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GSLP/Liberal Government has already improved the quality of democracy and there is more to come

The latest statement by the GSD Opposition on democratic reform is all very interesting but it fails to explain why they did not implement any of these measures that they now advocate over the sixteen years when they were in office. It also displays, from a procedural point of view, a marked lack of respect to the Select Committee on Parliamentary Reform whose work dealing with such matters is on-going, includes the Opposition, and which encompasses the issues that they have now chosen to raise outside it.

The reality is that there has been more discussion, debate and action on the question of democratic reform since the election of the GSLP/Liberal Government in December 2011 than there ever was under the previous administration, where the issue was raised shortly before the general election almost as an afterthought. Indeed, the new Government acted quickly to make itself more open and accountable than any Government had ever been before. This process included increasing the frequency of meetings of Parliament from two or three to ten meetings a year. There have been 24 meetings of Parliament in two and a half years under this GSLP/Liberal Administration, that is more than in eight years under the GSD. As a result, this allows the Opposition to question the Government more often and when the issues they can put are more topical. On top of all that, the GSLP/Liberal Government has increased the resources available to Parliament, ensured the faster publication of Hansard, set-up a Parliament website and reversed the position of the GSD until the last election to make provision for meetings to be televised.

The Government has already introduced direct-democracy by allowing citizens and/or the media to question the Chief Minister once a quarter. This allows citizens direct rights to question the Chief Minister every 90 days, demonstrating a direct connection with people and an approach to democracy as something which is alive more than just every four years.

All these reforms, which increase the quality of democracy, the level of accountability and of transparency were carried out in record time by the GSLP/Liberal Government, demonstrating our real commitment to reform.

It will be recalled that the Government also set up a Commission on Democratic and Political Reform on 2 March 2012 to report on all aspects of the parliamentary and electoral system in Gibraltar and to make recommendations to Parliament. The Commission issued a consultation paper on 1 June 2012 which marked the start of the work which led to the publication of its report in January 2013.

The Government, at this point, could have determined to simply implement those recommendations with which we were in agreement as we were committed to do. Instead of proceeding down this route, the Chief Minister decided to establish a Select Committee which allows for further discussion and consideration of the matter, together with the Opposition, in order to consider the implementation of appropriate recommendations of the Report.

It is important to note that three of the five points raised by the Opposition were already the subject of deliberation by the Commission. In recommendation 19, the Commission said that Parliament should make greater use of Standing Orders to nominate Select Committees where appropriate. In recommendation 20 the Commission declared that Standing Orders should be revised to improve the public petition system as a way of enhancing public participation in the parliamentary process, along the lines of the system in the United Kingdom. This is part of the work to be covered by the Select Committee which has now been pre-empted by the Opposition statement.

However, the Commission did not recommend the creation of a Public Accounts Committee. It said: "We have concluded that there is no need to establish a General Purpose Standing Committee nor a Public Accounts Committee, given that Opposition Members have every opportunity to examine Government expenditure in detail as well as debating the report from the Principal Auditor on Government accounts for every financial year."

The role of determining allegations of lying to Parliament is very clear; a motion must be brought to the floor of the House for consideration and debate by it. The GSD were very happy with that mechanism when they were in government and held a majority in the House. Appointments to Statutory Bodies would actually, of course, be more politicised - and not less - if they were directly made by Government and Opposition – and in any event not all of these operate in the same way. Surprisingly, the GSD did not consider this was appropriate when they were in Government and the GSLP/Liberals proposed a similar mechanism for the appointment of the Board of GBC when it WAS responsible for the political content and balance in the programming of the public broadcaster. Such a volte face will no doubt raise some eyebrows.

Commenting on the matter, the Deputy Chief Minister Dr Joseph Garcia, who has ministerial responsibility for the delivery of the reforms that have already been completed, said:

"The Opposition, while perfectly entitled to comment on whatever it likes, must understand that they do not operate in a political vacuum. The Government has already taken great strides to improve the quality of democracy in Gibraltar from where they left it and there is still the unfinished work of the Select Committee on Parliamentary Reform to complete. The Opposition has itself benefited from the reforms that the Government has introduced with greater access to information and more opportunities to ask questions. It is also an active participant in the Select Committee that was established precisely for this purpose. In this context, their comments do not make any sense because no Opposition has ever had it so good.

Moreover, the public will see through the politics of this: they know they can question the Chief Minister every 90 days directly, something that has never happened before. That is real accountability and transparency where citizens don't even have to depend on the Opposition to question their government directly."