

Speech to the Diplomatic Corps

**Dr Joseph Muscat,
Leader of the Opposition,
15th January 2010**



Your Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentleman,

It is indeed a pleasure to welcome you again to Labour's annual reception for the diplomatic corps, an occasion when we can meet once again to thank you for the sterling work you are doing in enhancing Malta's ties with the rest of the world.

I cannot start this address without referring to the harrowing and intermittent account of events we are getting from Haiti. Seeing the population of an already beleaguered small island nation state on the other side of the world going through such anguish is heartbreaking. I hope that during this hour of dire need after this devastating catastrophe, the global community, ideally through the United Nations that is thankfully becoming again a common home for us all, can get its act together.

This is a perfect test for us as Europeans, who are this year celebrating the Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. We are already late. Let us hope we are not too late.

Internationally, 2009 has not been a year to write home about. Many of us had high hopes for the United Nations Climate Change summit in Copenhagen. Instead, we ended up with a partial deal brokered by some. Maybe it was the best that could have been achieved given the circumstances, but it is clear that much more needs to be done.

We have seen the clear re-emergence of terrorist threats during the Christmas period. It seems that for all the talk, the world's security systems were caught unprepared.

Our vision is that of Malta being a harbour of peace, committed in a global and multilateral fight against terror, and advocating understanding between people.

On this side of the world we have seen the Union of the Mediterranean stutter. We hope that it will be able to make it through and work hand in hand with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean. This we envisage as one way in which we can aspire at attaining peace, security and prosperity in the Mediterranean: goals to which Labour is historically and totally committed. Unfortunately, we have to once again point at the worrying situation in the Middle East. It is indeed saddening that the shift towards multilateralism from the United States, which we envisage as a key player, coincided with increased polarisation in Israeli – Palestinian relations. We hope that the new European Union position adopted on 8 December will help find a way forward.

It was also another year during which we have seen very little solidarity by our European neighbours when it comes to illegal immigration. The problem seems to have been mitigated only due to a bi-lateral agreement between Libya and Italy. This time of lull offers a unique window of opportunity for decisive action to be taken at European level. Nevertheless, on behalf of the Labour Party, I wish to thank all those countries who have shown solidarity in practice.

We hope that 2010 will be a better year. We look with anticipation at the Papal visit in April. It will be an important occasion for our country. Striving to secure civil rights and European standards does not mean that our society should turn its back to its core values, and the Roman Catholic religion that is at its basis.

The country will also be hosting the Convention of Maltese Abroad, which we support and hope that will not be a purely symbolic event but a productive way to bring together the Maltese Diaspora.

We meet just a few weeks before my party's Annual General Conference, an event that this year will have added importance since we aim at not only consolidating our base but most importantly building our vision of a Movement that brings together Moderates and Progressives in our country.

This Movement is not an alliance of the disgruntled based on convenience, but rather the homecoming of people from all walks of life who are united by the quest for a change in direction.

It is quite symbolic that as Labour this year celebrates its ninetieth anniversary, it is forging ahead in an ambitious but necessary reforms to continue to nurture this much needed Movement – a Movement of people who are willing to reach across the aisle, who are willing not to focus on the past that has too often divided this nation but on a future that will bring us together.

We will be meeting in an upbeat but realistically sombre mode. It will be our first gathering since convincingly winning the European Parliament elections – a victory that exceeded the positive expectations. Nevertheless, we are not lost in lust for power or precocious celebrations. We are humbled by the trust that the people have shown in us and are adamant to work even harder order to earn their trust in a general election.

We are working hard because we know that this recession will pass. But it will pass despite, and not because, of this government.

We are working hard because we want to give this country a strong, stable government with a clear direction, something that is missing during this legislature.

We are working hard because our people are working hard to maintain their family's standard of living, and expect no less from their representatives.

Our Movement does not aim at being a one-time electoral exploit. It is a groundbreaking attempt at changing the way politics is carried out locally: a politics based on meritocracy and making use of the country's best talent.

This is the only way in which we can reach the ambitious goal at the heart of our Movement: that of Malta becoming the Best in Europe.

Yes, I know that it not only looks ambitious, but also preposterous to some. It looks like one target too far for a country that has become too used to mediocrity.

But I believe it is achievable and that our people can rise to the occasion.

I come from a generation that is not afraid to dream, and to cry it out loudly about its dreams.

This is my dream, and I want to talk about it.

During my New Year message at the dawn of this new decade, I said that during these ten years Malta will be facing an exciting, new challenge: its first European Union Presidency in 20-17.

There were some who asked why I thought it necessary to make the point, seven years in advance.

I don't blame them, especially given the normal management-by-crisis and stop-gap solutions we have been made to believe are the only way of going about things.

I believe that in 20-17 we should not simply sit through our Presidency, administering and hoping that nothing exceptional happens. We have to show leadership, give vision and give our tangible, sensible and realistic contribution to building an environmentally, economically and socially responsible Europe.

Labour will be preparing to make sure we are well positioned and hit the ground running with the preparations for this important period, should the people entrust us with government in the next general elections.

Here I do take this occasion to congratulate the Swedish Presidency for a job well done and wish the best to our Spanish friends and their ambitious agenda.

It will be the first Presidency that will see the structures of the Lisbon Treaty in full swing. We wish well to the President of Council, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, together with the Commissioners-designate. In particular, I would like to congratulate John Dalli on yesterday's showing and wish him well for his new post.

We hope that the mechanism by means of which Malta will get an additional seat in the European Parliament is ironed out without further delays. Indeed, moving slowly on this front goes in the face of all the momentum gathered when all Member States ratified the Lisbon Treaty.

Europe is our family and is crucial to us. But we want Malta to re-discover its vocation for the Mediterranean, Africa and the rest of the world.

In order to do so we believe that we should treasure and actively use our Constitutional neutrality. We think that if used wisely, this is the best way in which we can pursue our goal of promoting peace and understanding between nations.

We are in favour of thorough discussions on our Constitution in order to modernise this document at the basis of our democracy. We think that this is much more desirable than patchwork changes that lack form and continuity. Nevertheless, we do believe that the concept and spirit of neutrality, albeit in a more contextually relevant and historically impermeable fashion, should be fully retained and supported.

Decisions concerning our country's political commitments toward the attainment of peace should ideally come from a mature democratic discussion within our parliamentary structures, open to public scrutiny, with full respect to our constitutional obligations. They should not come from the promptings of any other country, however friendly, and well intentioned.

Here, I have to lament the fact that in our Parliament there is hardly any consultation, let alone deeper discussion with, and involvement of, the opposition, in arriving at decisions on foreign policy.

As a party we are also giving strategic importance to the issue of development aid, as part of a long-term strategy on illegal immigration. We are the first mainstream party in Malta to have a spokesperson for this subject and aim at taking new initiatives in the future.

During the next months, we will be working to renew our relations not only with our European, Mediterranean and African neighbours, but we will be looking actively at other countries where we think that there is great potential.

We will be starting with our Chinese friends, a country with which a Labour government started diplomatic relations back in 1972.

In April, together with a delegation of the Labour Party, I will be visiting China, following an official invitation.

I look forward to discussing the possibilities of collaboration, especially in energy, tourism and education, between our two countries.

This is the way we want to develop our attitude in foreign affairs: realistic but ambitious. Knowing what our potential is, while keeping in mind geo-political realities.

I hope that during the coming months, we will be able to pursue similar exploratory visits in other countries.

Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentleman, you can trust us to be honest partners who will say what they mean and mean what they say. We might not always please everyone. But our job is not to please, but take the relations between our countries to new, higher levels.

I wish you, your families and staff all the best for the New Year.

