

**SPEECH BY HIS EXCELLENCY DR GEORGE ABELA,
PRESIDENT OF MALTA, ON THE OCCASION OF THE
INAUGURATION OF THE SIR ANTHONY MAMO HALL. SAN
ANTON PALACE. THURSDAY 22ND APRIL 2010.**

The year was 1909. Edward VII, son of Queen Victoria, reigned over Great Britain. His relatives, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Tsar Nicholas II, were still in power. The British Empire had reached its zenith; India was its jewel in the crown. Barely fifty years before, the unification of Italy had taken pace and King Vittorio Emmanuele III was now on the throne. Tunisia and Algeria were both French colonies with sizeable Maltese migrant communities.

Malta was then a colony, administered by a British Governor, the Maltese having almost no say in the shaping of their own destiny. Hardly more than a mere fortress, Malta's economy depended on the defence needs of the Empire. The Maltese economy depended entirely on the needs of the empire. Social conditions of the Maltese were poor and education was within the grasp of only a few. The towns around the harbours were densely populated whilst the villages were under-developed with few roads and a few hundred automobiles. Social services were almost inexistent.

In Birkirkara, a son was born to Guzeppi and Karla Mamo, a couple of modest means. They could barely have imagined that that son would witness the complete transformation of the world and the transition of Malta from a mere colony to an independent Republic of whom he would become the first President. We are gathered here today to inaugurate this hall in his honour in this historic palace where he lived with his family during his Presidency.

Ninu Mamo was born on 9 January 1909 in a numerous and very modest family, known as *ta' Karla*. From an early age, Ninu displayed promising qualities, being endowed with such intelligence and acute dedication to his studies that his early educators could not help noting. He studied hard and spent almost all his time at school, at the MUSEUM (lay society for religious instruction) and attending as choir member and soloist at the Basilica of St Helen. As can be attested by many who hail from B'Kara, he continued to attend the village feast for many years when he grew up and he thoroughly enjoyed the hymns and the company of many friends he knew from childhood.

When Ninu was only ten years old, the *Sette Giugno* riots broke out in Malta. Later on, these events probably influenced Great Britain in granting Malta the first self-government constitution of 1921. It was the beginning of a long road leading to independence, the republican constitution and the appointment of the first Maltese President.

Ninu was a very affectionate son, especially with his mother Karla whom he adored. She died at a relatively young age when he was still adolescent. His siblings relate how he had to sit for an exam some days after his mother's death and it was the only time in his life that he failed.

After primary school, he entered the Seminary and then University. He felt a religious vocation but, some time later, he became aware that this was not his real calling and so moved from the Faculty of Theology to that of Law. Nevertheless, he retained close ties with the Seminary where he continued to attend many important functions even when he became President of Malta.

Though his schooling was essentially free, he always required some assistance, even financial, from his siblings. And they never failed him! Sir Anthony remained grateful towards them for all their kindness as was manifest in his intensive bond with them and all their families. He always showed great interest in them and, where possible, he was there to assist them.

Sir Anthony graduated as a lawyer in 1934. Achieving first place in his course, he was granted two scholarships by the Government, namely the 'Travelling Scholarship' and the 'Bugeja Scholarship'. During his first year as a lawyer, he served in private practice but then commenced his career in the public service. In 1936 he was appointed member of the commission responsible for the revised edition of laws, under the guidance of Judge Harding.

In 1939 Sir Anthony married Margaret Agius by whom he had three children: a son and two daughters. I take this opportunity to thank his three children, John, Josephine and Monica, for the generous support and assistance that they offered me not only by supplying information on the daily life of Sir Anthony and Lady Mamo but also for providing me with copious printed matter, private documents and other material which will be conserved in the hall which we shall be inaugurating today.

During the war, Sir Anthony was a constant help to the refugees and those badly hit by the air raids which sowed daily death and havoc. It was in 1942 that he joined the office of the Advocate General as a Crown Advocate. Gradually, he rose through the ranks, becoming Advocate General in 1955.

In spite of considerable pressures of work and responsibilities, Sir Anthony remained constantly a family man and a father who always found time for his children, passing on the love and unity he experienced during his early life to his own family. In an interview with his children, I was informed that he was perhaps slightly Victorian in his approach but they recalled many days of happiness and fun with their beloved father and mother. It was a simple sort of entertainment, typical of those times, such as swimming in summer and picnics in winter. Sir Anthony was renowned for his fine sense of humour and did not shy away from pranks at the expense of friends, especially those who could not take a joke so smoothly.

Like the rest of the world, Malta had meanwhile experienced many changes. It was again granted a new constitution in 1947 which, for the first time, introduced universal suffrage to all those who had attained the age of 21 years. A new self-government, responsible for internal affairs, was elected. Sir Anthony served under four Prime Ministers throughout his career and, as Advocate General, formed part of official delegations which entered into negotiations with the British Government.

Meanwhile, in 1943, Sir Anthony was appointed Professor of Criminal Law at the University of Malta, a post which he retained until 1957 when he was promoted to Chief Justice and President of the Court of Appeal. I think there is not a single Maltese lawyer who has not studied on the lucid and erudite notes of Sir Anthony on Criminal Law. For many years, whilst retaining his professorship, Sir Anthony was also President of the Council and Pro-Chancellor of the University. In gratitude and appreciation for his work, the university awarded him a Doctorate in Literature (D.Litt.).

Sir Anthony was particularly proud that his son, John, too took the legal profession and he was fortunate to preside over two graduation ceremonies and bestow the University Degree on his own son. There is a moving photo in the memorabilia of Sir Anthony which shows him visibly touched, with a tear on his cheek, whilst granting the lawyer's warrant to his son, John.

In 1955 Sir Anthony was appointed Honorary Queen's Counsel whilst in 1957 he was awarded the Order of the British Empire; two years later, he was knighted Sir Anthony Mamo. When the 1964 Constitution came into effect, he was also appointed President of the Constitutional Court.

Two years earlier, in 1962, one can say that Sir Anthony started the journey leading to the Office that became the apex of his long career. Towards the end of 1962, when Admiral Sir Guy Grantham's term of office as Governor of Malta came to a close, the Queen, acting on the advice of Prime Minister George Borg Olivier, appointed Sir Anthony Acting Governor until the arrival in Malta of Sir Maurice Dorman. Subsequently, Sir Anthony became Vice-Governor and, after Independence, Acting Governor-General until, on 3 July 1971, he was appointed the first Maltese Governor General.

It is worth mentioning here that, as it is often said, close to every great man there is always a woman who walks by his side, offering her support. Sir Anthony's marriage to Margaret, known as Maggie, was indeed a happy one. They had totally different characters and hence perfectly complemented each other.

This does not mean they did not enjoy a social life together. Sir Anthony and Lady Mamo preferred to pass their free time with the family and old friends, including school friends of Lady Mamo.

Naturally, in those days there was no lack of official engagements at which Sir Anthony and Lady Mamo enjoyed meeting other friends, including foreign ones, some of whom retained a life-long connection. Sir Anthony and Lady Mamo were widely considered an interesting, lovable and friendly couple. He represented erudition and she exuded naturalness, common sense and the pragmatism of a typical Maltese mother.

It was under the direction of Lady Mamo – during Sir Anthony's presidency – that all income of the August Moon Ball, which had commenced in the days of Governor Sir Robert Laycock, was donated every year to charitable and philanthropic institutions, such as *The Malta Polio Fund*, *The Malta Memorial District Nursing Association* and *The Malta Playing Fields Association*.

In 1971, a “chest fund for deserving cases” was established. For the first time, proceeds from the August Moon Ball were distributed amongst organisations which required urgent financial aid.

Sir Anthony and Lady Mamo enjoyed a long married life, characterized by mutual love and respect which became even more evident when Lady Mamo, then in her old age, was completely incapacitated by illness. Right from the onset of her malady, Sir Anthony renounced to all his commitments in order to dedicate himself totally to her, day and night. Sir Anthony’s devotion to his wife during those years could not but gain the admiration of all those who knew them.

Sir Anthony loved sport in general but his favourite was football. He is vividly remembered by his children, seated before the start of the Cup Final, very eager not to miss the singing of ‘Abide With Me’, which never failed to move him.

He was an avid reader who kept himself updated by means of contemporary literature and reviews. But his real love were the classics which he had studied at University and which he could recite extensively by heart.

It was during the 1971-1976 legislature that talks began between the political parties with one of the main aims being to amend the Independence Constitution to change Malta from a Monarchy to a Republic. The constitutional development of these Islands was a long one and the first constitution that conceded self-government to Malta was the 1921 Constitution. However, the British Crown withdrew that constitution when it deemed it convenient. The 1947 Constitution was based on that of 1921 and the British Government still retained what were termed ‘Reserved Matters.’ It was the Independence Constitution which gave Malta the right to decide its own destiny but the Head of State remained Queen Elizabeth II as Queen of Malta. In this way, a certain connection was retained with Britain and the British Crown. Malta did not have a dynastic monarchy or a Maltese royal family.

A parliamentary two-thirds majority was required to carry out the proposed constitutional changes and not all members of Parliament agreed with the change from monarchy to republic. In the course of negotiations between the political parties, Sir Anthony offered to bring the two sides together. Allow me to quote from President Emeritus Dr Ugo Mifsud Bonnici’s book “*Kif Sirna Repubblika.*” (How we became a Republic):

On one occasion, after the end of Question Time when the House was in committee stage, we were chatting round a table in the Opposition Room. Guido de Marco entered the room, went straight to Dr Borg Olivier and informed him that Sir Anthony's son, John, today a Professor but who in those days was trainee at Guido's office, had conveyed a message that his father was willing to convene delegations from both parties to discuss the proposed changes to the constitution.

Every party then appointed a delegation for these talks and they met at San Anton "in the long room then known as the Blue Room", precisely the one which will be inaugurated today. Sir Anthony did not merely host the delegations in his official residence but attended the discussions and also voiced his opinions and gave advice on constitutional matters.

After a number of meetings, the discussions were no longer held at Sir Anthony's but at the Valletta Palace.

After some time, agreement was reached and the constitution was amended. The Maltese Parliament resolved to appoint Sir Anthony Mamo as the first President of the Republic. At long last, after centuries, Malta could pride itself that one of her worthy sons was the Head of State and a symbol of national unity. On that cold, wet night in December 1974, after having taken the oath of office, Sir Anthony appeared in the balcony of the Palace with the Prime Minister and some members of Parliament and from there addressed the large Maltese crowd that had gathered there to celebrate the fact that at last Malta had become in every sense Maltese.

In his address to that crowd in St George's Square, President Mamo thanked all those present and said: "There is one way, and one way only, in which I can show you my affection and re-pay you for the goodness of your heart. This is by promising you that, on my part, I shall do all I can to truly deserve your respect and faith in me." Then he added, "All of us who are living this solemn occasion bear witness to an important day in our constitutional development which will surely etch itself and continue being remembered in the history of our nation...Whilst in other countries, as we unfortunately read and hear on the communications media, constitutional changes often become the cause of uprisings, fighting, and shedding of blood, it is indeed a cause of satisfaction that in our country, this important change has taken place in peace, in an orderly and peaceful manner and in a spirit of reciprocal co-operation, as required by a democracy."

It is worth mentioning that amongst the good wishes sent by Heads of State, President Mamo received a message from Her Majesty Queen Elisabeth II who expressed her best wishes and satisfaction that Malta had decided to retain its membership of the Commonwealth.

After the end of his term as President and his retirement from public life, Sir Anthony continued to take an interest in what was happening around him in Malta and the development which was taking place. He remained very close to his family and it was his joy to be surrounded by his grandchildren.

Sir Anthony died on 1 May 2008, aged 99. The news spread like wildfire and various obituaries were published in Malta and abroad. Books of condolences were opened to the public in Maltese embassies and he was granted a state funeral as he perfectly and fully deserved. Sir Anthony was lucky to have served his country in a most effective and dignified manner in various fields of public life, including the highest office in Malta. During the hundred years of his life, he witnessed the dismantling of empires, the raising of colonies to new states, the end of the cold war and, above all, he saw Malta's transition from a colony to an independent Republic, developing its own economy, taking its place within the European Union and proving to the world that, in spite its small size, it can contribute as much as any other country.

Sir Anthony will continue to enjoy everyone's admiration for his correctness and rectitude. He did not command respect because of any partisan political power but because he was graced with a persuasive moral authority. He did not reach the highest offices because he came from an influential family nor because someone wanted to favour him or undeservedly reward him. He reached the zenith solely through his capabilities and extraordinary qualities. When he became Chief Justice, Professor Victor Caruana Galizia delivered a dinner speech which was echoed, among other comments, during Sir Anthony's long career. Allow me to quote from the speech as reported in the *Times of Malta*: "Professor Mamo in fact had reached the summit of his legal career not because of an accident of birth, family connections or political affiliations, but solely on the strength of his own personal merits. It was because of this that his appointment to the Chief Justiceship had been received with unanimous praise and plebiscitary approval."

When he was appointed the first Maltese Governor General in 1971, the newspaper *Il Hajja* commented: "Apart from his remarkable career, Sir Anthony has great distinguishing personal qualities. Foremost among

them are his deep humility without undue pretensions, affable and always ready to speak to every one at any time. He is a man who made progress solely on his own merits and on his merits alone for he does not come from a family which could have pushed him forward in society.”

On the same occasion, *In-Nazjon Taghna* commented: “Integrity is innate in Sir Anthony Mamo. It is an integrity that derives from a profound knowledge of the law and a long experience in the judicature.”

Again on the same occasion, *Iz-Zmien* reported: “Sir Anthony is loved and respected. He is not haughty. He can discern the problems that burden a person or the community. However, for us workers, the appointment of Sir Anthony Mamo as the first Governor General should make us perfectly happy because Sir Anthony is a worker’s son and married to a worker’s offspring.”

In Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio states: “Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them,” Undoubtedly, Sir Anthony belongs to the second category.

It is the unanimous and well-earned esteem enjoyed by Sir Anthony amongst all sectors of Maltese society that persuaded us that it would be most appropriate and deserving that this hall, where the first discussions between the political parties were held to reach agreement on the 1974 constitutional amendments, be dedicated to him and that in it should be kept for posterity some documents and memorabilia to preserve the memory of this deserving son of our country. The documents collected in the hall are being catalogued and scanned in order to make them accessible to researchers. I believe it is time the halls of our palaces should start being named after persons who have honoured their country.

Man passes on to another life but the good he leaves behind remains his best monument. For those who believe, death is not battle lost but a battle won. As is sung in *Abide With Me*, which was so loved by Sir Anthony:

**Through cloud and shine, Lord, abide with me.
I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
Where is death’s sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.**

Thank you for your attention.