

**Social, Health & Family Affairs Committee  
Council of Europe**

**10<sup>th</sup> May, 1999**

Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a distinguished honour for me and my parliamentary and government colleagues to welcome you all to Malta. Your presence here is of significance. It is perhaps a coincidence that the Council of Europe's Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee is meeting here in Malta at the same time when this august body is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. But coincidences are also of significance, and I must admit that I am quite proud of the fact that your presence here today inevitably gives a social dimension to this important anniversary.

During these past fifty years, the Council of Europe has always been a front-runner in its quest for social development and the protection of human dignity. Since 1950 the Council has upheld the European Convention for Human Rights later institutionalised by the European Court. The reconstitution of this important institution has resulted in a stronger, more powerful tool which serves as an efficient and effective guardian against transgression of one's basic human rights.

Equally important, the Council of Europe has been a major force in the social reconstruction and development of nations. Through diverse means, the Parliamentary Assembly has been committed, on a pan-European basis, to help member states develop and fine-tune their social infrastructure. Such a contribution should not be undervalued, particularly in retrospect to the significant geo-political and socio-cultural changes, which have marked European history in the past decades.

We have all been shaped through experience, and our individual histories and cultural backgrounds are part and parcel of a collective reality. We are all siblings of the electronic revolution, a generation shaken by the effects of the cold war, yet triumphant in our quest for unity, prosperity and social-interdependence, as evidenced in the creation of an European Union. We have witnessed successive re-mappings of the European geographical chart, shifted ideological paradigms and re-defined Europe across the years. All of this has left an indelible mark on the way nations behave, act and govern.

Through all of this rich historical development, I am proud to say that our country has been an active catalyst of change. As a small island state, Malta has as its heritage a synthesis of elements from many cultural traditions, the result of our geographical location at the crossroads between East and West and North and South.

We live in a period of rapid social transition, times that demand greater flexibility. Europe is changing and we are all social-actors, active participants in a changing environment. Through this change our nations are all striving for a sense of equanimity. Unfortunately, what is happening in the Balkans is reminiscent of the inability to accept such change and the antithesis of the European struggle for unity in diversity.

Yet even on this front, the Council of Europe has pledged its contribution to the stability programme for south-east Europe by mobilising all its experts and resources to assist in the restoration of democratic stability and security in the region, according to the Budapest Convention endorsed in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe last Friday.

Parallel to the Council of Europe's endeavour to make the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms central to the European ideal, the Council has also been extremely active in the sphere of economic and social rights, primarily through the European Social Charter. This important instrument came into force five months after Malta attained its political independence in 1964. The past thirty-five years have seen successive governments integrating the European Social Charter in the social fabric of our legislative and service structure.

The Council of Europe continues today to lead the social agenda of its member states in its endeavour to fight social exclusion and strive for social cohesion. Unfortunately, we must admit that due to an accelerated globalisation of economies and a cultural function directed principally to the satisfaction of individual needs, our communities are under the continuous threat of accepting without question the marginalisation of a large part of their members. Increasingly, the Council of Europe has to take the leading role in giving new life to the values that made Europe what it is today.

Your discussions over the coming days will focus on health, old age and social development. In this context, therefore, I believe it would be useful if I briefly outline to you the basic principles upon which our social policy fabric is woven.

The basis of my government's overall policy is based on the value of solidarity and its objective is to create an all-inclusive society. It is a policy which has its historical roots in the welfare state concept but which we have today developed into what can be better described as a welfare society. The difference is as obvious as it is fundamental.

In a few words, we strive to create a society that cares, a society where no one is excluded, a society where everyone belongs! Caring cannot be restricted to governments. Admittedly, government has to lead, where leadership is required, but this is only the minimum expected from whoever shoulders the collective representative responsibility in a democracy. The maximum is achieved only when each and every person who lives in our society voluntarily accepts his or her responsibility towards fellow citizens who happen to be marginalised or who are at risk of being marginalised. This is when the welfare state makes a quantum and quality leap, becoming a collective group where solidarity is translated into concrete action.

The values and principles that guide my government in policy planning and development revolve around the human person, which is the focal point of all our policy decisions. It is a person-centred philosophy whose pragmatic manifestations reinforce human relationships. Values such as liberty, social justice, solidarity, tolerance, and subsidiarity determine the development of our democratic practices, contemporaneously serving as guide-posts for the successful negotiation of both the macro and the micro challenges which face our nation.

Our quest to maximise human potential stems from our conviction that the collective well-being depends on the well-being of every single individual. We are also conscious of the fact that every single person has the potential to make a difference and therefore to improve his own quality of life and that of his fellow citizens. It is on this basis that we recognise the enormous potential of every single person and therefore we also recognise our duty to formulate policies which tap this inestimable and unique resource.

There are important corollaries, which are derived from this important principle. They are solid pillars, which determine the way we design our social, economic and cultural policies. One such important pillar refers to subsidiarity. We firmly believe that wherever and whenever possible, decisions are best taken at the level where their impact is mostly felt. Devolution of power is therefore an intrinsic basis of our policy. But it is a devolution of power, in a participative not merely a representative democracy.

There are other vital pillars, which I must mention. The centrality of the family as the building block of society, inter-generational dialogue, the movement of the elderly from the periphery to the centre of social activity, the alleviation of poverty through a participative welfare society, our commitment to equal opportunities for all women, men, children, persons with disability, and the development of a policy of inclusion on all fronts are all manifestations of the values which sustain our community and which my government has adopted as foundation principles guiding the way forward.

We are therefore committed to continue investing in community based services which allow the weak in our society to receive adequate support for them to live an independent life which has quality. We are committed to strengthen our social security systems and to transform them, as much as possible, into personalised services which address the individual needs of each person who is socially challenged.

My country is currently facing some exciting challenges. Our vision for full membership in the European Union, together with the process of economic restructuring, necessitate the harmonisation of our economic and social policies, thus, stalling and possibly narrowing the welfare gap. Our solutions to these challenges are myriad, and I am happy to note that the contents of your discussions in the coming days are pertinent to our local scenario. Allow me to mention a couple of examples.

An integrated effort to blend our economic and social programmes is embodied in the newly set-up Commission for Welfare Reform with the remit to ensure both economic sustainability and social equity and justice to our social security schemes. Moreover, our adoption of user-led policies in the delivery of services through the promulgation of Public Service Charters and concepts such as 'relationship service' augur well for ensuring open, free and efficient access to information regarding health, education and social welfare services.

Distinguished colleagues

The topics on your agenda are both challenging and taxing. Indeed, they are all person oriented. The issues raised by modern medicine and the controversies which

have recently arisen regarding the human rights and the dignity of the terminally ill and the dying demand that we tackle these delicate issues never forgetting that the human person is at the centre of our attention and that every single human life has a unique value which has an innate right to achieve the highest quality of life possible under every circumstance.

Similarly, the issues regarding the future of senior citizens challenges us to seek ways and means how to guarantee self fulfilment for those who reach a mature age and how to allow them to continue to participate in their own well-being and in the well-being of society.

Allow me therefore to conclude by wishing you success in your deliberations. I do so because I am fully conscious of the fact that the impact of your deliberations will be beneficial to all.

**Lawrence Gonzi**  
**Deputy Prime Minister and**  
**Minister for Social Policy**