

Voters and tax-payers

Editorial

And so the dust has finally settled on what was a very tense month for Maltese politics. The anxiety and trepidation that grip the island every half-decade or so are finally over, and the honking and waving of the winning party's supporters has faded away long ago.

Malta has seen a new Parliament solemnly sworn in and take its place at the helm of the nation. The incumbent administration has a lot of anticipations to live up to. It knows that it has snatched its place in government by only a very slim margin and that a lot is expected from it during the next five years.

With regards to gay rights and equality legislation, this election has seen such rights

actually be discussed by all four contesting parties - which is already a giant step in the right direction.

The Nationalist Party now in government has pronounced itself in favour of extending the remit of the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) to cover all grounds of discrimination. Moreover, during the press conference held in the week prior to the elections, party secretary Joe Saliba also assured those of us present that the PN was looking

towards enacting the cohabitation law that had been promised some 10 years ago, and that such cohabitation rights would be inclusive of same-sex couples too.

We can assure you that we will definitely be applying the necessary pressure for the PN officials to put their money where their mouth is and act upon their promises - because as voters and tax-payers, the LGBT community in Malta deserves equal respect, equal recognition... and equal rights.

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In doubt about sexually-transmitted infections?

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1. What makes a private citizen suddenly want to enter the political fray?

I had watched Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" and at one point he says that if you would like to change something, you should write to Congress. If nothing changes then you should run for Congress.

2. What is the hardest injustice you believe Maltese LGBT people have to face today?

There is a lot of bigotry and religious fundamentalism in this country. There is a lot of suffering through the church's indirect influence. There are people who attempt suicide or who exile themselves from the country. If the state acknowledges same-sex partnerships, then it would give a clear signal on the way it values gay persons. I am talking about the need for bereavement leave and urgent family leave in case of illness of the partner, or the right for a non-EU citizen to live and work in Malta. This also applies for straight couples since there is no divorce in Malta.

3. Were there any moments when you thought, why the hell did I get myself into this?

Yes, I had even sent a letter of resignation to the party a few days before the applications for candidature were due to open. I am a very private person and I like anonymity - it wasn't easy to go on television or to be interviewed for articles for the local newspapers. However I felt that there

was a big vacuum in the political arena. Nobody seemed to be able to talk about these crucial issues.

4. You rose out of nowhere and got 283 first count votes by spending just Lm50 on some leaflets, whereas an already renowned figure such as Anġlu Xuereb of AN would have undoubtedly spent more on billboards and DVDs and garnered only 226 first count votes. How does that make you feel?

Well, over 100 people gave me their first preference vote and just walked out of the room without marking 2, 3, 4 etc., so they must believe a lot in me. Unfortunately I need over 3,500 votes to get elected and make a difference in parliament so that leaves me about 3,200 votes short! :)

My interview on *Illum* was very positive. Then I got a huge response after my appearance on Str8 2d Point on Super 1 with Joe Saliba and Jason Micallef. People who I didn't know were stopping me in the street and telling me well done.

5. What were the reasons for choosing AD and not one of the two main political parties?

I joined AD since it is the only party which consistently pushed for gay rights (and

divorce). Even though I could be more of a political liability than an asset in a Catholic country, the party still accepted me as a candidate running on their ticket.

Some priests were even preaching to people not to vote for AD since it was in favour of divorce and gay partnerships. I think the AD has demonstrated to have more sense and more humanity than the Catholic church.

5. Looking back at the past pre- and post-electoral month, would you do it again?

What is done is done. The next election is in 5 years time and even though I didn't get a great result, my conscience is clean - I tried to bring about a change for the better. I received lots of emails, both positive and negative, which I posted on the website. I started a blog 3 weeks before the election and by election day it had 3,000 hits, with people accessing it from all over the world. I am satisfied that I managed to drag the suffering of many invisible people out into the open so maybe difficulties of gays and lesbians can be recognised and alleviated in the future. I hope that things will change for the better in the next 5 years.

Patrick's blogspot is still online at <http://patrickattard.blogspot.com>



Sister Jeannine Gramick is the kind of religious person you think you'd never meet, or the kind you'd think we would need more of.

A short, soft-spoken nun of 65, Sister Jeannine has been struggling for a long time to act as a bridge between the gay community and the Catholic church, which she belongs to, but feels is so out of touch with the reality of LGBT people. Invited to Malta by Drachma to deliver a talk titled 'On Becoming Whole: Sexual and Spiritual Integration', Sister Jeannine recounted her experiences with the numerous people present for the talk.

While studying for her Ph.D in Mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania, she became friends with Dominic, a gay man who asked her what her church was doing for lesbian and gay people. This was the 1970s, and faced with this question, Sister Jeannine thought that the church was surely doing nothing much *for* the LGBT community, or at least nothing that was positive.

Her encounter with Dominic led her to start organizing religious services for gay people who had left the church because of its prejudice and its verbally-violent attitude to LGBT people. She was helping the people she met realize that the church was not the bureaucratic patriarchic hierarchy that spelt out dogmas and issued pontifical warnings, but that the church was each and every individual - and that living one's life in a good way only depending on one's conscience, no matter what the rest of society thought.

In 1977, Sister Jeannine together with Fr. Robert Nugent, a Roman Catholic priest, who had also been writing and speaking on the topic of homosexuality since 1971, founded New Ways Ministry. The organization intended to help church leaders understand gay and lesbian reality better and to allow more



homosexual Catholics to find accep-

tance within the Catholic church.

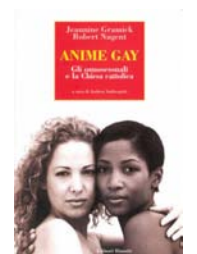
Her ministry with gay people - and her struggle for their inclusion - was however creating ripples in the Vatican's still waters. Like many others who dared to speak their minds before her, Sister Jeannine was 'invited' to keep silent about issues relating to homosexuality. In May 1999, the Vatican's Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith (what was in centuries past known as 'The Inquisition') issued an edict ordering Sister Jeannine to shut down her Ministry. The order was penned by none other than the then-Cardinal Ratzinger, who was the leader of the Congregation. Sister Jeannine was meant to halt all retreats, workshops or liturgical celebrations for the gay community.

A passage from this order read:

"Father Nugent and Sister Gramick have caused confusion among the Catholic people and have harmed the community of the church." All this by choosing to stand next to an oppressed minority on what Sister Jeannine considered to be a matter of conscience. She knew that she would be accepted as long as she was silent, but she firmly believed that everyone should speak the truth from their vantage point.

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Sister Jeannine was brought to Malta by Drachma, a local gay Catholic group.
 You can visit Drachma's blogspot on
www.drachmalgbt.blogspot.com



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Instead of making any rash decisions, she spent around a month in silence and prayer thinking about what she should do, and arrived to the conclusion that she could not stop her struggle for what she knew was a just cause. She responded by saying "I choose not to collaborate in my own oppression by restricting a basic human right (to speak). To me this is a matter of conscience."

Thousands upon thousands of letters were sent to the Vatican by people who had heard of Sister Jeannine's work and who could not agree with the Vatican's completely detached manner of dismissing and trying to silence one of its own. The Vatican officials still did not budge.

Also under pressure by her superiors at the

School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sister Jeannine decided to transfer to the Sisters of Loretto, who support her in her ministry.

Sister Jeannine is the authoress of a number of books and the subject of a documentary, called *"In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith"*, which MGRM screened for last November's Pink Sunday. Among the books which she authored is one called *'Building bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality'*.

The book was also translated to Italian, and Sister Jeannine left a copy of it for Ratzinger when she was in Rome, after she went to the Congregation but did not manage to meet him. In the documentary that was made about her work, she half-jokingly admits that since Ratzinger was not too pleased about the book having been published at all (in English), he must not be too thrilled about it having been translated to and published in Italian. She knows it might draw some ire from the church, but she feels the irrepressible urge to forge ahead in her mission.

Central in her argument is the matter of conscience. Sister Jeannine believes that if her conscience is not in tune with the teachings of the church, she feels obliged to follow her conscience. Even when faced with criticism and accusations of being a threat to the church, Sister Jeannine battles on, confident that her struggle is not in vain.



"In conscience, I choose not to collaborate."

- Sister Jeannine Gramick

NEXT: pink sunday

Bingo

Date: Sunday, 20 April
Time: 6:00 pm
Venue: Cucoo's, Naxxar Road, San Gwann
 (nearest to the end of Naxxar Road when coming from San Gwann centre)

For more info contact MGRM on mgrm@maltagayrights.org or 99255559

Pink Sunday
LGBT Social Activities by MGRM

Pink Sunday Flyer by Farrisig

“quotes of the month”

“The homosexual lobby has been extremely effective in aligning itself with minority groups. It is ever-present at the service each year for the Holocaust memorial, as if to create for themselves the image of a group of people under persecution. We neglect the gay movement at our peril.”

“I want to ask you if you are able to see the giant conspiracy that's taking place before our eyes, even if we didn't see it at the time. I take it you're beginning to see that there is a huge and well-orchestrated conspiracy taking place, which the Catholic community missed.”

“In this New Year's honours list, I saw actor Ian McKellen being honoured for his work on behalf of homosexuals, when a century ago Oscar Wilde was locked up and put in jail. It's a very small group of people, but very active and organized – and extremely indulgent. The opposition know exactly what they're doing. We don't.”

- **Rev Joseph Devine, Bishop of Motherwell and President of the Catholic Education Commission, 12th March 2008, Glasgow**

“...the social reforms relating to co-habitation, divorce and gay rights or recognition will not be addressed in the next five years. Because these issues will irritate the core vote of the PN and serve to tilt the very delicate balance of power.”

“In 2013, Malta will not have divorce or co-habitation, because Gonzi does not consider them to be on his agenda. England introduced divorce in 1530; in 1530 we were still burning witches.”

- **Saviour Balzan, MaltaToday, 10th March 2008**



ADDENDUM

Fri 29th February - Sat 1st March: Gabi was in Brussels for an EU Network Meeting organized by ILGA-Europe.

Mon 3rd March: MGRM met with two researchers from the Danish Institute of Human Rights who are conducting a comparative study in all 27 EU countries on behalf of the European Fundamental Rights Agency. The study focuses on various aspects of LGBT lives in the EU countries.

Tue 4th - Thu 6th March: Colette attended a conference on LGBT families organized by ILGA-Europe in Ljubljana.

Wed 19th March: A day of team-building exercises was organized for MGRM committee members and close contributors to discuss the issues to be tackled in the coming periods.

Malta Gay Rights Movement

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