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OPINION

Bend over, here it comes again

THE recent conviction of another seven benefits fraudsters received very little attention in mainstream news and almost none in people's social media discussions. This is no surprise given that the two major scandals to rock the government last year did not seem to shock people as much as one would have expected. Have we really become so habituated to stories of corruption that nothing fazes us anymore?

Both the benefits fraud scandal and the driving licences scandal are brazen manifestations of a deeply entrenched culture of clientelism in Maltese politics. It seems that some MPs are entirely comfortable with the idea of exercising their power to help their constituents irrespective of what a request consists of.

These politicians do not lose any sleep over whether a constituent's request has gone through the official channels or if proper procedures have been followed in order to accede to it. They make no qualms about bending the rules or even breaking them if the end result is to the satisfaction of the person who has voted them into power and promises them their continued support.

people need something from the government apparatus that might be highly difficult to get or might not be theirs to claim, they see nothing wrong in bypassing all administrative levels and processes so as to place their demand directly with their MP.

This culture of clientelism has long thrived in Maltese politics and has created many injustices, most of which have affected individual citizens and the general public in ways that have not always come to light. However, the present ubiquity of electronic devices and widespread access to social media make it far easier to gather and share evidence of such government sanctioned cheating.

When the evidence was so irrefutable that two major scandals made the news in the space of a few weeks last year, it was deeply disconcerting to hear the prime minister justifying the existence of such clientelism rather than proposing ways of eradicating it altogether. Those who never benefited from clientelism would be right to feel crushed by the perpetuation of this state of affairs and its potential escalation in the future. They can-

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The minions within ministry customer care units and the executive offices of government agencies are encouraged to follow suit given that their job's very existence is dependent on the current and future success of the politician they answer to and the government they work for. Hence, in exchange for fealty, they do favours for those who feel entitled to such assistance through the claims of partisanship even if granting it might be unethical or plain illegal.

On their part, many people seem to believe that their political support gives them an inalienable right to demand such help from their elected representatives and their various underlings. When these

not but be excused if they lapse into acquiescence.

This is where the acronym BOHICA is quite apt. Used by cynical military personnel during the Vietnam War, it refers to adverse situations that persist for so long that enduring them seems to be the only possible response. Locally, if there ever was an example of a BOHICA situation, this habituation to institutionalised cheating would be it. And that is scary for anyone who values the rule of law, good governance, and public accountability.

Let us just hope that we do not get to a point in this country where things are completely FUBAR, to use another acronym. Those who know, know.