

## More lead balloons for Gozo



Xatt l-Ahmar's remoteness and ecological value will be shattered if plans to build a road to the area go ahead.

Labour leader Joseph Muscat has once again dismayed and disillusioned all those who are against more 'brick and mortar' development in Gozo by talking about a likely extension of the Mġarr yacht marina once the party is in power.

The Gozo airstrip still seems to be on the cards for the Labour Party too, disguised as "providing better access for Gozitans", though the party was quick to partly retract this later, saying the helicopter service was its preferred option. This follows similar talk by the Labour Party leader of "major projects" in Gozo, for which red tape will be waived, presumably referring to the Ta' Ċenċ project or similar projects.

*With such a stifling human presence on these islands, preserving unsullied corners of paradise, like Xatt L-Ahmar, is of paramount importance*

- Alan Deidun

Making 'pledges' is a politician's prerogative but one surely cannot cut corners for the sake of populist promises. For instance, bypassing the Environmental Impact Assessment process, or at least vitiating the process by pre-empting conclusions when such studies have not yet been conducted, is reminiscent of the 1980s, when projects were steamed through with no prior consideration of their environmental impact.

Muscat should have been advised not to stick his neck out so brashly in view of concerns over the impact that the possible extension of Mġarr Harbour yacht marina could have on water quality and on seagrass meadows.

The Labour leader's stance in this case is somewhat puzzling as it comes back-to-back on his laudable pledge to give due importance to social impact assessments prior to the introduction of a major economic policy.

The proposal is so rash and it is so certain not to fly that one may liken it to plutonium, rather than a lead balloon, plutonium being even denser than lead.

Criticising Eco-Gozo only to promote Concrete-Gozo hardly qualifies as consistent behaviour.

### Paving paradise

Xatt l-Ahmar might sound enigmatic to many as it is one of those remote places in Gozo that have still maintained a veneer of pristine character, mainly due to its inaccessibility. In fact, the area is used mainly for swimming, almost exclusively by residents of Ġhajnsielem and by groups of boys under the supervision of MUSEUM members, who trek down on foot to the rocky shoreline and short sandy beaches.

The limited human presence obviously also translates into disproportionate ecological importance, resulting mainly from the rare plant species found along watercourse linked to the the duck pond and also from the sand dune remnants behind the beach.

While obviously giving due credit to these ecological features, there is really no need to resort to them to make a strong case for the conservation of Xatt I-Aħmar, as its relatively pristine nature should ward off any form of 'development'.

Needless to say, the proponents of the new road will wheel in farmers, and the need for them to be provided better access. They will probably also cite 'better access to the coast in order to be able to appreciate it', and similar dross.

What's wrong with promoting the 'walk down to the sea' approach, rather than the 'drive your way to it' approach?

Indeed, the script used is the same old one, especially when it comes to coastal sites in Malta – open up or upgrade vehicular access to a previously undisturbed site and the hordes will move in, fuelling ribbon development of all sorts, ranging from snack shops to deck chair hire facilities to, God forbid, an impromptu caravan site.

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### **Developers' delaying tactics unacceptable**

PA04286/99, submitted over 10 years ago, proposes the development of an Outside Development Zone coastal stretch at Triq it-Tonn, St Paul's Bay (Għar Għasfur area), one of the last slivers of undeveloped coastal land in the locality, which is also scheduled by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority for its ecological value.

Residents have been putting up a tenacious stand to oppose the project and on October 22, 2010, they were under the impression that they had triumphed as the Planning Appeals Board rejected the appeal submitted by the developer against its refusal.

However, since then, the developer has resorted to delaying tactics ad nauseum. In fact, although the board's refusal decision was final, it could only be challenged in the Court of Appeal on points of law. The developer did go to court and challenged the decision on the grounds that the developer's name was incorrectly written down on the official decision document issued by the board.

The name was 'Anton Camilleri vs Mepa', when it should have been 'Anton Camilleri on behalf of Grove Ltd vs Mepa'. The Court of Appeal accepted this, declared the board's decision null and void and ordered the appeal to be reappointed in front of the Environment and Planning Review Tribunal.

The residents' lawyer rightly pointed out that the court's decision to annul the appeal did not change any of the merits of the case, adding that in the original appeal process, both parties had already presented all their submissions, on the basis of which the board had eventually arrived at its decision to refuse the appeal.

The tribunal gave the developer two months within which to present his written submissions, following which Mepa would have a further two months to present its own written submissions. The case was adjourned to November 8 for the final submissions of both parties to be heard, after which it will be put off for the tribunal's decision.

One hopes that such machinations by the developer, simply aiming at bypassing the residents' tenacious stance, will not result in some anomalous decision being taken at the end of the day – the courts should really not entertain what are nothing more than delaying tactics by the developer in this case.