



# ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

## No to a 'no-fun zone'

The Minister for Home Affairs and National Security, Carmelo Abela, following the accident at the Plus One Club in Paceville that left over 70 young people injured, announced the first measures that the government is taking to respond to the uproar.

From what I gather, by people who know the scene, well over 20,000 people, which is roughly the equivalent of the resident population of Birkirkara descend on that zone every weekend. To control the movement of bodies in a relatively small area, most of whom at one point or other have consumed alcohol and possibly drugs makes the task of organising and supervising a very shambolic region extremely difficult.

The first measures announced by the minister are in my opinion only the tip of the iceberg and the way I see it on their own do not resolve the problems we have in Paceville. However, even though it took an accident (that could have had even grimmer outcomes) for politicians to realise, there seems to be an indication that the lawlessness free-for-all mayhem that characterises that area is going to be dealt with. It is now the turn of the owners of these leisure outlets to show some good will.

Let me lay out a disclaimer here.

As I have repeatedly claimed, 'Paceville' is not 'the' problem. It is good to have a sparkling leisure industry and equally fantastic to have an area in our country that can host pubs, clubs, bars, restaurants, cinemas, a casino, hotels, a bowling alley, a beach, holiday apartments, a seafront and the like.

It is unquestionably brilliant to have a place where people of all ages know that they can chill and relax after a week of hard work and study. Not only that, it is all within walking distance and one can choose to move from watching a film, to dining, to having a stroll by the sea or just sitting on the sand soaking in the clear summer night – it's all there at your beck and call.

The problems in Paceville are entrenched in years of 'anarchy' to appease the growing leisure industry without any foresight and planning.

In fact, the biggest and most pressing issue that I perceive is that there never was any attempt at urban planning. In all honesty, I cannot think how we can restore order in that area in terms of traffic management, the inadequate use of space, lack of an appropriate transportation system (private and public) and chaotic pick-up points.

In other words, I can hardly conceptualise how we can have an orderly development of this zone when there is so much undoing we need to carry out when every little space was taken up without courteous social and economic planning and hardly any consideration to the residents who live in the area. It is now all uphill, but I remain

hopeful.

In fact, I cannot understand how one can explain that in between having a parent or parents taking their kids to watch a movie or to play bowling and getting them a hamburger at Burger King it would mean passing through a street packed with youngsters, loud music and an array of strip clubs – in other words a hotchpotch!

I am no bigot and I think that all legal and acceptable forms of leisure should be made available as long as the people working in the industry are protected. The issue here is that Paceville is a leisure zone that attracts people of all ages and nationalities and having order is even more critical.

As we know, another issue with Paceville is that of observing the regulations. With the immense movement of bodies, once again in a fairly restricted space, binge drinking and the availability of drugs (that young people I talked to tell me is as easy as getting a drink at the bar, probably easier), trying to manage people is a headache.

Turning this part of Malta into a police state is not a good idea even because enforcement agencies will be seen as the adversary when people may not be in a position to reason clearly.

I believe that even though we need improved police presence (and it seems we are starting to get that) it also calls for more closed circuit cameras that can zoom into the troubled zones and nip the problems in the bud. Paceville lacks good lighting in most areas, there aren't suitably organised pedestrian zones and the signage is not adequate. If it was for me I would close the place on weekends to all traffic if not to service the establishments, access for security, emergency and residents' vehicles.

The next massive problem is public sanitation. People drink and eat – nothing more to add on that one!

Controls on who goes into clubs seem to have been tightened lately. With the revised enforcement and the spiking of fines and other germane efforts it will definitely put the club owners on their toes, at least for now until we start to slack again. But once again that is not enough. We still need systems in place to regularise how many people go into clubs and that proper staff training is provided in terms of fire, first-aid and emergency drills.

This needs to be compounded by improved safety measures, like emergency exits and lighting, assembly points, first aid posts apart from having the Civil Protection on site (which is most certainly a welcome decision).

As a side note, I think these services should be funded by the

establishment and club owners as they are the ones that gain from their patrons and this operation should not be entirely funded by the state.

Paceville attracts young people by and large. This might be the result of my bias and professional interest but certainly an issue that I strongly believe in. We need youth workers to be at the centre of this reform.

They should be present in clubs and leisure establishments. They are the best placed professionals that can support young people who might be exaggerating in terms of how much alcohol they consume, they are skilled in talking people out of trouble, are able to support young people who might be going through a tough patch.

They should have full indiscriminate access to clubs, accompany police officers when arrests are going to be made and have complete access to all the areas of Paceville. It is the notion of detached youth work that is most effective because with young people a Police Officer represents confrontation whilst a Youth Worker is seen as a point of reference. In my humble opinion we need to take this recommendation seriously.

The biggest problem as I stated earlier on is the easy access to alcohol consumption. Sharing photo-shoots of middle aged people smiling with non-alcoholic cocktails is inane. We have a massive problem when it comes to drinking and it will not be resolved by long-drawn initiatives. Drinking is now at the centre of leisure and not as it was a couple of years ago just another loop in the evening out. Young people plan their budgets, pool in money, buy alcohol from off-licence stores and get it all organised before choosing the shirt they will be wearing.

This is a culture that emanates because children are brought up believing that alcohol is OK. They buy beer and wine for their parents from the grocers, see their parents drive after gulping four or more cans of beer at a BBQ. To compound this we hardly ever hear of anyone being stopped and arrested for drink-driving. It is a culture that is embedded in us that drinking is fine and it can happen all the time and anywhere.

We must have heard this statement addressed to the parents of a 10-year-old son or nephew, 'U tih ffit whiskey miskin issa qed jikber!' – drinking seems to be the initiation into adulthood.

We could also do with clubs that close earlier on. I am sure that parents who have children, siblings or relatives the age of my children will appreciate that having to wait on edge for your kids to return from Paceville two or three times a week at 3 and 4 in the morning is barmy. I

am not saying that clubs should close at 11pm and that we turn our dance floors into line-dancing and zumba classes for goodness sake! What I am saying is that having a club operate from 7pm till 2am is more than enough. I think that clubs that remain open after that time should have a special licence and particular conditions to operate in.

We also need to create more space and leisure activities for younger 'young' people. I am not saying we organise treasure hunts or cooking lessons but we need to hearten operators to provide for parties, extreme sports and activities that attract young people who are of an age when they cannot drink alcohol and access clubs.

The National Youth Agency has taken it on itself to create a Youth Village and Youth Hubs which is excellent and commendable work but that context applies to young people who are involved in NGOs mostly.

Having said that, even though Aġenzija Zgħazgħi has started detached youth work and has extended its remit within the community this needs to grow quickly and widely and the Department of Youth and Community Studies I head is responsible to provide more training and opportunities in this regard.

But, we still have a dearth of leisure spaces for young people. We need more adventure and outdoor activities, complexes that are fun, incentivise companies to bring more artists to Malta, develop theatre, drama and alternative art and leisure spaces – in other words popularise culture.

Young people are not homogeneous, that's a fact, they are all different. What we need to do is to realise that young people need to be with each other, need colour and sound and calculated risk events they can engage with.

Let's stop talking surveillance and start engaging young people. Listening to children on consultation and photo shoot meetings and getting our token youngster to speak in front of the TV camera news is not remotely good enough. We need to take this agenda to them and see what they want and let them design it for themselves.

That is why I reiterate my belief that youth work is central to resolving part of the issue and realigning Paceville to become a (safe) haven of fun. We need it because youth work is also about policy development, strategy arrangement and helping young people regain the spaces that are theirs by right.

Let's not turn Paceville into a no-fun zone but we should not allow it to be dragged further into an accident-prone region.

**"Ghandi xi Nghid"**

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