

BOOK REVIEW

Godfrey A. Pirotta, **Malta: Selected Essays in Governance and Public Administration**

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Governance encompasses the structures and processes that ensure governing and provide mechanisms by which the governed have to comply to ensure stability, inclusiveness, responsiveness, transparency and accountability. It differs from government; the focus is less on the state and its organisation and more on social dimensions and actions. Public administration is just a component of governance. It is the discipline concerning the implementation of government policy and the preparation of public officers for engagement in the civil service, that is, in the public sector, at various levels of government.

The publication *Malta: Selected Essays in Governance and Public Administration* is a collection of seminal research articles by Godfrey A. Pirotta republished by the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies. This academy, which forms an integral part of the University of Malta, is an outstanding international seat of learning for young diplomats from the Mediterranean and Africa. The majority of papers included in this publication were published either as studies in internationally refereed journals or as chapters in books on politics, public administration and sociology and are grouped into two thematic parts, both focused on Malta. The first consists of critical essays regarding governance read through a historical perspective. The focus of the second part is public administration post 1979, when Malta broke away from its traditional role as a military base and sought to build an entirely new economy. The public administration during British Colonial Malta until 1940 is the theme of another landmark textbook authored by Pirotta (1996).

The first part of the book opens with an essay focusing on a pertinent question in nineteenth-century colonial Malta, the use of English as the official language and its impact on the livelihood of the Maltese working in the civil service, an aspect ignored for almost a century. The language question, “which plagued Maltese politics, ... was equally about bread and butter issues as well as linguistic” (p. 7). This article is followed by others which address the evolution of the national anthem from a hymn written for school children and the historical process which, after 80 years, culminated

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in the building of the new House of Representatives in the capital Valletta, a direct commission to the Italian architect Renzo Piano. Despite protests from sectors of the public, “the government pressed on with its plans and Piano’s creation, love it or hate it” (p. 47). The standing of this article has to be read in the context that Pirotta is the author of the official history of Malta’s Parliament (Pirotta, 2006).

These papers are followed by another two: one addresses the traditionally powerful political parties and their renewal over the years through the redefinition of Malta’s identity and the paradox of whether the development was political or economic; the other addresses the building of the democratic state of Malta, notably the period 1921–76 with a special focus on the rapport between the Malta Labour Party and the powerful clerical establishment, a main topic covered earlier by Adrianus Koster (1981). The themes identified in these writings still underline the *forma mentis* of the main political parties. A paper focused on the struggle of women in politics discusses how such parties approached gender issues by zooming in on political emancipation, electoral participation, women politicians and the politics of gender. “All this makes one believe that politics in Malta will, in the not distant future, become much more representative than it is today” (p. 102). A paper on the foreign policy of Malta post Dom Mintoff is, according to the World Bibliographical Series, “a clear and concise article ... [which] considers Malta’s possible foreign policy in the future” (Thackrah, 1985, p. 75). This paper is followed by another which addresses the substantive deliberations in parliament from 1968 to 1987 as Malta’s parties sought to evaluate and initiate relations with the constantly evolving European Community. This part of the book concludes with an article on the academic study of the disciplines of politics and public administration in Malta which, in 1997, lagged behind considering the standing which both enjoyed in other parts of Europe.

The second part of the publication opens with two papers addressing the public service: its future and its reform, given the local political context. “The future of the public service depends ... on the direction and the way political affairs are conducted” (p. 165). The review article on the public service reform concludes that “public service reform, in Malta and other micro-states such as Grenada, will never become meaningful until the political problems that assail them have been faced and resolved” (p. 177). These articles are followed by two sets of three papers. The first set covers the organisation of public administration and civil society, the state and running of its institutions and the bringing about of good governance in Malta. The article on the organisation of public administration and civil society actually consists of comments and remarks – including an endorsement of the call for greater Euro-Mediterranean cooperation – on the keynote paper of Professor Eva Etzioni-Halevy (1997) presented at a conference on Governance in the Euro-Mediterranean Region at The Hague, Netherlands. The keynote speech delivered in the Maltese language at Ġużè Ellul Mercer Foundation over two decades ago includes recommendations which have only been taken up recently, one of them relating to the independence of

the judiciary and recently adopted by the Maltese Parliament. The article with respect to governance sends out the warning that, in a globalised world, “the challenges facing Malta are ... great.... Investors will find it increasingly difficult to commit funds in countries where the institutions of the state are weak and incapable of providing even the most basic forms of protection for their investment” (p. 201).

The second set of papers addresses the Maltese experience of establishing local governance in a centralised micro-state, public administration education and training, and the question of whether the notion of privatisation in a small island state bade farewell to paternalism through public enterprise. Given the strong two-party system present in Malta, polarisation remains a constant issue for debate. In his paper reviewing eight years of local councils’ politics, first established in 1993, Pirota demonstrates that these have contributed significantly towards increased polarisation and little by way of decentralisation. Their polarisation resembles that of the local band clubs – at the time social clubs which served primarily as hotbeds for political activism – identified by Jeremy Boissevain during his fieldwork undertaken six decades ago (Boissevain, 1965). With respect to public administration, the respective article acknowledges that graduates in the discipline fail to read public service as a profession and instead read it as safe and secure employment; the current staff development strategies within the public sector needing time to mature. The paper addressing privatisation argues that unions and local entrepreneurs were not convinced that it would fulfil the benefits foreseen by the government, tracing the fears of a common foreign takeover in many micro-states. This second part of the book concludes with a paper addressing the pertinent scenario relevant in a small island state where the government is the main employer, namely the politics of public expenditure in Malta, a country long identified by Boissevain as run by friends of friends (Boissevain, 1974). It addresses politics and the politicisation of public space, public expenditure and clientelist politics, budgetary policy processes, trends in public expenditure, capital and recurrent expenditure and concludes by outlining implications of public revenue and public expenditure.

Using Malta as a case-study, this publication outlines the intricate issues in a systematic and readable manner. It should be mandatory reading – for scholars, policymakers, analysts and students alike – on the governance and public administration of this EU member state and of small states, generally. It is an outstanding collection of numerous essays which highlights the complexity of the dynamics of local party politics and provides a holistic interpretative approach to reading governance and public administration grounded in a robust analytical historical background. The fact that many articles are dated two decades ago does not diminish their relevance and Pirota pulls no punches on the need for reform. Indeed, much of their content is under debate today as Malta seeks to reform its governing institutions and its processes of governance. Besides being outstanding in their readings of these disciplines at the time of their publication, the articles provide a strong contribution to our understanding of the challenges faced by small island

states when it comes to governance. This is especially true as Malta, the smallest EU member-state, seeks to optimize its membership.

Malta: Selected Essays in Governance and Public Administration is authored by Malta's pre-eminent professor of government and policy studies at the University of Malta and the official historian of Malta's parliament; its publication coincides with the first centenary of the establishment of the parliament of Malta.

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