock to 'tell His Grace the Archbishop of the respectful admiration with which I have read his eloquent and moving message to the people of Malta' (Pirota 2001: 57). This message stands in marked contrast with one of Lennox-Boyd's predecessors, Lord Lloyd's, accusations of disloyalty against Gonzi (Fenech 1976: 2).

In June, the British Minister to the Holy See, Sir Marcus Cheke, confirmed following discussions with Gonzi in Rome that his 'personal distaste' for Mintoff remained 'unaltered'.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, during the period of direct British rule, hostility between the Catholic Church and the Malta Labour Party had continued unabated. The Diocesan Commission for the Co-Ordination of Catholic Movements protested strongly at criticism levelled at Archbishop Gonzi by Mintoff. The relevant monthly intelligence report commented that 'This forthright condemnation is clearly the beginning of a counter attack by the Church on what they regard as an anti-clerical socialist movement which will inevitably lead to communism'.<sup>36</sup> In a display of support for the Archbishop, up to eighty thousand people turned out to welcome him on his return to Malta on 4 October 1959 following an overseas trip. The chief secretary, Archie Campbell, described this very public display of devotion to the episcopate as a 'slap in the face' for Mintoff.<sup>37</sup> No doubt emboldened by such conspicuous popularity, and affronted by the MLP's policy statement of March 1961, which the Church newspaper *Lehen is-Sewwa (The Voice of Truth)* denounced as a 'collection of anti-clerical and anti-Catholic attacks made by Mintoff during the previous years' (Pirota



2001: 779), Gonzi, along with the Bishop of Gozo, issued an interdiction against the entire MLP National Executive.<sup>38</sup> They followed this up by declaring it a sin to print, write for, sell, buy, distribute, or even read Labour Party newspapers (Boissevain 1965: 98). Gonzi also set about, admittedly with limited success, developing a leader to oppose Mintoff.<sup>39</sup> The Archbishop favoured the former President of Catholic Action and prominent Nationalist lawyer, Dr Herbert Ganado (Pirota 2001: 82). In June 1958, Ganado had characterized Mintoff as Malta's 'enemy Number One', on account of his 'anti-Catholic outlook and political conduct, his extreme socialist, leftist views, his terroristic and dictatorial methods of Government, his appeal to mob rule and violence' (Pirota 2001: 82). Ganado went on to form the Democratic National Party which secured just four seats at the 1962 elections in Malta. Despite Ganado's limited success, the fact that Malta had the highest ratio of clerics to laymen in the world provided Gonzi with an 'enormous asset' in his battles with Mintoff and the MLP (Koster 1984: 167).

In the lead-up to elections under the interim constitution drawn up by Sir Hilary Blood, Mintoff declared: 'The intensity of the Clergy's offensive against our movement has not abated. In the months to come and as elections draw nearer, their weapons will be sharper' (Mintoff 1961: 9). He also emphasized the 'mediaeval methods' being employed by priests to 'smash our movement'.<sup>40</sup> Referring to clerical intervention in council elections in Gozo, Mintoff bewailed: 'there could not be a more complete suppression of freedom of speech and a more palpable denial of the most fundamental element of human rights'.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the Malta Labour Party chairman, Anton Buttigieg, claimed that 'Violence, suppression of freedom of speech and intimidation by the clergy and their fanatical supporters have become the order of the day in Malta.'<sup>42</sup> Mintoff also alleged that in primary schools children were being 'interrogated' by teachers on the political beliefs of their parents. More specifically, he claimed that Gonzi had called a meeting of all teachers and asked them to 'carry on with this wicked process of turning children against their parents' which he characterized as defiling the name of democracy.<sup>43</sup> Not surprisingly, the party targeted the Catholic Church during the 1962 elections.

In its manifesto, the MLP supported the right of an individual to 'fulfil his civic duty without pseudo-religious interference' (Boissevain 1965: 97). Flouting this principle, the Catholic Church issued a pastoral letter exhorting the faithful to vote for those who would defend the Church, organised boycotts of MLP gatherings, and even disrupted MLP speakers by the energetic ringing of church bells.<sup>44</sup> Mintoff also accused Gonzi and the Bishop of

Gozo of ordering father-confessors ‘to ask every penitent whether she or he intended to vote Labour and to refuse absolution if a promise were not given to vote against Labour’.<sup>45</sup> Mintoff responded to such challenges by attacking the Church. ‘The priests will know that sooner or later the wind of change will also reach Malta’s shores’, he fulminated (Austin 1971: 95). So perturbed was the MLP leader that he appealed to the governor to suspend the election on grounds of clerical interference (Koster 1984: 182). Mintoff subsequently portrayed the election as the most unfair in the history of Malta (Koster 1984: 183). Governor Sir Guy Grantham remained unmoved. ‘In a country where the vast majority of people are practising Catholics’, he explained, ‘it is only to be expected that the people would ask and receive guidance from their pastors on matters of such moment as the open war declared by the Malta Labour Party against their Archbishop and their Church.’<sup>46</sup> Despite MLP protests, polling went ahead. On an impressive turn-out of over 90 per cent, the Nationalist Party of Giorgio Borg Olivier emerged with twenty-five seats to the MLP’s sixteen. Shortly after the count had been completed, Borg Olivier announced that the Nationalists’ victory had ‘vindicated his party’s policy of Independence within the Commonwealth’ (Dobie 1967: 222). Newly sworn in as premier, Borg Olivier travelled to London towards the end of March 1962 to discuss Malta’s future constitutional development.

During a meeting with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in July 1959, Gonzi had dismissed Maltese independence as an ‘absurd idea’.<sup>47</sup> A little earlier, Laycock had reported that ‘the Archbishop has let it be known that the church will fight against “independence” with all the powers at her disposal’ (Pirota 2001: 189). Demonstrating a protean turn of mind that belied his inflexible image, Gonzi began to soften his line on this key question. In the aftermath of the constitutional conference in London in July-August 1963, Governor Sir Maurice Dorman reported the Archbishop as saying: ‘I am against independence.... But if independence has to come, as I see it has to come, I would prefer that it came under a Conservative Government in Britain and with a moderate government in Malta.’<sup>48</sup> Summarising Gonzi’s evolving attitude towards independence, Dorman recorded the Archbishop’s view that ‘independence is certain and that now all attention must be concentrated on securing the future on the best and most sensible terms’.<sup>49</sup>

Towards the end of 1963, the MLP leadership ascribed the stalemate which had been reached in drafting the constitution to the ‘direct intervention by the clergy in the political field’. ‘These differences’, they continued, ‘cannot be resolved without the removal of the clauses which give rise to pseudo-religious disputes and continually bedevil the political,

social and economic issues facing our people.’<sup>50</sup> During discussions with the British Ambassador in Rome, Sir John Ward, Mintoff asserted that the whole political and social situation in Malta was ‘false and out-of-date, based on the tyranny of the Church’.<sup>51</sup> He also implied that it was only the Church and its unwelcome interference in political affairs that stood between the Labour Party and victory.

The inability of the Maltese political parties to reach agreement on the constitutional basis for independence, and the equal reluctance of the British to impose a constitution on the grounds that it risked alienating political opinion on the island, threatened Malta’s smooth progress towards self-determination. The Colonial Secretary, Duncan Sandys, attempted to locate common ground and some measure of compromise between the MLP and the Nationalist Party on fundamental differences which focussed on the position of the Church, particularly as it would be affected by the human right clauses, including provisions to preclude discriminatory legislation and the use of spiritual sanctions during elections. Sandys gloomily remarked: ‘it appears that any constitution acceptable to the Malta Government and the Church would be rejected by the Malta Labour Party’.<sup>52</sup> The UK Commissioner for Malta, Sir Edward Wakefield, warned that Sandys would ‘have to be careful to avoid the charge that he is imposing on the Maltese a constitution containing provisions unacceptable to the Catholic majority. He must be equally careful to avoid the charge that he is deliberately thwarting Independence by making its achievement conditional on popular endorsement of a secularised Constitution drafted by himself.’<sup>53</sup>

Although deadlock had apparently been reached over the Malta independence constitution by mid-1964, Borg Olivier proved willing to satisfy British defence requirements in order to safeguard the privileges of the Catholic Church. Indeed, the fact that Borg Olivier placed more importance on the issue of Maltese electoral law and the Church than on the storage of nuclear weapons provided the key to breaking the impasse.<sup>54</sup> Having informed his Cabinet colleagues of the possibility of the Maltese premier acquiescing in an acceptable defence agreement if HMG abandoned its demand for a change in the proposed Maltese electoral law, Duncan Sandys was authorized to reach a settlement on this basis.<sup>55</sup> On 21 July 1964, he was able to report to the Cabinet that negotiations had been brought to a successful conclusion: the defence agreement would not contain any ‘unacceptable limitations’ on Britain’s right to store nuclear weapons, while the British stipulation that Maltese electoral law should preclude the Catholic Church from exercising undue spiritual influence during elections was dropped.<sup>56</sup>

Despite previously dismissing Borg Olivier as a ‘broken read’ (Pirota 2001: 75), Gonzi clearly decided, if not exactly to throw in his lot with the Nationalist Party leader, then at least to preserve the privileges and position of the Catholic Church in collaboration with him. This in turn necessitated not obstructing Malta’s progress towards independence, but rather seeking to secure the best deal possible for the Church in an independent Malta. The rapprochement between Gonzi and Borg Olivier contrasted with the enduring enmity between the Archbishop and the MLP leader. In August 1963, for instance, Gonzi told Sir Edward Wakefield that Mintoff should be imprisoned since the Labour leader’s warning that he and his followers would ‘fight in the streets’ for their rights constituted a threat to public order.<sup>57</sup> Speaking before a ‘vast crowd’ from the balcony at St. John’s Co-Cathedral in March 1964, Gonzi called Mintoff an ‘apostate’ to which the MLP leader quickly responded by asking: ‘Do you want a liar as your Archbishop?’<sup>58</sup> Somewhat earlier, Mintoff, in a pamphlet entitled *How Britain Rules Malta*, had accused Gonzi and the Catholic Church of being imperial collaborators with the British. ‘Colonialism to survive’, he posited,

must find reliable allies rising from the same soil - the maharajahs, the sheiks, etc, to whom a political change often means a social change and the consequent loss of material privileges and benefits. Their counterparts in Malta were the high dignitaries of the Catholic Church who frequently turned the political arena into undignified free-for-all in which pseudo-religious fanaticism was only equalled by crass and atrocious conceptions of social justice (Mintoff, undated: 3).

The importance of collaborating elites has been taken up by historians of empire, most notably Ronald Robinson who argued that ‘The theory of collaboration suggests that at every stage from external imperialism to decolonisation, the working of imperialism was determined by the indigenous systems connecting European and Afro-Asian components’ (Robinson 1972: 138).

In the case of Malta, the loyalty of Gonzi and the Catholic Church to the colonial link with Britain if anything increased during the process of decolonization, which can be used to qualify Robinson’s contention that ‘when the colonial rulers had run out of indigenous collaborators, they either chose to leave or were compelled to go’ (Robinson 1972: 139). Gonzi himself admitted in 1957 that ‘he would never tolerate a move by Mr Mintoff to break the British connection which the Archbishop regarded as vital to Malta’ (Pirota 2001: 590). Nevertheless, as we have seen, the Archbishop revealed a flexible frame of mind. Once Borg Olivier had come to power in 1962 committed to achieving Maltese independence, Gonzi

accepted the inevitability of change and sought to attain the best possible settlement for the Church. He undoubtedly perceived the Nationalist government in Malta and the Conservative one in Britain as eminently preferable in this regard to possible future Labour administrations in both countries. For its part, Britain, while undeniably welcoming the Church's crusade against Mintoff and the Malta Labour Party, especially following the demise of integration, did not attempt to use the influence of the Church to impede Malta's progress towards independence. Indeed, there was a growing recognition, not least in the Colonial Office, that Maltese self-determination could not be frustrated indefinitely.

The 'wind of change era', symbolized by British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's famous speech to the South African Parliament in February 1960, is normally associated with the rapid decommissioning of empire in Africa. Its ethos, however, found echoes in British policy-making towards Malta which the new Secretary of State for Colonies, Iain Macleod, visited in December 1959. On his return he impressed upon Macmillan the unsatisfactory nature of direct rule, pointing out Malta's 'very long history of representative government'.<sup>59</sup> Macleod subsequently underlined that 'H.M.G.'s policy for all dependent territories is that they should be advanced to independence or to responsible self-government, preferably within the Commonwealth. There are no exceptions to this rule.'<sup>60</sup> Returning to the Maltese people's tradition of self-government, he stressed that 'no solution which fails to give them a full share in the management of their affairs can be expected to attract their sympathy or support'.<sup>61</sup> '[I]t is not a question whether, but how and when Malta should achieve a greater measure of self-government', Macleod insisted.<sup>62</sup> Gonzi, despite his highly traditional mindset, equally came to accept this fact, but did his utmost to ensure that independence was not achieved under the auspices of Mintoff's Malta Labour Party.

Gonzi's efforts merely won a stay of execution, however. A mellowing of the papacy's attitude towards socialism as a result of the Second Vatican Council (1963-5) led to pressure being brought to bear on the Catholic Church in Malta in general, and Archbishop Gonzi in particular, to moderate their stance towards Mintoff's MLP. This culminated in an agreement announced on 4 April 1969 between the Church and the MLP which included the crucial statement: 'In modern society it is necessary that distinction be made between the political community and the Church. The very nature of the Church demands she does not interfere in politics' (Koster 1984: 210). This 'peace treaty' was undoubtedly an important factor in the MLP's narrow victory in the 1971 elections. Shorn of protection from either the British, or the Nationalist Party, the Church saw its powers progressively emasculated by

Mintoff's government. Demonstrating the same propensity to bend before the wind that he had revealed in the early 1960s with respect to Malta's incipient independence, Gonzi did not actively resist the MLP's programme, not least over fears that further action would be taken affecting the Church if he did (Koster 1984: 240). By the time of the declaration of Malta's republican status in 1974, the Church was no longer an effective political opponent of Mintoff and the Malta Labour Party. That the Church's demise had been delayed during Malta's often turbulent transition from dependence to independence, nevertheless, was due in no small part to the role played by Archbishop Gonzi.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Note by J. S. Bennett, 25 Sept. 1950, The National Archives, Kew (TNA), CO 158/590/89844/22.
- <sup>2</sup> Laycock to Lennox-Boyd, 7 June 1956, TNA, CO 926/299.
- <sup>3</sup> Memorandum of the Malta Labour Party to the British Labour Party by Mintoff, Oct. 1936, attached to a letter from Mintoff to Gillies, 20 Nov. 1936, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester, Labour Party International Department, Correspondence: William Gillies, WG/MAL/62iii.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Dom Mintoff: Pugnacious Prime Minister of Malta who fought for liberation from British colonial rule', *The Independent*, 23 Aug. 2012.
- <sup>5</sup> Campbell to A. B. Acheson, 11 Aug. 1944, TNA, CO 981/13.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Interview with Archbishop of Malta', Minute by Sir Arthur Dawe, 11 Sept 1945, TNA, CO 158/558/89786.
- <sup>7</sup> Note by Bennett, 25 Sept. 1950, TNA, CO 158/590/89844/22.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Trafford Smith to W. A. Morris, No. 107/55, 29 July 1955, TNA, FO 371/117998/RV 1781/10.
- <sup>10</sup> Laycock to Lennox-Boyd, no. 248, 4 Aug. 1955, TNA, FO 371/117998/RV 1781/10.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Telegram from Laycock to Secretary of State for Colonies, no. 170, 9 Aug. 1955, TNA, CO 926/295.
- <sup>14</sup> Minute from Kilmuir to Eden, 26 Oct. 1955, TNA, CAB 134/1295, MC(55)9.
- <sup>15</sup> Memorandum by Laycock, [Oct. 1955], TNA, CO 926/321.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> *Malta Round Table Conference 1955: Report* Cmd 9657, 1955, p 21, para 80.
- <sup>21</sup> Seeking to justify his decision to hold the referendum in early 1956, Mintoff told Lennox-Boyd that 'Lent is known in Latin countries as a period when the Church is at peak of its spiritual power. It is easy for [a] few extremists to cross the thin border line dividing spiritual from political field and bring about politico-religious crisis' (Pirota 1991: 123).

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- <sup>22</sup> ‘Malta’: minute from Lennox-Boyd to Eden, 9 Feb. 1956, TNA, PREM 11/1432, PM(56)11.
- <sup>23</sup> Telegram from deputy governor to Lennox-Boyd, no. 41, 29 Jan 1956, TNA, CO 926/297.
- <sup>24</sup> ‘Malta’: minute from Lennox-Boyd to Eden, TNA, PREM 11/1432, PM(56)11.
- <sup>25</sup> Despatch from Laycock to Lennox-Boyd, no. 248, 4 Aug. 1955, TNA, FO 371/117998/RV 1781/10.
- <sup>26</sup> Telegram from Melville to Laycock, no. 209, 27 Sept. 1955, TNA CO 926/321.
- <sup>27</sup> ‘Malta: the referendum result’: memorandum by Lennox-Boyd, 17 Feb. 1956, TNA, CAB 134/1202, CA(56)7.
- <sup>28</sup> Minute from Kilmuir to Eden, 16 Feb. 1956, TNA, PREM 11/1432.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Report of discussions in Rome and Malta on religious assurances (6-16 May) by E. Melville, 22 May 1956, TNA. FO 371/124260/RV 1781/30.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Laycock to Lennox-Boyd, 7 June 1956, TNA, CO 926/299.
- <sup>34</sup> ‘Brief for His Excellency’s visit to London, February 1957’, p. 7, Rhodes House Library, Oxford, MSS Brit. Emp. s. 530, Papers of Trafford Smith, Box 5, file 4.
- <sup>35</sup> Cheke to J. M. Addis, no. 1053/23/58, 19 June 1958, TNA, FO 371/136192/R1781/6.
- <sup>36</sup> National Archives of Malta (NAM), G (Governor/Governor-General) Files, Box 3, 111/57 part 6, no 99A, monthly intelligence report for the period 13 Sept to 12 Oct 1959.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid, no. 99, Campbell to N. B. J. Huijsman, 12 Oct 1959.
- <sup>38</sup> Campbell to J. M. Kisch, 10 Oct. 1961, TNA, CO 926/1539.
- <sup>39</sup> ‘Malta’, minute from Lord Perth to Iain Macleod, 16 March 1960, TNA, CO 926/1245.
- <sup>40</sup> Glamorgan Record Office, Cardiff, Papers of Stanley Awbery, DAW/Parl/13/8, letter from Mintoff to Awbery, 17 June 1961.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., DAW Parl 13/7/4, Mintoff to Macleod, 26 May 1961.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, DAW/Parl/13/7/1, Buttigieg to Awbery, 27 May 1961.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., DAW/Parl/13/8, Mintoff to Awbery, 17 June 1961.
- <sup>44</sup> The MLP’s grievances against the Church were detailed in a letter to the governor (NAM, G Files, Box 3, 12/62, no 6 enclosure, A. Buttigieg and J. Zerafa to Grantham, 14 Feb 1962).
- <sup>45</sup> Glamorgan Record Office, Cardiff, Papers of Stanley Awbery, DAW/Parl/13/21, Mintoff to Awbery, 14 March 1962.
- <sup>46</sup> NAM, G Files, Box 4, 12/62, no 9, Grantham to Maudling, 3 May 1962.
- <sup>47</sup> Record of a meeting between Macmillan and Gonzi at 10 Downing Street, 29 July 1959, TNA, PREM 11/2745.
- <sup>48</sup> Dorman to Sir John Martin, Sept. 1963, TNA, CO 926/1884.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup> NAM, G Files, Box 11, G 72/62 V, Mintoff, Buttigieg (deputy leader), D. M. Cremona (chairman) and Zerafa (general secretary) to Duncan Sandys, 12 Dec 1963.

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- <sup>51</sup> Note on conversation with the leader of the Malta Labour Party in his room at the Parliament buildings of Malta, 14 Dec. 1963, by Ward, 31 Dec. 1963, TNA, CO 926/1876.
- <sup>52</sup> Telegram from the Foreign Office to certain of Her Majesty's Representatives, 4 March 1964, TNA, CO 926/1887.
- <sup>53</sup> Wakefield to Martin, 10 March 1964, TNA, CO 926/1946.
- <sup>54</sup> 'Malta': minute from F. W. Mottershead to Peter Thorneycroft, 13 July 1964, TNA, DEFE 13/531.
- <sup>55</sup> 'Malta': Cabinet conclusions, 16 July 1964, TNA, CAB 128/38, CM 38(64)6.
- <sup>56</sup> 'Malta': Cabinet conclusions, 21 July 1964, TNA, CAB 128/38, CM 40(64)1.
- <sup>57</sup> Wakefield to C. G. Eastwood, 17 Aug. 1963, TNA, CO 926/1818.
- <sup>58</sup> Wakefield to Martin, 10 March 1964, TNA, CO 926/1946.
- <sup>59</sup> Minute from Macleod to Macmillan, 29 Dec. 1959, TNA, PREM 11/3423, PM(59)65.
- <sup>60</sup> 'Malta': minute by Macleod, 25 May 1960, TNA, CO 926/1245.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>62</sup> 'Malta: constitutional changes': Cabinet Colonial Policy Committee, 20 July 1960, TNA, CAB 134/1559, CPC 6(60)1.

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