

US-Malta relations – from strength to strength

by Carla Gatt

US Ambassador MOLLY BORDONARO speaks to Carla Gatt about the transfer of refugees from Malta to America, the new adventure park in Ta' Qali and the life of the Bordonaro family in Malta

Calm and self-assured, the American Ambassador, Molly Bordonaro spoke to The Malta Independent on Sunday about bilateral matters between Malta and the United States and how she and her family have found life in Malta so far.

“Looking back over the past 12 months, I honestly feel that relations between Malta and the US have gone from strength to strength.

“Malta is a very small densely populated island and housing large numbers of communitarian refugees is a real struggle for this tiny Mediterranean Republic.

“I’m very glad that the US will be helping Malta as we’re about to send the first group of communitarian refugees in Malta to America. The US takes so many thousands of refugees from Third World countries such as Sudan.”

Could you give me an estimate of the number of refugees the US will be taking in?

Let’s just say hundreds! They will start leaving in groups so this is not just a one-time transfer. There are two procedures to be followed. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) first processes the group, followed by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which the United States contracts to do the second processing.

The refugees are given a three-day orientation programme about America so that once they reach the US they have an idea what to expect.

When they arrive in the US, the non-profit organisations that sponsor them find housing for them and help them become productive in American society.

The American newspaper The Oregonian of 18 November quoted you as saying that Malta was 20 years behind in terms of gender equality.

I was completely misquoted! What I said was that what the States achieved in the past 20 years, Malta has managed to achieve in much less.

I believe the Maltese government has made it one of its top priorities to ensure women have as much equality as men.

Like any advanced democracy, Malta has made many options available for all individuals.

What about the new embassy to be built in Ta' Qali?

The modernization of US embassies worldwide started in 1998, and now, nine years later,

it is Malta's turn.

The old buildings on site at Ta' Qali have been pulled down and we're excited about the new one, as it will be a state-of-the-art *Leed Silver' certified building. It is going to be one of the most progressive environmental buildings constructed from Maltese limestone.

We have also made a commitment to set up an adventure park worth \$250,000 that will have three unique features – a climbing wall, a jungle gym, and swings for disabled children.

We want to make sure that our presence here has a very positive impact on the Maltese.

As regards the commercial relationship between Malta and the US, do you think that once SmartCity opens it will attract more American companies to invest in Malta?

There are more than 3,000 employees working for American companies excluding those working in franchised companies.

A lot of American companies are interested in investing in Malta for a number of reasons. Malta has a stupendous geographical location, as it is close to the North African region and is also an EU country. The level of education here is very high and the people are all English speaking.

What measures have been implemented by the US to develop the Freeport? In order to prevent the proliferation of illegal firearms and drugs in shipping, the US helped Malta build a two million dollar warehouse and has trained Customs officers, as well as extended the computer system for faster automation.

Now that Malta forms part of the Schengen area, surely its position regarding the visa waiver should change?

Malta is in the best position to be accepted in the US Visa waiver programme once it reopens. Unfortunately, since 9/11, the US has not accepted any new countries for security reasons. Malta still has one requirement to satisfy, which is the biometric passport, but this process is moving forward.

When is the next meeting on the double taxation agreement, which was withheld in 1997, going to take place?

The next meeting on the double-taxation agreement will be held in January. In fact Malta is currently working on this with the US Treasury Department.

Malta has participated in the Fulbright Scholar Programme for over 35 years, but other programmes were introduced recently...

Yes, a Masters in Environmental Technology Programme, which is a dual degree between the James Madison University and the University of Malta has been set up in Malta, and other potential academic linkages similar to this are in the pipeline.

We are working really closely with the Education Department and we have also initiated a

creative writing programme for primary schools, as well as an exchange programme for teachers.

So how do you juggle your life as an ambassador and being a mother and wife?

I take my children to school every morning, then go to the embassy and make sure I'm completely focused on my work. All working mothers know that time is a valuable commodity. In the afternoon I help the children with their homework; we have dinner together and give them their baths. My husband helps out a lot, as he is not working here in Malta. We have a mutual agreement that family comes first.

So do Ambassador Bordonaro's children like foreign affairs like their mother?

They're still too young to understand what foreign affairs are of course. They probably think it's living in another country, which is a great experience for them. They're gaining knowledge and living in a country that has a very different culture to their own. They meet interesting people every day and this has increased their understanding of Malta.

Right now, my son's at a Maltese schoolmate's house and my daughter's at a ballet-class with around five of her Maltese friends, so their social calendar is pretty full thanks to the Maltese who have made them feel so welcome and are so kind to them.

This experience has been so meaningful for all of us that it is going to be difficult leaving Malta.

What advice would you give any woman who would like to enter the diplomatic service?

Dream big, be confident in who you are and what you do. There have never been as many opportunities in the world as there are today.

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