

'Controversial' projects for Gozo?



The iconic Ta' Kenuna Tower in Nadur, rubbing shoulders with a truck parked nearby.

Opposition leader Joseph Muscat's recent declaration that the Labour Party was ready to take "controversial decisions" to generate "work in Gozo, for Gozitans", unless qualified, should send shivers down the spine of all those who have been striving to prevent further encroachment on Gozo's undeveloped areas.

The Labour Party should immediately qualify this vague statement to dispel the public perception that while the party is criticising the lack of clout of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority reform and the lack of focus of the Eco Gozo concept, it is promising to run roughshod over Mepa and pander to contractors.

The Labour Party should immediately qualify this vague statement

- Alan Deidun

By "controversial", are we to understand that Ta' Ċenċ, Mgarr ix-Xini, Hondoq ir-Rummien, the Gozo heliport or any other Outside Development Zone site in Gozo will be targeted?

The Labour Party – mainly through its environment spokesman Leo Brincat – talks of inclusive discussion with environmental NGOs, but if it does not disclose what these "controversial" projects and sites are, this suggests a party policy which aims not to alienate environmentalists before election time, only to drop the bombshell once in power.

Muscat's statement also harks back to the times when grand schemes were conceived to provide employment for the masses, only for that employment to fizzle away when the schemes no longer remained viable, but not before the schemes wreaked environmental damage as a result of their short-sightedness. The mottos *Iżra u Rabbi* and *Risq il-Widien* immediately spring to mind.

Proposed car-pooling rotation system

An article recently appeared in this newspaper highlighting that the total number of vehicles on our roads has surpassed the 310,000 mark, such that roads are perennially snarled with gridlocked traffic.

Many online comments on the article referred to the slipshod public transport service. While saying the bus service is still not up to scratch is an euphemism, I beg to differ that a good bus service is the only solution to the traffic conundrum.

Many motorists, including myself, openly admit that they will never abandon their cars for the bus no matter how efficient it is. For all my green credentials, I unashamedly admit to be a car junkie. So for all dyed-in-the-wool motorists like me, a mandatory and enforced car-pooling rotation system is needed.

The system would involve the publication of a so-called roster of number plates of cars that would be barred from being used on the roads once every two weeks. The list would need to be published with sufficient advance notice to give motorists ample time to make arrangements and so as not to be caught unawares.

Since the frequency of the barring of the car's use would not be prohibitive, one could easily pair up with another motorist to make alternative arrangements to get to work, or to the supermarket or to run any other errand. The same motorist could even be tempted to use the bus.

Such a system is not original. The so-called 'targhe alterne' (alternate number plates) system is occasionally implemented in urban areas abroad, such as Milan and Rome, when vehicle emissions exceed certain thresholds.

What is novel about this proposal is that the system has never been tested on an entire national territory or on the entire vehicle complement of a country.

The enforcement of such a system is the greatest challenge and it might appear mind-boggling. But it need not be so if car registration numbers are considered sequentially in consecutive batches, with car registration numbers barred for the day being widely advertised, and car owners penalised if they are caught using the car on the day concerned.

Obviously, commercial vehicles, which comprise 24 per cent of the total local vehicle complement, would be exempted from such a system. Still, even a simple ball-park calculation reveals that if every private vehicle were to be barred from the roads for once every two weeks, the scheme would eliminate over 16,000 vehicles a day from our roads. If the pilot project succeeds one could consider further broadening the system.

One particular online comment said the current traffic malaise was mainly due to cars still being considered as status symbols locally. I could not agree more.

The organisers of local lotteries and other gambling fare are partly to blame for this mindset – for instance, the Lotterija Indipendenza organised annually by the Nationalist Party seeks to whet the appetite of pundits by offering a car as a first prize, thus further consolidating the notion that owning a car is one of the ultimate achievements in life, a coveted goal to aspire to.

Pulling wool over eyes

The fact that the proposer of the Qala Creek (Hondoq ir-Rummien) project has abandoned the yacht marina concept and replaced it with a proposed swimming lagoon may seem, *prima facie*, a victory for the environmental movement.

But delving further into the matter, one realises that the move is symptomatic of a developer who has read the writing on the wall and has opted for confounding, delaying tactics.

The Qala Creek project proposals have in recent months been given the thumbs down by Mepa's Environment Directorate, Transport Malta and the NGO Wirt Għawdex, among a long list of other detractors. In fact, the publication of the case officer's report for the project was imminent and the odds were stacked against the developer.

So by popping such a fundamentally different proposal out of the hat, the developer is wasting the precious time of Mepa staff. The application was originally submitted some nine years ago.

With Hondoq ir-Rummien's excellent bathing water quality, the need for a swimming lagoon there is hardly urgent.

Trailers re-colonise scenic Nadur site

In previous years I had exposed through this column the illegal parking of trailers and construction equipment at a site close to the iconic Ta' Kenuna Tower in Nadur in what had effectively become an impromptu dump. The site had eventually been cleared.

Recently, residents have yet again observed the piecemeal accumulation of trailers on the site in what appears to be a re-run of the same story, as illustrated by the two photos above.

I urge the authorities to treat the issue with urgency so as to avoid the re-colonisation of the site.