

WIRT GĦAWDEX Debate
GOZO – MALTA Subsea Tunnel
ACTION NEEDS TO BE TAKEN NOW!

18 March 2019 Oratorju Don Bosco

Gozo Business Chamber

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Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen! It is with pleasure that I, on behalf of the Gozo Business Chamber, accepted the invitation of Wirt Għawdex to be with you this evening. I would like to thank Wirt Għawdex for the invitation and for their initiative to hold this debate. The subject, the Gozo-Malta Subsea Tunnel, has been promoted by the Chamber for the last ten years but we started mentioning a permanent link between the islands of Gozo and Malta more than twenty years ago, the same time the Gozo Business Chamber was founded. In the end we are doing nothing more than echoing what our forefathers have planned and wanted fifty years ago.

Last Thursday I was on the 6.45 boat from Gozo to Malta. It is one of the most populated trips from; an everyday occurrence. Students and workers seated in every conceivable corner, sitting on the stairs, strewn on the floor, taking every space available. Anger took over me. To make a few steps I had to pay attention not to step on someone. In a recollection flash I remembered a particular trip of the 18 March 1994. Exactly 25 years ago to the day. Had to go to Malta in the afternoon, can't remember why. Boarded the Calypso and the trip began making its way to Sa Maison because of adverse weather. It was a harrowing experience. Tourists jam packed like a can of sardines all sitting up being hit to and fro. Never thought we would arrive alive but we did manage it after all. The next day, the feast of St Joseph, I spent a couple of hours writing a long letter to Dr Fenech Adami, the then Prime Minister of Malta, putting up the burden on his shoulders, should Gozo have a repeat of that fateful 28 October 1948. Action was taken and the plan for the new ships and a proper Cirkewwa berthing space soon came rolling out. Remember, action needs to be taken.

Time passed and in May 1999 taking part in a BOV conference in Gozo entitled "Leveraging Private Enterprise" I advocated the setting up of a Gozo-Malta Transport Authority, that apart from having Gozo Channel under its auspices, would take care of the ports and their facilities, take new initiatives to develop

the communication between the two islands and last but not least indulge into discussion on a permanent link between the two islands.

The debate on this particular project was started ten years ago and discussion has been going since then. One of the first Public meetings was held in February 2011, eight years ago, and in March 2011 in the publication of the Gozo Business Chamber, Isle Link we stated that, “the question of a permanent link, has now gathered irreversible momentum. Since January of the present year (and we are speaking of 2011), when the debate was brought up to the forefront on the national media, what had always been a dream in the mind of a number of people, has become a possibility within the grasp of a people”.

A visit was conducted to Norway in April 2011, after which Eivind Grov, Chief Scientist and Professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology was appointed as consultant to the Maltese Government and he is still acting in this function today. One interesting public meeting of that year was that conducted by the same Professor Grov in June 2011 at the Grand Hotel organized by the Chamber in conjunction with Government. The audience on that day had the opportunity to ask all the questions they wanted about tunneling technology. I still have clear in my mind his assurance about the fact that during earthquakes, the safest place where one could be is a tunnel; and also that tunnels can be built anywhere, albeit with various grades of difficulty, but tunnels can even be constructed in the sand.

In the end it resulted that there was general consensus of the Gozitan Constituted bodies, the Gozo Regional Council and the Church, who all backed the political responsibility assumed by Government to study the matter further. The Opposition also gave the thumbs up to the proposal and a subsea tunnel appeared to be the preferred way to link the two islands. The result of this concerted effort was the report: “Preliminary Analysis; Assessment of Road Tunnel Options between Malta and Gozo” by Mott McDonald in March 2012. The conclusion made by this report was that “The review of the number of different types of undersea tunnels demonstrates in general terms that with regard to the overall length, depth and configuration and size of tunnels, an undersea tunneled link between Malta and Gozo would be feasible and does not exceed the capability of current technology”. (page 38) This information is all publicly available.

A year later, in March 2013 there was the general election in which both political parties promised that they will be working on a permanent link.

Labour took Government and the tunnel project was shelved for a while. A bridge scenario was being envisaged and the “Malta-Gozo Link Feasibility Study, China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) was published in April 2014. This project was estimated with a CAPEX of €800m.

It took the Gozo Business Chamber some time to convince the present administration to consider the feasibility of a subsea tunnel and that this project could be better than what was being proposed. In the initial meetings, we were met with scepticism, negativism and perplexity. But with patience and dialogue and I suppose with some internal help from Dr Franco Mercieca we managed to convince. In the end in February 2015 the Chamber took the initiative to commission Dr Gordon Cordina to conduct a study on the economic and financial feasibility of alternative solutions towards providing connectivity between the Island of Gozo and the main Island of Malta. Transport Malta in a short time came on board and in September 2015 the report was published.

“Establishing a Permanent Link between the Island of Gozo and Mainland Malta: An Economic Cost Benefit Analysis of Available Strategic Options” as the report was titled, studied three options: Option 1, Business as usual – a baseline scenario; Option 2: Project Scenario: Linking both islands by means of a bridge; Option 3: Project Scenario: Linking both islands through the subseabed tunnel scenario. The economic analysis presented in this report takes consideration of the following factors:

- Effects on traffic flows on economic activity in Gozo
- Effects on vehicle travel and waiting times
- Implications for the costs of fuels used
- Climate change and pollution effects

From an economic perspective, the tunnel results to be by far the preferred option with a maximum CAPEX of €300m.

This report was discussed internally in the Chamber and then was presented to the Prime Minister and various other members of the Cabinet. It was also discussed with various stakeholders and also publicly presented. Copies of this report are available.

Come the general election of June 2017 and both parties promise in their electoral manifestos that the tunnel would become a reality. Specifically the Partit Laburista manifesto stated that over the past four years a lot of work has occurred, "and today we are in the most advanced position we have ever been

on this project. A number of technical and scientific tests have occurred both from foreign companies and the University of Malta, and an Italian University. We are currently undergoing geological tests called 'investigative coring' ." The manifesto also reads that a Social Impact Assessment had been undertaken and that the next stage is for an Expression of Interest to be issued.

In February of last year the Malta-Gozo tunnel Steering Committee was set up headed by Dr Franco Mercieca. In May 2018 Transport Malta published the Project Description Statement and the Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) issued an Environmental Impact Assessment and invited comments from Constituted bodies, NGO and individuals. The Gozo Business Chamber made its contribution to both the statement and the EIA in August of last year. I am sure that most of the associations represented here made their own comments. We levelled criticism to some of the statements contained and made our own suggestions and proposals.

Why have I taken the pain of going through this timeline? Because it appears that many have just woken up to the fact that the tunnel is just round the corner. We have spoken about this project for years in a convincing way but a number of people, who I don't blame at all, have been thinking that this is just another electoral gimmick. And whilst we have criticised the steering committee for not divulging enough information mostly about the geological findings, one cannot say that there is lack of information on the project itself. The discussion has been going on for more than eight years, a number of studies have been published, and debates have been conducted. Throwing into the equation a fully fledged metro system when it is very well known that such a project is not within the short term vision of the country, smells of a derailing of the tunnel project. Of course a metro system is what is ideal for the country but studies show that if it will arrive to Gozo it will not be before another 30 years. Why do not these associations undertake a study on the metro as a solution for Gozo's immediate problems? If we just wait and see and continue discussing, Gozo is doomed.

The situation of the present service being provided by Gozo Channel Company Limited, albeit performing to the very best of the actual capabilities with the vessels in hand, has reached saturation point. A call for a fourth vessel by all Gozo based associations has been made, whilst the fast ferry service is direly needed. We are also all in favour of reviving the helicopter service and we reiterate our call for all these options to materialize sooner rather than later. But I repeat, we cannot stay just throwing proposals into a discussion. The

present boats are nearing the end of their lifetime and we are risking a complete meltdown of the service we have.

In the May 2018 Project Objectives of Transport Malta, it is highlighted that this infrastructural project will “address the accessibility between Malta and Gozo, thus addressing the everyday problems being experienced by Gozitans to travel to their place of work”. Whilst it is true that Gozitans are experiencing a myriad of problems to travel to their place of work this is only just one of the problems of the Gozitan experience. It is the experience of the Gozitan student faced with the problem of unreachable rents. It is the sorry state of Gozitan businesses made to wait interminably with their drivers and trucks unable to load their vehicles because of the double ramp usage. It is the problem of the Gozitan traveller and tourist alike missing flights or leaving early on a 3am boat because of a 7.30 flight. It is the problem of Gozitan patients having to travel for tests or treatment. The list is endless.

But above all, the project is not one that benefits Gozo and Gozitans alone; it is a project of national importance that benefits the two islands. The limited access has led to a duplication of public services when in effect, a strategy of specialization, would enable the services in Gozo to form part of a national network serving the entire Maltese population. We are speaking here of medical services, educational services, law courts and a number of other opportunities that can be created.

The fact that the tunnel portals are inland, car traffic will be relieved from the roads especially in the Northern part of Malta. It would become easier for people to commute by public transport as transport could go uninterruptedly from points in Malta to others in Gozo and vice versa.

Saying that the tunnel will destroy Gozo’s character is nothing short of a gross lie. Gozo is being destroyed now. What makes Gozo what it is? Its people, its inhabitants more than anything else. And its people, its inhabitants are now dwindling and vanishing at an alarming rate. We need youth to stay here, we need families that grow up their children here. This is what we need.

Others say that Gozo’s environment and natural beauty will be destroyed by the tunnel. Gozo’s environment and natural beauty are being destroyed now by unscrupulous permits in ODZ areas and village cores all over the island and the tunnel has nothing to do with this. Gozo is being destroyed now.

To conclude, is the tunnel an answer to all Gozo’s problems? It certainly is not, but can we stay anymore without this road in hand? Have we got the luxury to

continue discussing without acting? Certainly not. Together with us, both Chris Said in the past and Franco Mercieca presently, have been bold and ambitious and managed to convince decision makers and takers from the whole political spectrum to take the steps needed to turn this dream into a reality.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals call for Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG8), Innovation, Industry and Infrastructure (SDG9) and Reduced Inequality (SDG10). The subsea tunnel between Gozo and Malta is essential for the country to fulfil all three. It will provide an affordable additional and more efficient means of connectivity between the islands. It will expand the choice of travelling modes, alongside the development of services by sea and air. And it will relieve the country and commuters from the costs and congestion associated with excessive pressure on any one means, including the need to re-invest in expensive transport equipment every twenty five years or so. It is indeed a must to attract modern, high value added business necessary to rejuvenate the Gozitan population.

I ask again. Is the tunnel an answer to all Gozo's problems? No, certainly not. Alone it does not, but it is definitely the road that will lead Gozo into the future. The future with a plan for sustainable investments, which our Chamber will suggest to the authorities. A plan that will give jobs in Gozo, a plan that will rejuvenate the island, a plan that will give a new life to the environment, a plan that will make Gozo the island where one would want to be. Carefully and wisely, we will use it as additional essential tool to transform Gozo into a role model for island sustainable development, envied by the world over.

A Chinese well known proverb states "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now." So, let us get going. For our own and future generations, we need to take action now! THANK YOU!