

## Largest, unrepresented minority



Hunters stand tall while those opposing spring hunting have been left without any parliamentary representation.

The spring hunting referendum may be done and dusted but a number of sore points about the result and the way the campaign was conducted still linger on.

Over 124,000 people voted No in the referendum, which is a significant number by any stretch of the imagination. But this sizeable minority has been orphaned by both major political parties, with the Labour Party actively lending its support to the Yes camp, especially during the last few days prior to the referendum.

Meanwhile, the Nationalist Party was locked up in blissful hibernation, with Simon Busuttill's only reaction being a pre-recorded message after the referendum result emerged which almost exclusively appealed to the Yes voters.

It is disappointing, to use an understatement, that no Labour (bar Marlene Farrugia) and, more significantly, no Nationalist exponents actually tied their flag to the No camp mast.

What is surprising is that the PN withdraws into an ivory tower only when environmental issues such as hunting and trapping are at stake; by contrast, the party is very vociferous, and rightly so, when issues related to perceived corruption or lack of meritocracy are involved.

Effectively, the spineless stance adopted by both Labour and Nationalist MPs effectively meant that over 124,000 Maltese citizens were not represented by their elected parliamentarians, bar one.

It is a damning indictment of our political class that the aspirations of this large minority are only being voiced by Alternattiva Demokratika, a party which is not even represented in Parliament. What a quirk of democracy!

The Yes camp's post-referendum statement on the need to revise the referendum Act so as to avert future referendums that curtail the rights of minorities such as fireworks enthusiasts and motorsport fans was ironic. Besides being an undemocratic proposal, as it seeks to maim the referendum tool, it could also be applied to safeguard the interests of the sizeable minority of Maltese voters who wish to enjoy the countryside during springtime from further incursions (such as an extension of the bird shooting period) by the hunting lobby.

The mother of all aberrations is that the junior minister for animal rights – Roderick Galdes – publicly supported the Yes vote. How the resumption of spring hunting will protect animal rights confounds me – perhaps Galdes does not consider birds to be animals, reserving such a privilege to cats, dogs and horses instead?

Rather, I suspect that his stance, which would be inconceivable anywhere else in the civilised world, has more to do with political survival, and Galdes' core constituency happens to be in hardcore hunting areas. By contrast, but equally vexing, the Opposition's spokesman on hunting and trapping was completely absent during the campaign.

Against this background of the anomalous absence in the No camp of the two major political parties, it is no wonder that a cohort of a mere 10,000 registered hunters managed to sway the majority of the Maltese public in their favour.

The No camp failed to counter in a convincing manner the numerous myths bandied about by the Yes camp, despite having the scientific acumen to easily do so, and at the end of the day they let legal arguments trump over ecological ones.

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Someone should have stood up and calmly told lawyer Kathleen Grima that there is nothing wrong with trapping cats close to the Simar bird sanctuary, as cats prey on bird hatchlings, rather than let the Yes camp have a field day on this issue.

Someone should also have countered the argument of yet another lawyer, Ylenia Rosso, that the fact that the two bird species targeted by hunters during the referendum – quail and turtle doves – are not listed as being endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature is not tantamount to a clean bill of health, as spectacular bird population crashes have happened in the past. The passenger pigeon, which went extinct in 1914 after numbering in the billions just 50 years before, is a case in point. So it is wise to apply the precautionary principle applying in such cases.

I would also have expected someone to point out that turtle dove populations have been declining in the UK since the 1970s, with the decline accelerating in recent years, and that this should be ringing some form of warning bell.

There were a few individuals who tried to break the monotony of legal and animal rights considerations that dominated the debate, but they certainly did not make enough ripples with their arguments.

The referendum's outcome is obviously not only attributable to the shortcomings of the No camp, but also to the deceit spun by the Yes campaign.

For example, it conveniently presented the derogation for spring hunting unilaterally applied by Malta as though it is a derogation granted by the European Commission. The Yes camp's slick marketing campaign also featured everything except guns and birds (as if hunters were using stones or some other mysterious means to down birds).

The referendum's outcome provides a lesson for those who care to learn: the hunting fraternity is a unified and committed front, which tows the same rope for the cause. Conversely, a number of exponents who would abhor being labelled environmentalists but who are in favour of environmental conservation shied away from lending their support to the No camp, probably so as not to prejudice their professional and academic activities. They may also be wary of being associated with AD, which was the main catalyst behind the referendum.

The fact that there was a 70 per cent voter turnout in districts where there was a No majority, and an 80 per cent voter turnout in districts with a Yes majority, has laid bare an unsavoury reality: not all who say they believe in the green cause are ready to step up to the plate.

The mother of all ironies is that the same electoral districts that featured most strongly at the referendum signature collection stage also registered the lowest voter turnout figures, suggesting that, at least in some people, the commitment against spring hunting was just skin deep and restricted only to signing a petition.

Probably, some will only be nudged into voting if an apartment block that will block their sea or country view is on the cards. Survey after survey may indicate that the environment is increasingly becoming an important issue for many Maltese, but seeing such voter apathy, one wonders whether, at the end of the day, the apparent environmental awareness of the Maltese is mere lip service.

This does not bode well when one considers the upcoming controversial environmental proposals on the government's agenda, such as land reclamation, the revision of the local plans (with a consequent relaxation of development boundaries), planning amnesties, the Gozo airstrip and the Sped (a watered-down version, rather than a revised version, of the Structure Plan).

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