

Alienating the greens



Jibes and snipes are flying from the Nationalist camp in the direction of anything that has a minimal hue of green, with many in government asking themselves what has led to the current impasse. Before proceeding further, I wish to make it clear that I have no pro-Labour agenda (this column has lambasted the Opposition's stance on scheme revisions ad nauseam); the fact is that the PN has been in power ever since this column started some four-five years ago.

Things had started well, with the green camp lauding EU accession, the PM's statement that the environment is one of the country's three priorities and George Pullicino's pledge to keep ODZ (outside development zone) infringements in check.

It then soured with the recent development zone extension, which no comparison with past misdemeanours by Labour or scaremongering (of a change in administration) can ever sugar, since we are not 'voters by default'.

The last straw was Government-backed proposals for the two golf courses at Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra and Ta' Cenc, and Government's silence on the Hondoq ir-Rummien marina project in Gozo. Here's a simple remedy for the time being: can the present administration pronounce itself on the Hondoq project?

Local Plans - quote when convenient

Throughout the scheme revision exercise, a common rallying cry from the 'pro' camp was that Government tinkered with the Local Plan drafting exercise by MEPA since the local plans were being drawn by different teams using different yardsticks and hence Government had to impose some common guidelines. Hence, Government felt that it has to react to the local plans since it saw inconsistencies in them.

Reading through the recently approved Gozo and Comino Local Plan, one encounters the entrenchment within the same plan of the Ta' Cenc project, with the approved plan now earmarking the eastern flank of the Ta' Cenc promontory and the upgrading of the existing hotel.

While at least not playing second fiddle to the developer's proposals for a full development cartilage of two km, the local plan does go beyond the Structure Plan by identifying new sites for the development of the hotel, 59 villas and 49 bungalows.

I am eager to see the response from the pro-revision team now... it's in their credibility's interest that no more ODZ sites are swamped over. Will they resort to saying that the local plan process was flawed, as they did previously, and amend it to bring it back to the Structure Plan guidelines? Some consistency is required here.

PoliLand

The acronym 'PoliGas' is fast being emblazoned on numerous delivery vans and is becoming almost a household name. Hence, I thought I'd coin a similar acronym - PoliLand. Why not, especially when one considers that this sweet land of ours is fast becoming the fiefdom of the Polidano Brothers?

Take the gas-bottling plant at Hal Farrug, I/o Luqa, for which no environment impact assessment (EIA) was deemed necessary although EIAs were commissioned for the Multigas

plant in Kirkop and for rabbit farms, and despite the fact that the plant is rubbing shoulders (just 200 m away) with a fireworks factory.

Take the previously green area at Tal-Biedja Street, Safi, privately owned by Polidano Brothers, earmarked in the draft local plan as an urban open space (SMSE 04 - extension of the existing public garden) and suddenly opened up for development of terraced houses after the local council dropped its calls for a home for the elderly.

Take the application by Polidano Brothers to continue quarrying the largest hardstone quarry in Malta (at Ghar Lapsi), despite having elbowed the road leading to a number of farms in the area to the very edge of the ridge, disturbing residents of Id-Dar tal-Providenza and enveloping the environs in billowing clouds of dust.

Rumour has it that Polidano Brothers have set their eyes on a well-known restaurant in Ghar Lapsi, to replace it with a large hotel. Any clarification from the interested parties would be welcome.

All this and much more (e.g., more than 80 enforcement notices) is justified on the pretext of "I employ thousands of people".

Marinas galore

The latest report by the European Environmental Agency (EEA) focuses on Europe's coast. Malta (along with Lithuania and Belgium) is listed as having an extremely high settlement density on short coastlines.

In a case study within the report on the 'Impacts of Marinas on the European Coast', it is stated that "marinas are developing in new member states, like Malta and Croatia", that "marinas have a serious negative impact on the environment due to the consumption of land, degradation of shallow coastal water, disturbance of the dynamics of coastal currents and chemical pollution", and that "boating also has major implications for the terrestrial coast as infrastructures are built to keep boats out of water".

Against this backdrop, try harmonising the fact that our government is planning at least two new yacht marinas (one in Marsascala and a gargantuan one in Xemxija) and is silent about a third proposed one at Hondoq ir-Rummien in Gozo. Labour's position is, as usual, ambiguous and equivocal - on one hand you have Roderick Galdes, MP, lambasting the project, and on the other you have opposition leader Alfred Sant attacking the developers for also planning luxury residences instead of just the hotel and yacht marina.

The authorities (especially the Malta Maritime Authority) should publish its plans for Xemxija yacht marina, especially when these appear to impinge on Fekruna Bay

It is only when such absurd applications as the Hondoq one are refuted that we can say that the rationalisation exercise was worth the sacrifice. This acumen was aptly distilled in a letter by Edward Camilleri (The Times, August 10), who asks:

"Can the authorities illuminate us on how the issue of development in Hondoq ir-Rummien is going to be decided when the area, besides being Outside Development Zone, is outside the limits for development established lately during the rationalisation of development boundaries exercise conducted by Parliament, which is binding for the next 10 years?"

Yet another valley under concrete?

Yet another valley in Malta is facing the gauntlet, possibly going down the same alley imposed on Wied Ghomor in San Gwann - Wied il-Madonna in Mellieha. This valley meanders down to Ghadira from beneath Mellieha parish church and constitutes an important watercourse habitat (see accompanying photos) and a green lung for the community.

Despite this, the valley is currently the subject of two planning applications - PA 04959/02 (extension of existing Solana Hotel, construction of flats, and parking spaces, provision of access to future public car park on the adjacent site) and PA 06514/03 (to demolish existing building and reconstruct 18 flats).

One of the developers has even brazenly opened up a 'temporary' road on one side of the valley (see photos), on which an enforcement notice was issued but which was never acted upon. The same developer even had the temerity to dump concrete blocks, rubble and even air-conditioning units on the other side of the road.

What may be most galling, however, is that no fewer than 12 conference rooms are being proposed for the mouth of the valley, through which a considerable amount of rainwater gurgles. The site proposed for development is endowed with a carob tree and was previously even the site of an apiary.

Who's next?

John Zammit, writing in the online news portal 'MaltaRightNow' of July 31 under the title "Rebha ghar-rahuni u ghall-moderazzjoni" (A victory for reason and moderation) champions his cause (i.e., the need to extend building schemes) as a sacrosanct one and that its approval was a win over excessive zeal and fanaticism.

One gets the perception that Mr Zammit's is simply a regurgitation of previous pieces by the likes of Michael Falzon, arguing for extension on the grounds of Malta's population density and

the need for affordable housing for newly-weds, etc. When did Mr Zammit ever harp on any other environmental issue in the past?

Especially galling is the barb which can be roughly translated as "environmentalists cannot be placed in the same kettle as the Labour Party but they too have a defect". Is this to imply that the pro-extension camp is flawless?

Rather than picking on exponents of the green camp for their mud-slinging campaigns (such as researching on their private property) or using national broadcasting (the derisory PBS coverage of the environmental protest in Valletta comes to mind), reminiscent of the Pravda days (see Professor Edward Mallia's letter - The Sunday Times, August 13), the pro-extension camp should try to restore their credentials as bulwarks of the environment and most of all of democratic representative ways. In particular, Mr Zammit and the lot should take a leaf out of Mr Michael Magri's letter (The Sunday Times, August 20) where he states; "Let's not shoot the messenger any more as this is nothing more than a sign of great fear of the truth being known."

Golf course - no reply as yet

TWO weeks have passed since I asked the Golden Sands Resort management whether the golf course is being marketed to prospective timeshare owners at the hotel yet no answer has been forthcoming...

MaltaStar.com revealed the contents of the Deloitte & Touche financial report on the proposed Xaghra I-Hamra golf course, whereby the obvious was rubber-stamped - i.e., that a stand-alone golf course is not financially viable. The Malta Tourism Authority (completely ignoring the deluge of letters by tourists complaining about our islands' overdevelopment) is proposing the construction of 198 maisonettes and apartments around the perimeter of the golf course and a club house. It has also transpired that the commissioned EIA for the site is largely favourable to the proposed golf course. Is this the end of Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra as we know it?

Rationalisation - a suggestion

Nationlist MP Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando is admired by many environmentalists for his laudable stances. My admiration is not dispelled by his recent support for the rationalisation exercise, despite my total opposition to it.

However, I beg to differ with a point he makes in his piece "Irrational about rationalisation" (The Times, August 10), namely: "The myth that a number of 'friends of friends' were going to benefit from the extensions was dispelled when the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) posted a list of all the beneficiaries on its Website."

I have painstakingly rummaged through the list of recommendations and names of "beneficiaries" as posted on the MEPA Website. It is quite unreasonable to expect members of the public to sift through the 4,300 or so submissions made and to download the eons of megabytes of maps, etc., that go with them. In addition, it is hard to conclude that no other interests conceal themselves behind the names posted - i.e. the names could simply be a front for the real beneficiaries. A number of eminent beneficiaries keep resounding in my ears but I can't think of a possible way to confirm such a list or not.

The suggestion made by Astrid Vella ("The Tal-Papa Field", The Times, August 17) that MPs should visit the sites acting as apples of discord in the current scheme revision is a sound one indeed. Government should be kept on its toes by the legal precedent set by the Constitutional Court which has confirmed the award of Lm360,000 to Dom Mintoff (July 29) for the de facto expropriation of his Delimara house through the construction of the power station. This could potentially open the floodgates for numerous legal actions taken by aggrieved citizens, whose property's views are obstructed as a result of the scheme revisions. A case of opening a Pandora's Box?

Silver linings

Positive message from hunters - Mark Mifsud Bonnici, secretary of a local hunters' union, deserves praise for berating the justice system for meting out a lenient fine of just Lm200 to a hunter who admitted to shooting a strictly protected species (short-toed eagle), relapsing and even to attempting to bribe police officers (The Times, August 15). Honest hunters should take the cue in asking for harsher sentences.

MEPA steams ahead - MEPA recently sealed off two illegal villas as part of its campaign to curb illegal developments in Delimara, in the wake of its pledge to clear the Delimara coast of illegalities. The doors were sealed with MEPA green seals and their main gates blocked off with concrete slabs. There should be no vacillation in the circumstances. Bravo!

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