Introduction

On All Souls Day 1933, twelve years and one day after the Prince of Wales opened Malta’s first parliament, the British closed down self-government. It was an elaborately planned coup d’état, anticipated by removing the police from the control of the Maltese ministry and by the banning of all public demonstrations, and followed by the imposition of press censorship. It was staged in such a way as to enable the colonial authorities later to say that it was not for want of trying that they had failed to salvage constitutional government. They first served the elected Maltese Government with a warning, then with an ultimatum, and finally dismissal. The constitution was suspended indefinitely.

The first warning to the Maltese Nationalist ministers – that unless they changed their ways radically and soon, they could face dismissal – was read out to the ministers by Governor David Campbell on 20 September. ‘His Majesty’s Government feel that the time has arrived’, he told them,

when it is necessary for you to be acquainted with their views on the subject of the general attitude and policy adopted by you, since you assumed office, with regard to Italian propaganda in Malta ... The impression that has been created, both in the minds of His Majesty’s Government and in my own, is that the lines of your policy are generally pro-Italian if not actually anti-British.

I do not propose to embark upon any detailed discussion of the features of your policy and general attitude ...

You cannot be unaware that Italy is lavishly spending money to further Italian propaganda in Malta ... your attitude, far from discouraging this foreign propaganda, has tended to openly encourage it. Moreover, His Majesty’s Government have the impression that you, or at all events some of you, have been unsympathetic to
proposals when you thought they were likely to further the interests of the Empire to which you belong; and to which His Majesty’s Government is quite satisfied the vast majority of the people of Malta is staunchly loyal.

The situation is now causing considerable concern ... this attitude, if persisted in, can only bring about an atmosphere which must oblige His Majesty’s Government, albeit reluctantly, to suspend the Constitution.

I wish to make it clear that I am referring to your general attitude towards this foreign propaganda, and not merely to your attempts to circumvent the decision of His Majesty’s Government regarding the teaching of Italian in the elementary schools. Many of your actions of late which, taken alone, might be considered trivial have, when taken together, a cumulative effect which is beyond misunderstanding. I trust that these observations ... will be taken in the spirit in which they are made, namely as coming from a Governor, who wishes well to Malta and its people, and is anxious to maintain the best relations with his Ministers.

The governor concluded by announcing that the extent of Italian propaganda in Malta led him, that same morning, to publish the Aliens Ordinance and to make the Police a reserved matter: ‘for the proper enforcement of the Aliens Ordinance’.

Uttered half a dozen times, ‘attitude’ was the operative word in the governor’s address: what was being expected of the Maltese ministers as a condition for keeping the constitution was not merely to abandon their pro-Italian stance, but to prove themselves worthy in the opposite direction. Since the Maltese ministers predictably responded by rejecting the governor’s accusations, the next step was for the governor to present them with an ultimatum of specific demands, aware of the likelihood that the ministers would not comply. The colonial authorities took great pains to put on the mise en scene, with public relations very much in mind, even taking the British press in their confidence. To British public opinion it was presented as an inevitable measure of last resort, forced upon them by the flagging loyalty and defiance of the Maltese ministers. For Maltese consumption they focused on the Nationalist Government’s anti-Maltese language measures as much as their pro-Italian ones.

Having already taken over control of the police force, Governor Campbell by proclamation of 18 October banned the holding of all public meetings and demonstrations. One public gathering he could not ban was the crowd-pulling festival of Christ the King in Valletta, which fell on Sunday 29 October. To avoid the occasion being turned into a mass demonstration he scheduled the delivery of the ultimatum for two days later, 31 October.

The immediate and given reasons for the suppression of constitutional government in 1933 were mainly three. The first was the stance of defiance adopted by the Maltese ministers, notably, though far from exclusively, on the question of the voluntary classes in Italian. These classes were meant to circumvent the recently introduced constitutional ban on the teaching of Italian in government primary schools. Although they never quite went through with the measure, the ministers repeatedly advertised their plan to vote £5,000 for this purpose. Philip Cunliffe-Lister, the secretary of state for the colonies, found this the more exasperating because of the way that Mizzi and the rest ran circles around him and the governor, double guessing them and playing cat and mouse, so that by the end he was taking such defiance very personally. Second, was the sudden exponential growth of Italian propaganda, seemingly complementing the various pro-Italian measures and policies initiated by the Maltese Nationalist Government. Originating and funded from Italy, these included notably the opening of the Institute of Italian Culture and the lavish activities it put up, the establishment of a well-appointed Italian bookshop right next to the governor’s palace, the planned expansion of Italian educational institutions, and the increasing visibility of various Italian fascist organizations for resident Italians extending also to sympathetic Maltese.

1 National Archives UK, Colonial Office papers, CO158/471/19509/Part VI, Governor’s address to Ministers, 20 Sep 1933.
2 Colonial Office papers, CO158/471/19509/Part VI, Cunliffe-Lister to Shuckburgh, 21 Sep 1933.
4 CO158/470/19508/3, telegram, Campbell to Cunliffe-Lister, 17 Oct 1933; secret, Campbell to Cunliffe-Lister, 20 Oct 1933; telegram, Campbell to Cunliffe-Lister, 28 Oct 1933.

5 CO158/470/19508/3, minute by Shuckburgh, 12 Oct 1933.
Third, was the financial situation which, according to James A. Galizia, the head of the Treasury, was becoming alarmingly dire. Behind the back of his minister, Galizia drew up a confidential report for the governor detailing what he considered to be instances of recklessness and malpractice in financial administration. Topping the list was the budget deficit – at the time an absent word from Malta’s financial vocabulary – amounting to 16 per cent of expenditure in excess of revenue for the current year, which was possibly an irreversible trend because public sector and general public costs had been growing with each administration. Shifting from the financial to the political, Galizia lamented the practice, costly besides abusive, of rewarding party supporters with government jobs, contracts and other favours, as well as the corrupting influence such practices were having on civil servants, driving them to pander to politicians instead of upholding propriety. The worst part was that he had no faith that things might improve with a change of government because these practices had been equally prevalent during previous administrations. Galizia concluded in so many words that the Maltese were incapable of responsible government. When it came to justifying publicly the dismissal of the ministers and the suspension of the constitution, Galizia’s memorandum was the best public relations weapon in Cunliffe-Lister’s arsenal (and probably a genuine reason for concern given the expectation of stringent financial management in the colonies). That said, there is no reason to think that outside the broader international context these considerations would alone have been enough to suppress the constitution, especially considering all the problems that had dogged constitutional government in previous years without seriously endangering its continuation.

Misconceptions

Before moving on to a deeper autopsy of the so-called Milner-Amery constitution, it may be worth addressing a couple of common misconceptions about the motivation behind the British decision to suppress it. The first is that the British colonial authorities were spoiling to take the constitution away because there was a Nationalist Government in office. Of this there is no evidence, at least not until the last months. On the contrary, the Colonial Office did everything in their power to avoid any interruption of constitutional government. As a department of state, they had been converted to the belief that the government of Malta was better off with a constitution than without one. They had not awarded responsible government lightly, having thought about it for 121 years. Even earlier on, when the bishops had issued their mortal sin pastoral letter of Mayday 1930, condemning those who would have voted for Strickland’s Constitutional Party and its Labour allies, the Colonial Office had been very reluctant to suspend the holding of elections, let alone the constitution, and had only been compelled to do so by the doggedness of Governor John Du Cane and eventually the ulterior motives of the Foreign Office (see below). Orme Sargent, a counsellor at the Foreign Office, had this to say to Arthur J. Dawe, a principal clerk at the Colonial Office handling the Malta files:

“So great was your interest in the political development of the islanders that you have given them a beautiful democratic constitution ... having given them this toy you naturally are interested to see that it works properly, for if it works badly it may do a lot of damage not only to the Maltese but to the ‘British connexion’.”

This was some weeks after the first suspension of the constitution in 1930, which saw the exchange of some sharp words between the bureaucrats of the two departments. Later on, when the Royal Commission visited Malta in 1931, it recommended strongly and unequivocally that the constitution should be restored without further delay, with or without amendments, and not even making the condition that the bishops should withdraw the mortal sin pastoral. Governor Campbell, himself a hawk although weak under stress, in 1932 saw the restoration of the constitution as a means of keeping the people loyal rather than as the instrument of trouble he came to consider it later. He was worried by the possible impact of the current economic depression on British Services’ spending and by the October 1931 riots in Cyprus, which over there led to the suppression of constitutional government. His actions during the best part of the 1932-33 Nationalist administration presupposed that constitutional government should somehow be salvaged.

As for the administration being a Nationalist one, it did make a difference of course inasmuch as the PN was the pro-Italian party. Even so, the party’s love affair with Italy and Italian was not reason enough for withdrawing the constitution. To be sure the British authorities were properly annoyed with this, but in reality they could not at this time find any evidence of disloyalty on any notable scale. Among the ministers, Mizzi would have qualified as an irredentist, but even the over-zealous secret service officers conceded that he was not the leading one in Malta, that tag being reserved for one Alberto Hamilton Stilton, a friend of Mizzi’s but not part of the Government. More relevant probably was the fact that after the shattering defeat of the Constitutional and Labour parties at the polls in 1932, the apparent ineluctability of the opposition parties rendered them somewhat immaterial. In other words, once the Nationalist Government began adopting a confrontational role, its main adversary became the British authority rather than the Maltese parliamentary opposition. Constitutional government had been originally designed to prevent precisely this sort of situation.

6 CO158/472/19509/8, memorandum by Galizia, undated, Aug 1933.
Other than that it cannot be said that the colonial authorities regarded the PN as intrinsically objectionable: the bureaucrats normally preferred a Nationalist administration to a Constitutionalist one. While the later PN was less amenable than its forerunner in government, the Unione Politica Maltese, nothing matched the Constitutional Party in difficult and problematic government from a Colonial Office point of view, whether that took the form of Strickland’s bad personal relations with them; encroachment in the sphere of reserved matters; assertion of powers beyond those defined in the constitution; stirring the language question instead of helping to ease it; and worst of all embroiling the British administration in Strickland’s fighting with the Church. It is true that later on Philip Cunliffe-Lister becomes a dedicated constitution-hacker, but that was because he lost control over events as a result of his stubbornness and short-sightedness. He lost control first because, as shall be seen, he accepted the Foreign Office hypothesis that the way to end the language question in Malta was to summarily suppress the teaching of Italian. Having done so with measures that were not easy to justify to the Maltese (because they really were taken in the interest of foreign relations), he created a state of confrontation with the Nationalist ministers from which he could not afford to back down, so that he pushed himself into the role of a dictator. Through all this he ignored the advice of his experienced permanent staff not to miss the wood for the trees; that as the secretary of state for the colonies, he should be worrying about the good governance of the colony, not about foreign affairs.

The other common misconception is that the British took the constitution away for reasons of security, because they were afraid of growing Italian imperial designs on Malta. Rising Italian influence was, indeed, central to the events that destroyed constitutional government, but not because it threatened Britain’s hold on the islands. Neither the colonial authorities nor the security services believed it did. There was no scenario of Italy going to war with Britain over Malta; and if it were to do so in the context of a general war, the outcome would be decided militarily, and (as we know with hindsight) the British had ways of eliminating any internal hostility between Britain and Italy. That was not the case at all. Yes, Anglo-Italian relations were tenuous in these years, and yes, Italy’s imperialist designs in the Mediterranean were no secret. But the British in these years were not looking to quarrel with Italy. They were just concerned to stay friends. What they wished of Malta was to stop popping up to disturb a relationship they tried to salvage with all their resources.

Briefly, Mussolini’s attitude towards Britain (and France) was that Italy’s friendship should not be taken for granted just because they had been allies during the First World War. With other Italian politicians he shared the perception that Italy had been cheated at the peace settlement. But on the whole during the 1920s he kept good relations with Britain. The kingpin of fascist foreign policy thinking was that Italy enjoyed a peso dominante: that it could hold the balance of power as between opposing blocs in European international relations. Well, during the 1920s there was only one loose bloc to speak of (that of Britain and France), so the peso dominante idea was short of meaning and mostly translated in a calculated unpredictability. Then from 1930, when galloping Nazi electoral successes raised the spectre of a revived militaristic Germany, Mussolini took to dangling his peso dominante with the message that he might go with the highest bidder. Having in 1929 placed the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in the hands of the Anglophile Dino Grandi, he dismissed him in July 1932 and assumed personal control, just when the Nazis doubled their strength in the Reichstag. One might say that the turn of the decade ushered in a new phase of Anglo-Italian relations, where Britain struggled hard to keep Mussolini appeased while he went about flirting with Hitler. Appeasement was the word: British policy in Malta was designed to shut the Maltese ministers up, not hurt Mussolini. As it happened, Malta’s constitutional crisis fitted into the timeline of these events as a hand in a glove. The British Foreign Office was not going to allow Maltese politics to generate friction in this increasingly fragile relationship. Quite simply, if Malta were to keep falling like the proverbial fly in the ointment of Anglo-Italian relations, then it must be swatted and removed.

Foreign Office interference

Whether dealing with Italy or, early on, with the Vatican, the Foreign Office is central to the decisions taken on Malta in these years. Their first assertive intervention had to do with the political-religious crisis, which also unfolded, as it happened, during the years 1929-1932. Lord Strickland had had this conspiracy theory: that the Holy See, by a secret side agreement in the Lateran Pacts of 1929, was pledged to promote Italy in Malta through the action of the local Church. Few believed in this theory, but the people at the Foreign Office did feel that the Vatican’s enhanced status as a sovereign state might have made it more smug in its conduct of foreign relations. In these years, notably after Robert Vansittart took charge as permanent under-secretary of state in January 1930, the Foreign Office geared up to adopt a new assertiveness when dealing with foreign states. The Vatican was a good and safe candidate to start with, having as it were obstructed the government of a British possession and slighted its democratically elected prime minister (as if they cared about Malta’s prime minister). This ulcerous concern not to back down in front of the Vatican’s intransigence drove their determination in Cabinet to keep the constitution suspended after 1930 and not restore it before the Church withdrew
the mortal sin pastoral, and furthermore to retain Strickland and his ministers in office as caretakers for the duration. It was, so to speak, to teach the pope a lesson for having earlier declared Strickland persona non grata at the Vatican. This use of Malta as a pawn in the bigger game of international relations annoyed the Colonial Office no end, since in the final count it was they who had to reckon with the long-term repercussions of these actions inside Malta. Here is a piece of A. J. Dawe’s mind:

It would be a good thing if the Foreign Office would cease inflicting their embarrassing attentions on the Island. They have magnified into a matter of international principle a matter which might have been kept within much smaller limits; and they have got no change at all out of the Vatican. However it looks as if they will keep quiet for a bit now as they cannot think of anything else to do!  

And then, angrily to his Foreign Office counterpart, Orme Sargent:

The Colonial Office naturally look on the matter more from the practical standpoint of the administrator. Our object in Malta is to keep on good terms with the native population of an important Imperial stronghold and to govern the place with the least possible amount of friction ... You regard it from the wide point of view of the principle which is to govern the relations between the British Government and the Vatican. You are ... concerned to make it clear that the recent emergence of the Vatican as a temporal power is not to be followed by any interference on their part with temporal matters in the British Empire ... If you could get any change out of the Vatican it might be a different matter ... [but] the wrangle has now lasted in an acute form for over a year and the Vatican have not budged an inch.  

Instructive are the reflections of the Foreign Office staff when in 1932 the pope finally accepted Strickland’s apology and ordered the bishops to withdraw their mortal sin pastoral, clearing the way for the holding of elections. By their reckoning or wishful thinking the Foreign Office concluded that the Vatican had capitulated. Vansittart asked for a little internal brainstorming exercise to try and see whether or wishful thinking the Foreign Office concluded that the Vatican had capitulated. Vansittart asked for a little internal brainstorming exercise to try and see whether the adoption of a hard line had actually worked and to what extent, almost as if this had been some simulation game to test a hypothesis. ‘I think it would be useful for future purposes’, Vansittart’s private secretary told the men, if we could clear up what exactly the succession of events in Malta was, with a view particularly to seeing whether it was because the Government decided to take a strong line about the elections that the difficulties resolved themselves. I suppose it is fairly clear that Strickland sent in his second apology in a panic because he saw the prospect of being indefinitely shelved as a political force in Malta. But what is much more interesting is the question whether the Vatican so promptly accepted

his apology and so promptly issued the new Pastoral because they saw that we were resolutely determined not to permit a corrupt election to take place. If it could be shown that this was a case of cause and effect, it would give support to the view that in the interests of peace and good relations it sometimes pays to take what is called a strong line and stick to it. This view is as a rule at a discount and any facts which led in strength [sic] ought to be recorded.  

‘We were certainly right’, remarked Vansittart after having collected a number of views, ‘... the rest of the history illustrates the value of a firm line’.  

Pandering to Mussolini

With Italy, however, the Foreign Office believed not so much in taking a ‘firm line’, generally speaking, as taking a firm line with Malta on Italian matters. With Mussolini they used kid gloves. Essentially, the position in this regard was that Italy consistently protested that it had absolutely no designs on Malta. It was not however indifferent to the fact that there was a strong Italian culture amongst Malta’s educated class which Italy wished preserved. Any attempt to eradicate this culture was taken as a wanton slight to Italian sentiment, in addition to mistrust of Italy’s intentions in Malta. The British might say as much as they liked that Italy had no right to interfere in the internal affairs of Malta, but this did not diminish the fact that they were acting in a way that appeared mistrustful and unfriendly. So whereas, as already observed, Britain was bidding to keep Mussolini on the side of the western alliance, the Foreign Office believed somehow that a firm line on the Maltese question, though it might annoy the Italians at first, should remove a source of recurring abrasion, and Anglo-Italian relations would be better served in the long run. Or so they thought when in 1932 they prevailed on the Colonial Office to forbid the teaching of the Italian language in primary schools, although with what logical sequence it is hard to tell.

One of the major recommendations of the Royal Commission which visited Malta in 1931 was to restrict language teaching in primary education to Maltese and English, thus confining the teaching of Italian to the secondary schools and the university, where very few students attended. However, the commissioners’ report proposed that it should only be implemented ‘if and when the Secretary of State for the Colonies is satisfied that sufficient expression of opinion is given in support of an alteration in the elementary schools and that there is a desire on the part of the people in the Island for an alteration’.  

The Foreign Office welcomed the suggestion, 

15 CO158/454/40176/Part III, Dawe to Sargent, 21 Aug 1930.  
16 National Archives UK, Foreign Office papers, FO371/15982/C4937, Minute by Clifford Norton, (for Sargent), 14 June 1932.  
17 FG371/15982/C5054, Minute by Vansittart, 21 June 1932.  
18 MRC, 166.
but not the part which proposed to delay its implementation until Maltese opinion was ready for it. They wanted to act quickly, and this for two misconceived reasons. One was their conviction — for which there was neither evidence nor reason — that the Church's insensitivity was driven by its determination to preserve the status of Italian in Malta. The other, more important one, was to remove what they saw as a recurring obstacle in their relations with Italy. 'The Italians generally ... will probably not like our decision on the language question', remarked Vansittart, 'but we must really show some virility (& impartiality) in this matter.' Anyway, the Foreign Office 'did not consider it likely that the Italian Government would make any protest if the language recommendations were accepted', which was not a very perceptive judgement. Cunliffe-Lister conceded the point, and in return John Simon, the foreign secretary, agreed to lift the objection of the Foreign Office to the dismissal of the Strickland ministry. That decision, one based on wrong premises and wronger prognosis, probably turned out to be the biggest nail in the coffin of constitutional government, given the centrality of Italian to Nationalist Party ideology.

There was no need to wait for hindsight to know how easily Italian pride could be wounded beyond all proportion on this count. There was a superb historical precedent, when Joseph Chamberlain in 1899 had decreed to substitute English for Italian in education and official use. Chamberlain discovered for himself how bitter the Italians felt about this attack on the Italian language in the only place it was spoken in the entire British Empire. He consequently withdrew the language decrees in 1902 in the interest of improving Anglo-Italian relations, which were strained at the time for other reasons. This story was very vivid in the Italian memory, but evidently not in the British one where, in comparable international circumstances, the Foreign Office was doing the exact opposite to reach the same objective.

Yet for all their bluster, the Foreign Office before long started having cold feet. In March 1933, one year after the decision was taken, they were asking the Colonial Office to moderate their actions in Malta in view of Mussolini's proposal of the Four Power Pact. A welcome break from his politics of recklessness, the initiative developed roots. They hoped that the spectre of an Austro-German union, an agenda the newly installed Hitler did not care to hide, would drive Mussolini to work closely with Britain and France. In August, apropos of Malta, Vansittart explained to his Colonial Office counterpart, Samuel Wilson:

> The question of Austro-German relations is at present in a highly critical state and definitely overshadows every other European issue. Its satisfactory solution depends on the capability of the French, the Italians and ourselves to work together and it would be fatal if we were to fall seriously foul of the Italian press at this juncture.

Month after month there was so much holding back in Malta in order to avoid irking Mussolini, that Cunliffe-Lister, having once been persuaded to be tough on pro-Italian activity, began himself to grow impatient with Foreign Office prevarication and, more importantly, worried that the Maltese ministers might start to mistake his silence for weakness. In September he asked the Cabinet: 'if, as the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs urged, the moment was inopportune, when would the situation change? Was the Austro-German difficulty likely to end soon? Might it not go on for years?' Seeing his point the Cabinet agreed to let him switch on the well-rehearsed process to suppress constitutional government.

Even after the suppression of the constitution, the Foreign Office continued to keep a close watch on Malta, constantly weighing the possible effect on their relations with Italy each time that the Colonial Office wanted to take any action there which might attract Italian interest. Thus, press management and control both in Britain and Italy continued to play an important role in limiting damage to the two countries' mutual relations, though this seemed more important to the British than to the Italians. Reacting to press censorship, introduced in Malta immediately after the suspension of the constitution, the Nationalists took to sending press copy telegraphically to the Italian and British press. In Italy there appeared a spate of articles harshly critical of the British action. The British press, 'suitably guided' from the press departments of the Foreign Office and Colonial Office, largely ignored the telegrams.

Malta's stubborn presence on the Anglo-Italian agenda meant that it was the first item of discussion for the newly appointed Ambassador to Rome, Sir Eric Drummond, who replaced Ronald Graham in late October 1933. Drummond had instructions to 'make a personal appeal to Signor Mussolini on the ground that at
this juncture, when Anglo-Italian friendship is so important, an incidental question like that of Malta should not be allowed to poison public opinion in either country.29

The Catholic Church

Finally, to leave out the Church from the equation would be to miss a vital constant, and not just because the political-religious clash of 1929-1932 had been the occasion that brought the Foreign Office directly into the affairs of Malta and kept it involved thereafter. Constitutional government or not, the Church was not yet ready to yield any of its traditional status as a presence in public life, beyond its mission as a moral or spiritual authority. It was an unwritten condition for the survival of responsible government that the elected government must not supplant the Church in that role. Correspondingly for the colonial authorities, it was important that they should not have to choose between the two, because as far as they were concerned, governing Malta against the Church was not an option. For them, the worst part of the political-religious crisis was that Strickland – and eventually the Foreign Office itself – for a while succeeded in sowing the impression that the British and the Church were at war. It is mostly why the Colonial Office was prepared to dump Strickland, something they would have liked to do anyway for other reasons. One could say that on this score the Colonial Office and the Vatican were more or less in agreement (just as, correspondingly, the Foreign Office and Strickland seemed to be in agreement). Governor John Du Cane, who after sticking out for Strickland turned against him sometime in 1930, wrote in December: ‘We do not want the Pope to say “I told you all along he was quite impossible”, but I am afraid he is’.30 It transpired then, once Strickland was made to eat humble pie by apologizing and on top of that was destroyed at the polls, that the Church was as eager as the colonial authorities to restore the traditional collaborative Church-State relationship. And what the Church meant by ‘State’ was not the elected government of Malta, but the British authority.

While the action of the Church was not itself the reason for the loss of self-government, the security of ecclesiastical consent was of no small assistance in the British decision to suspend the constitution. The Church may have actively contributed to the Nationalist landslide victory at the polls in 1932, but having once ensured Strickland’s final downfall, had no interest in supporting the new Government’s language policy, or the new Government if it came to that. In September 1932 Eugenio Pacelli, the cardinal secretary of state, told the archbishop, Maurus Caruana, that henceforth he must work in close co-operation with the governor, and ‘that the pope was most anxious that the clergy should keep clear of any controversy regarding the Italian language in Malta’. The archbishop assured him that he was friends with Campbell and that when they disagreed they agreed ‘to disagree as gentlemen’. Pacelli told him it was not enough: the pope wished there to be no disagreement of any kind with the governor.31 ‘Now that we know we have Rome at our back’, Caruana reassured Campbell, ‘it will make a great difference’.32 There was more comfort to be had from the evident displeasure of the Church with the experience of constitutional government, later on once the constitution was suspended. Pacelli asked Robert Clive, the head of the British Legation at the Vatican, whether there was any danger of Strickland returning to power once the constitution was restored. Clive replied: ‘It was unlikely and... best for everybody that the Governor should govern without any Prime Minister at all’.33

In Malta, Archbishop Caruana warned the Nationalist press to keep religious issues out of their political comments. To Harry Luke he confided ‘that he hoped we were in for a long spell of Crown Colony Government, which is obviously the best thing for Malta’.34

Conclusion: Thwarted objectives

Beyond the real and fabricated reasons, beyond the immediate and long-term ones, beyond the internal and external contexts in which constitutional government was lost in 1933, the bottom line was that the experiment did not work out in the way that its British designers had intended. Alfred Milner’s and Leo Amery’s Colonial Office had originally devised an experimental diarchic system for Malta which attempted to draw a boundary between purely internal Maltese affairs and external

28 My italics.
29 F0371/16796/C04959, minute by Sargent, 26 Oct 1933. Despite Mussolini’s antics, or because of them, the British Government never quite gave up bidding for his friendship, all the while keeping an eye on Malta to see that it did not rock that particular boat. Hope survived the Abyssinian crisis of 1935–36, generally considered as the juncture where Italy turned its back on the western powers in favour of the Rome-Berlin Axis. In September 1936 Britain and Italy seemed to clinch an informal accord over outstanding issues in the Mediterranean which was meant to heal the rupture caused by the Abyssinian crisis and halt Mussolini’s intervention in the Spanish Civil War as well as his drift towards Hitler. The so-called Gentlemen’s Agreement was later consolidated by an exchange of notes on 31 December 1936 and a joint Anglo-Italian declaration on 2 January 1937. Concurrently in Malta, on the basis of dubious secret service reports, Governor Charles Bonham-Carter had for weeks been planning to dismiss from their posts Vincenzo Bonello, the curator of the Museum’s fine arts section, and Carlo Mallya, the professor of commercial law at the university, as a warning to anyone else in the public service who was given to promoting Italian influence. So sensitive had the bigger issue of Anglo-Italian relations become that even this purely local action required Cabinet clearance, which it got. But then on 5 January the Colonial Office sent an urgent telegram to the governor with instructions to stay the dismissal, as the publication of the Anglo-Italian agreement ‘reminds the present moment very inportant for action on lines proposed’. As chance would have it, the governor, eager to clear his desk before travelling the following day, had served the dismissal order only a few hours before, and once served he could not rescind it. (C0158/451/900017, minute by Shuckburgh, 4 Jan 1937; telegram Bonham-Carter to Ormsby-Gore, 5 Jan 1937; telegram Ormsby-Gore to Bonham-Carter, 5 Jan 1937).
30 C0158/452/40066, personal Du Cane to Wilson, 8 Dec 1930.
31 C0158/467/97475/Part II, Campbell’s notes of a conversation with the archbishop, 23 Sep 1932.
32 Ibid.
imperial interests. In so doing they had overcome the time honoured prejudice that Malta was too small, and too intrinsically fortress in character, to allow for any clear separation of the domestic from the imperial. In effect, the experiment was fairly successful in that respect, inasmuch as Maltese Governments did not quite pursue measures that were prejudicial to imperial defence interests as such. The Services chiefs in Malta hardly ever complained. The experience had, however, by unilateral British reckoning, turned out to be prejudicial to Britain’s foreign relations, an altogether different aspect of imperial interest, though no less supreme given the international circumstances.

The other Milner-Amery fundamental aim that was defeated by the record of self-government was the elimination of traditional bipolar politics, which earlier had tended to pitch pro-Italians against pro-British in the language question, and intransigents against collaborators in everything else. Amery had thought that the experimental electoral system of Proportional Representation by Single Transferable Vote, designed to maximize pluralism in party representation, would sideline the extremes and produce moderate coalition government, while internalizing conflict and invective. This did not happen. Governor Herbert Plumer’s euphoric assessment of the 1921-1924 administration, which seemed to satisfy the original aims perfectly, found no resonance in later assessments by his successors. As if inevitably, and in utter defiance of the theoretical claims of the system, parliamentary politics already reverted to bipolarity by 1926, and thereafter the shots were mostly called by exponents of the same political schools that the electoral system had been meant to emarginate. Instead of an instrument to keep Maltese politics contained, ring-fencing them from the external sphere and leaving their practitioners to balance each other out, constitutional government became once more a contest between the local and the imperial governments, a contest the imperial government could never lose.

35 Endemic Democracy, 66-71.
36 Endemic Democracy, 140-41.