

## **Parliament: Freedom of Information Bill unanimously approved**

The Malta Independent

By Reuben Fenech

July 15, 2008

The debate in the House of Representatives regarding the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act yesterday continued with members of both sides contributing to the debate.

Labour main spokesperson for Public Services and Public Investment Helena Dalli said that the Opposition agrees in principle with the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act. However, the Opposition has its reservations as regards the content of the Bill. Ms Dalli criticised the Prime Minister for delving more into the government's electoral promises rather than the substance of the law when piloting the Bill. Ms Dalli criticised the definition of "eligible persons" contained in the Bill and said that the definition for instance does not exclude research organisations. Ms Dalli also criticised the fact that requests for information will become more bureaucratic.

Nationalist MP Charlo Bonnici welcomed the proposed enactment saying that the Freedom of Information Act will make the workings of public entities more transparent. Mr Bonnici remarked that the Bill is giving eligible persons the right to information which up till date was only contained in ad hoc enactments which are sectorial in nature and not general.

Opposition main spokesperson for Education and Media Evarist Bartolo criticised the legislators for using as a model the United Kingdom's Freedom of Information Act, saying that the British are not the most advanced in this field.

To substantiate his argument, Mr Bartolo quoted Dr Tony Wright speaking in the House of Commons, after a number of restrictions proposed to the original Freedom of Information Act were being discussed in the House of Commons. Dr Wright said that "the fundamental reason for wanting freedom of information has not yet entered the bloodstream of the government". Dr Wright further argued that unless the freedom of information laws produced the "culture change and entered the bloodstream of every public body in the land, it would not be doing its job".

Mr Bartolo added that laws of countries such as Finland, which is the pioneer in freedom of information laws, and Sweden should have been studied and used as sources of the Bill.

Mr Bartolo said that there is no doubt that Malta needs legislation concerning freedom of information. However, Mr Bartolo questioned whether legislation should have been incorporated into an ad hoc enactment or else incorporated into the Constitution. Mr Bartolo said that the number of countries that are adding the right to freedom of information in their Constitution is increasing. In Sweden, freedom of information is one of the four basic fundamental human rights.

“The proposed enactment is not innovative but restrictive”, Mr Bartolo criticised. Mr Bartolo said that the Bill should define what is in the “public interest”. As regards the criteria set out for eligible persons, Mr Bartolo said that the five-year residence limit is very restrictive.

In his winding up speech, Parliamentary Secretary for Public Dialogue and Information Chris Said said that the United Kingdom’s Freedom of Information Act is not the only source of the proposed enactment. Dr Said set out to answer various issues brought forward by the Opposition. He said that most of the technical issues and reservations will be discussed at Committee Stage.

The Bill was unanimously approved and sent to Committee Stage.

The House then continued to debate the Public Administration Bill. Nationalist MPs Frederick Azzopardi and Joseph Falzon contributed to the debate.

A parliamentary resolution was unanimously approved in the beginning of yesterday’s parliamentary sitting to the effect that Dr Albert Ganado and his wife Muriel Ganado can now transfer a rare collection of Malta maps valued over e1,747,500 to the government of Malta in exchange of the immovable property where Dr Ganado and his wife live. The said immovable property, which has been rented by the government to the Ganado family for a very long time, is valued at e1,727,500. The rare collection of maps has been described in a report laid out in the House of Representatives by Mr Joseph C. Sammut as being unique and of significant historical and cultural value to Malta.

Source: <http://www.independent.com.mt/news.asp?newsitemid=72307>