

Editorial:

Stop, Stop, Stop!

We are all convinced that Gozo is a very special place, and not just for Gozitans. It is special because of what it is, what it has been from the beginning. Those who come to visit appreciate the difference. The worst thing that can happen to Gozo is to turn it into the mediocre banality that most tourist places elsewhere have been turned into.

There are obviously many and varied conflicting interests. There is the ever increasing population of Gozo which in the last decade has swollen by almost 25 per cent. There is the ever-increasing desire of the better-healed compatriots from the sister island to have a pied-a-terre in Gozo, a desire which quickly turns into actuality when economic conditions allow such a luxury. There is, most ominously of all, the craving of those wishing to get rich quick by building more and more flats to accommodate the needs of the tourist industry - one taxi-driver was heard bragging that he now owned ten flats!

Politicians, finding themselves squeezed between the demands of developers and the increasing clamour of conservationists, talk of sustainable development, which a stretchable enough concept, meaning different things to different people. Hard decisions are difficult to make and are likely to have a severe negative effect on popularity. Hence the need for an approach to such problems that has the consensus of all major political parties, thus reducing the risk of the issue degenerating into a political football.

Here are some unlikely suggestions for the future. One thing which appears clear to most is the fact that Gozo does not need any more flats and apartments. The monotony of developments that scar the periphery of our villages should be a thing of the past. There should be a strict moratorium on building flats and apartments for the tourist industry.

Secondly, new building permits should be limited to those residents who need accommodation as their first home. No permits should be issued to build a second home/flat/apartment anywhere in the island. There should be taxes on second houses severe enough to make such holdings prohibitive. In particular, one must face the fact that not every well-off person in

Malta can own an apartment in Gozo - there is simply not enough space for this to happen.

Priority should be given to newly-wed couples wishing to establish a home in Gozo. These should be helped to find an existing home, with considerable incentives to obtain an older house rather than building a brand new home. In this respect politicians must have sufficient intestinal vigour to rectify once and for all the injustices generated by the pre-war renting legislation which have succeeded in perpetrating a mentality of fear and distrust between landlord and tenant.

There should be an effective propaganda against the overuse and abuse of land. An ethos should be established that shames all those who feel they need palatial accommodation where a smaller house could serve their needs equally well.

What is the alternative? A *laissez-faire* policy will ensure that Gozo will lose its attraction as a quiet semi-rural jewel in the Mediterranean ideal for those who prefer to escape from the hurly-burly of life in the major cities of Europe. By turning Gozo into yet another ordinary tourist spot with all the amenities available everywhere else in Europe, one is simply hastening the demise of the tourist trade in Gozo - a sure way of killing the goose that lays the golden egg. Why come to Gozo when there are so many more attractions in the major cities and countries of Europe?

It is also well to realise that Gozo cannot be all things to all people. There is always going to be limitation on what we can provide. A decision has to be made about the direction to take. Niche tourism requires specialising in a certain direction, involving the provision of a special product desired by a section of the population. When however, such needs conflict with the long-term viability of Gozo, and particularly when its very special characteristics, its flora and fauna and its natural beauty are threatened, then it is certainly time to stop and consider. No short term development should over-ride the long-term effects on the eco-system of the island, and none should be permitted, whatever the political cost.