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History in the making

One way of interpreting the present political events is to regard them as a small cobblestone in the political path of the future. This we should do, starting off with the assumption that history speaks of decades rather than years. In fact, where possible, it even speaks of centuries.

Few of us realise that today is tomorrow's history. Looking at the past 50 years of Maltese political history and the next 20 years in terms of election results we can draw some astonishing conclusions that were not possible before.

Conjecture can be totally hypothetical or partially so. It can also be reliable, especially if one goes by past experiences. So, by going back and forth in time, one can follow a political trend until it reaches its next turning point.

However, this article will not speak of electoral results but of political leaders.

The two major political parties (the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party) have established themselves since the 1950s. Since then only three political leaders (Gorg Borg Olivier, Dom Mintoff and Eddie Fenech Adami) have spent significant years ruling with a consequential significant impact. To these I refer.

Dr Borg Olivier's political life lasted 34 years, including 27 years as party leader and 14 as Prime Minister. He retired at the age of 67 and confronted two leaders of the opposing party.

Mr Mintoff's political career officially came to an end in 1998 when he was an MP. He retired from Prime Minister at the age of 68. Out of 35 years as leader of his party, he spent 16 as Prime Minister. He spent the last five years as Prime Minister enjoying a parliamentary majority but not a voting majority. He retired at the age of 82.

Dr Fenech Adami spent 27 years as leader of his party. He spent 12 years in Opposition and 15 as Prime Minister. His political career (he is President of Malta) will officially come to an end at the age of 74.

Dr Borg Olivier resigned when in Opposition. Mr Mintoff and Dr Fenech Adami stepped down when their parties were in government.

Other observations could be made as to Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici's eight years of leadership. He became Prime Minister when Mr Mintoff left office until the MLP lost the government won by his predecessor. He was out of the scene shortly afterwards.

Taking all this into consideration, one can make some predictions just by looking at political party leaders' "life-span" and popularity. The underlying forecast, however, is, that Dr Sant's career as a successful politician has yet a long way to go. On the other hand, Dr Gonzi's destiny seems to be less cheerful.

The present MLP leader is only 58 years of age. He has led his party for 14 years - two in government and 12 in opposition. If he had to lead his party until 2018 he would have led the

party for 26 years (quite comparable to other leaders' careers) and gone through three other general elections (2008, 2013, 2018). Thus, 15 years of possible premiership could ensue, which would still make him exceed the number of years both Dr Borg Olivier and Dr Fenech Adami spent as prime ministers. He could then step down at the decent age of 70.

If he had to lead his party until 2023 he would have been at the helm for 31 years and gone through another four general elections (2008, 2013, 2018 and 2023). Thus, 20 years of possible premiership could ensue, giving him the possibility of matching Mr Mintoff's record.

Alternatively, given his age, it is still possible for Dr Sant to lose yet another election in the future and still rank among the greatest of Maltese political leaders. On the other hand, Dr Gonzi's future looks bleak. His destiny seems to run parallel with that of Dr Mifsud Bonnici in the 1980s. Dr Mifsud Bonnici had lost the two elections he contested and then resigned.

Everything shows Dr Gonzi will lose the next general election and time will tell if he will remain at the lead to likewise contest a second one. His resignation before 2008 could be the best omen for the PN before the next general election. If he had to step down and is then re-elected as party leader he would be guaranteed a long life in politics. A simple informal plea for support, as happened during the last PN general council meeting, does not suffice. A secret formal vote to re-confirm his leadership would put an end once and for all to questions as to his effectiveness and suitability for the post. No resignation would be a two-year political death roll.

On the other hand, the parallels that exist between Dr Fenech Adami's and Dr Sant's careers are indeed odd. Dr Fenech Adami succeeded George Caruana after the latter's demise in 1969 and Dr Sant had also succeeded another member who had passed away - Joseph Philip Sciberras in 1987. Both contested an election unsuccessfully and started their leadership years in opposition. Dr Fenech Adami had to confront three opposing party leaders and spent his first 10 years in opposition until his party was elected to government. Dr Sant has already spent 12 years in opposition and faced two party leaders.

What most political observers and the public at large could have overlooked with regard to Dr Sant is the fact that his political career may well turn into success as much as Dr Fenech Adami's did. Perhaps Dr Sant's fault lies in the fact that he tried to cut short Dr Fenech Adami's career in the first place and in a country which seems to prefer 15-year government cycles (the next one is owed to the MLP) this could have been too pretentious.

Dr Sant's destiny could have been similar to that of Dr Mifsud Bonnici but he withstood an internal leadership battle for the second time after 2003. If Dr Gonzi doesn't ask for a vote about his leadership soon and be re-affirmed it seems Dr Sant will definitely have to confront a new party leader on the other side of the political arena in the future. Till then, all he has to do is persevere, work on internal party support and keep healthy.