

First, Labour supporters were told to love the EU. Now they are being told to hate Gaddafi.

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Dom Mintoff with Muammar Gaddafi in the early 1970s

This is my column in The Malta Independent today.

The Labour Party is now desperate to distance itself from Gaddafi, a process which, because for four decades it has boasted about its intimate personal relationship with him, has left it lying on the floor in a tangle.

Nobody is more confused than its supporters.

For 40 long years they were told to love him.

Without Gaddafi, they were told, there would have been nothing to fill the gap in revenue when Britain refused to renew its rental agreement on its military base here – all such agreements ran from 1 April to 31 March – and, as an inevitable consequence, the dockyard lost its most lucrative client, the Royal Navy.

Except that those credulous and largely – at the time – illiterate supporters were not told that Britain had given Mintoff a reverse salute and told him where to stuff his demands for more rent. They were told that Mintoff kicked out the hakem, and that 31 March was Freedom Day, rather than the last day of the rental agreement.

Freedom Day is really April Fool's Day, but that's a side issue.

In the Malta in which I grew up, crowds of Labour supporters lined the streets and squares to salute Muammar Gaddafi as he drove past during his several visits.

He was given lots of airtime on the state television channel, Xandir Malta, and he was the keynote speaker at a massive Labour meeting which was extensively covered on television.

In the 1976 election campaign, he appeared on Xandir Malta again, this time to announce – with a translator on hand – that if 'a pro-NATO political party' were to be elected, he would pull the plug on oil supplies to Malta. Or rather, put the plug in.

His Green Book was distributed to all children in state schools and to teenagers at the state sixth form college. Many people my age still have their copies.

Our buses were painted green, state school uniforms were green, our passports were green and depicted – in a map designed to show passport control officers where Malta is – the name of Libya far more prominently than Malta's. There was an inbuilt Arabic translation, too, because Libya required it and still does today, except that today you must have it done specially.

Arabic was put on the same footing as Malta's two official languages, Maltese and English, as an entry requirement for all university courses. It wouldn't have been such a bad idea to put Arabic in the curriculum, because aside from the script, it is the easiest language in the world for speakers of Maltese to learn, and the ability to speak Arabic is a distinct advantage for a European.

But we resented it and fought against it because we knew only too well that it wasn't being done for us, but as a sop to Colonel Gaddafi.

We fought against all things green and Arabic because we knew that we were being slowly absorbed by Gaddafi in return for money – except that he turned out to be even stingier than Dom Mintoff, who had finally met more than his match in the sociopathic and egocentric stakes.

Those of my generation grew up with the twin-headed Hydra of Mintoff and Gaddafi, and in our minds they were inseparable. We were the only children outside Libya to know Gaddafi's name, to recognise his face, and to associate the colour green with him.

Gaddafi was part of everyday life and conversation in Malta back then in the 1970s and 1980s. That alone should tell you exactly what the nature of the relationship was between the Labour Party and Muammar Gaddafi.

Since 1987, there has been nothing similar at all, and I'd say that 99 per cent of Maltese schoolchildren first heard his name and saw his face when the revolution began last February – and then only because of the 24-hour coverage on the international news channels, to which there was nothing similar when I was a child and yet knew of Gaddafi still.

When I was really young I actually thought Gaddafi was a Maltese politician.

I remember quite clearly walking past the open front doors of many dwellings

in the Grand Harbour area and seeing, there on the walls with a red votive candle beneath, framed images of Dom Mintoff and Muammar Gaddafi. Both were the Salvatur ta' Malta.

There would often be, next to them, an image of that other Salvatur, the real one, bearded and with his heart visible. Verbum Dei Caro Factum Est. The word of God is made flesh. Indeed.

Since the start of the revolution in February, there have been countless Maltese people defending Gaddafi on the internet or, toning it down as things got worse, saying that we must remember all the good he did for Malta.

You know beyond doubt that all these people vote Labour and were raised in Labour families. Their view of Gaddafi is not the objective view, but the brainwashed view.

Nobody in his right mind, nobody who wasn't brainwashed by repetitive political propaganda, could possibly assess Gaddafi and conclude that he was a good thing in any way.

At most, you'd conclude that he was a fact of life and that doing business with him and paying him the occasional visit were necessary evils.

Now those Labour voters (if they are still alive) and their descendants are being told, loudly and repeatedly by Super One and in various party press releases, that nah-nah-nah it was the Nationalists who had the priority relationship with Gaddafi.

So they don't know what to think. If Gaddafi is such a bad thing and has turned out to have been a really bad thing all along, why were they told otherwise?

This is a repeat of the psychological and political confusion on EU

membership. First, Labour supporters were submitted to a relentless campaign about its myriad and terrible evils, whipped out of their homes to vote No to save Malta from drowning under the weight of Sicilian hairdressers.

Now, they are given EU flags at mass meetings and asked to wave them around like they mean it.

But of course, all those who, like Lino Spiteri and the significant others quoted in newspaper articles, try to equate the relationship of successive Nationalist governments and Libya with the relationship between Labour and Libya miss the most crucial point of all.

The Nationalist Party *never* had any relationship with Gaddafi or Libya and still does not.

Fenech Adami's and Gonzi's dealings with Gaddafi's Libya were standard bilateral relations between states. The Labour Party has not represented the state since 1987 (bar those 22 months) and yet it has continued to celebrate and cherish its relationship with the regime.

Two years ago on 1st September, the Labour Party held at its Mile End headquarters a big conference to mark the 40th anniversary of Gaddafi's coup. They called it '40 years of relations between Malta and Libya'.

Yet Labour does not represent Malta, and the government, which *does* represent Malta, held no such commemoration. The only Nationalist politician present at that Labour/Libya event was John Dalli.

And it goes without saying that the name of the conference gave it all away, because Malta has had a relationship with Libya for thousands of years, not just 40.

The first official visit Joseph Muscat made as party leader was to Tripoli, accompanied by Alex Sceberras Trigona and Karmenu Vella, where he signed an agreement.

I wrote at the time that bilateral agreements are not negotiated and signed by the Opposition but by the government. It is a mark of just how much we take it for granted that the Labour Party in its own right has a special relationship with Gaddafi that nobody questioned those negotiations or thought them absurd.

Anything signed by the Opposition leader on behalf of Malta is meaningless and not binding, because the leader of the Opposition cannot contract Malta into anything. Joseph Muscat can no more sign on behalf of Malta than I can.

But the biggest clue to the nature of Labour's special relationship with Gaddafi is this. All Labour supporters thought well of Gaddafi and many even loved and admired him. Many of them are defending him still, today.

But all Nationalist supporters despised him and continued to do so, no matter the nature of bilateral relations or how many visits the man European Commissioner John Dalli calls GonziPN, or his predecessor, paid him.

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