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**SPEECH BY THE HON. LAWRENCE GONZI, PRIME MINISTER, DURING AN INTERNATIONAL FORUM ORGANISED BY THE CHAMBER OF ARCHITECTS WITH THE THEME "ARCHITECTURE AND POLITICS—PARTNERING FOR A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN" ON THE OCCASION OF THE U.M.A.R. 14<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN MALTA - SLIEMA - FRIDAY 4 APRIL 2008**

Thank you for inviting me to share with you some thoughts on the occasion of the 14<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Union of Mediterranean Architects which is being held here in Malta.

May I start by congratulating you on the choice of the main topic which focuses so strongly on the aspect of sustainable development – a topic that has taken centre stage in the international and global scenario particularly because of the issues that have been brought to the forefront in recent years some of which are closely related to climate change.

Before delving into the subject, I would like to lay down to you some basic considerations that certainly influence my contribution to you this evening. I am a lawyer by profession and therefore I approach this professional gathering of architects with a sense of admiration. I consider your profession as a hybrid that mixes together the high standards of technique, technology and expertise and merges it with the artistic talent that feeds on the beauty of innovation, creativity, style and elegance.

I am also a politician by vocation, a Maltese by birth and I am responsible for the environment in Malta by my own free choice. I have stated publicly that my country is justified in feeling proud of its achievements in past and recent history but it must also realise that it is facing some dramatic modern day challenges including an environmental deficit that has to be redressed.

Some of the challenges that we face are economic in nature and are inevitably forced on us by what is happening in the global markets. Others are universal in nature but they are intensified by the fact that we have one of the highest population density ratios in the whole world – according to 2007 figures we rank eight out of a list of 232 distinct states, countries and locations. I am also informed that Malta ranks highest among all the 27 European Union Member States when calculating the ratio of cars per kilometre of roads. Indeed the second ranking is Holland which I am told is five times less than the figures quoted for Malta.

Imagine the impact of these statistical realities on our environment and on sustainable development. This is precisely why I am particularly impressed by the title of the topic that you have chosen to discuss because it invites everyone to consider tackling these challenges by setting up a partnership between all the stakeholders.

There are however some other important considerations which I would like to put to you.

The four key terms that have been proposed in the formulation of the topic you have chosen all have a particular significance in relation to Malta : Architecture, Politics, Sustainable Development and the Mediterranean. Let me briefly go through each one of these four terms giving you my perspective as best as I can.

The first term is "Architecture". I believe it would be safe for me to state that Malta can be considered as one of the earliest demonstrations of architectural technique enhanced by innovation, creativity, style, elegance and beauty shown by human kind: our Megalithic Temples are not only free-standing buildings of considerable complexity, but they were also "designed". This is proven by the fact that small-scale models of the buildings have been discovered by the archaeologists who excavated them. Ever since then the history of Malta has been recorded in the different segments of the built environment of the country, the most notable of which have been classified as world heritage.

The second term is one with which I am more familiar – “politics”. I have been told that there is an interesting twist to this term when applied to Malta, because there seems to be some sort of a relationship between the structuring of power, in order to ensure the cohesion of human groups and the architecture that was designed through the ages, precisely to cater for the need of these power structures. Archaeologists are also more or less in agreement that a certain kind of political system must have existed in Malta thousands of years ago, when the early Maltese designed and built their temples.

Again, I will emphasise that I am no expert on the subject. However, I have read documents arguing that the Temples are of a size that could not have been produced by extended families or what might be called a tribal political system. They are also of a diversity that excludes the possibility of their production by a totalitarian political system. It seems, therefore, that the first society - of which traces from pre-history have survived - in which power was distributed neither on the basis of kinship nor on that of brute force may indeed have occurred on these islands.

The third term is “sustainable development”. This concept was brought to the forefront of worldwide attention by the Brandt Commission. Essentially it consists in the awareness that Economic Growth in the manner of the Western market economy system has limits imposed upon it by the natural environment. These limits have to be respected if development is not to be self-destructive.

This is of particular relevance to us in Malta for some specific reasons some of which I have already mentioned to you in my introductory remarks. Indeed this probably explains why the first introduction of the obligation to safeguard the natural environment for future as well as present generations occurred in International Law, in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea – a proposal that originated in Malta. Following that first appearance of the germinal idea of sustainable development as characteristic of resources deemed to be the Common Heritage of Humankind, Malta also took the initiative of initiating the process leading to climate change becoming a common concern of humankind.

The fourth term relates to the regional environment that surrounds us – the Mediterranean which sees Malta situated at its very heart playing a fundamental role over history precisely because of its strategic importance.

May I just remind you that it was Malta that took the initiative which led to the establishment of the Mediterranean Regional Commission for Sustainable Development. This was the first of its kind to be set up under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme. This Commission in June 2005 produced a document called “The Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development: a Framework for Environmental Sustainability and Shared Prosperity”. It is unfortunate that no serious attempt has yet been made to implement this excellent document. Among the seven priority areas identified in this document, besides water, energy, mobility, tourism and agriculture, the greatest importance is attached to marine resources and coastal areas and also to urban development as such.

It is, therefore, not surprising that ever since Malta began the process of becoming a member of the European Union, its special vocation has been considered by all to be related in particular to the Sustainable Development of the Mediterranean. There is hardly any more topical subject being debated at present in the European Union than spatial planning. Perhaps the most important change that has occurred in Europe in the little more than half a century, since the first steps towards the political construction of the European Union, as we have it at present, is in the location of human habitation within the territory of the Union.

Facts speak for themselves. I have personally seen studies that show that there has been a dramatic shift of population from the central areas of the European continent towards the coastline. Well over half of Europe’s population lives within a short distance of the sea. The demographic shift to the coastal zones has been even more pronounced on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean. This massive transfer of human habitation from inland areas to coastland has also been accompanied by correlative change from a rural to an urban style of life. The ports and cities on the Mediterranean littoral have expanded beyond measure.

Experts point out to me that the most visible evidence of these changes is architectural. I agree. Indeed I note that this has happened and continues to happen on a similar level within the Maltese archipelago. Immediately after the second world war, development in Malta started to move

towards the coastal states gaining momentum as years went by - until one day we suddenly realised that we had lost some of the most harmonious and beautiful aspects of our architecture, which could and should have been conserved as part of our Maltese identity.

Clearly, living by the seashore is bound to be very different from living in the midst of large expanses of land. Consequently, it is only reasonable to expect that the shells within which human beings make their homes will change in shape and almost every other respect.

Of course habitats change over time and because of circumstances but unfortunately they do not always change for the better. Globalization in the free market style in which it has been occurring has inbuilt within it the tendency to make people forget the specific requirements of their local identity.

In order to prevent this the call arises for that partnership between politics and architecture, or more specifically between those who have responsibility for formulating Government policy and those who are true and genuine architects.

Perhaps only the inhabitants of a country that is a small island like Malta can really appreciate why the European Union has been laying such increasing emphasis on the importance of spatial planning as is evident from the Strategic Objectives of the European Union Cohesion Policy. President Barroso in extending his patronage to the Architects' Council of Europe stressed that quality in Architecture and Urban Design are important not only for aesthetic and environmental reasons but also for very strong economic reasons. Architectural quality affects competitiveness not only with regard to tourism but also with regards to attracting foreign investment and creating an innovative society.

However, I am sure that you will all agree with me when I state that the value and importance of space is far greater when its supply is as limited as it is in Malta.

A particularly important aspect of architectural practice where economic interest coincides with environmental relevance, especially in the context of Climate Change, is that of the energy performance of buildings. Cooperation between researchers on this topic with specific reference to the Mediterranean climate is surely bound to be fruitful, as also the documentation of successful traditional low energy media for controlling interior environments. Revised building regulations can then be an important locus for the deepened Partnership between Architecture and Politics for which purpose this meeting is being held.

In our context the Authority in charge of land use and environmental planning by its decisions determines the sustainability or otherwise of the entire development process. This is precisely why a few weeks ago, I announced publicly that I intended to place sustainable development at the centre of the new government's political agenda and I would – as Prime Minister – take over responsibility for the reform and modernisation of the Authority, allowing it to focus on making Sustainable Development a reality in an extremely difficult and challenging local scenario.

Clearly, success will depend on our ability to strike an effective partnership between politics and architecture.

The Maltese *Kamra tal-Periti* published in November 2007 a document entitled "The Urban Challenge: our Quality of Life and the Built Environment". The ideas in this document that are generally consistent with the objectives declared by the Union of Mediterranean Architects (UMAR) were taken into account in the policies put forward by my Party at the last election.

In our projected *Vision 2015* aimed at transforming Malta into a Centre of Excellence in Health, Education, Manufacturing, Tourism, Financial Services and Information Technology, the theme of environmental sustainability is a common denominator. This vision is a backcloth that has to be kept constantly in mind both in the refashioning of the Malta Environmental and Planning Authority and its subsequent operations in view of a very specific objective, namely providing our citizens a better quality of life.

Besides the crucial areas of the energy performance of buildings and of the special qualities appropriate to coastal zone architecture, to which I have already referred, there are no doubt many

other topics on which dialogue involving professionals in the fields of both architecture and politics will be beneficial and is indeed necessary. Certainly the multicultural nature of the peoples of the Mediterranean has resulted in as many differences in architectural expression as it has in language and the other arts. I do not know whether there can be said to be such a thing as Mediterranean Architecture in the same way as geographers still talk confidently enough of a Mediterranean Climate, even in these days of menacing climate change. That climate has no doubt been as conditioning a factor in the genesis of the several species of Mediterranean Architecture as the political history of the region has also been.

The Government of Malta is – as always - open to dialogue with the *Kamra tal-Periti* with particular reference to those matters that are distinctive locally. We need to work together to achieve the highest professional standards and to make sure that the core values of what we do together, remain linked to what is valuable for quality of life and not merely for material wealth.

I congratulate the *Kamra tal-Periti* for working together with its sister member chambers of the Union of Mediterranean Architects on initiatives such as this evening's event. This is why I look forward to its sequels in the near future.

Thank you.

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