

## Disco mania



No need for political spin... civil society should have blown the whistle on the Mistra case.

I will not delve into the political connotations of the Mistra Spin Valley disco hiatus, even though this is the perfect Sunday to do so with votes for the general election cast.

However, the political mileage being exacted from the Outside Development Zone malaise certainly deserves some criticism, especially since all the 'actors' in the affair are not beyond reproach.

Both big parties, in fact, are dotted with exponents who were at some point involved in ODZ trespassing - thus, no one can throw the proverbial 'first stone'.

Reverting to Mistra, one must also consider the application (PA07752/07) for the utilisation of the area as an open-air entertainment area.

The only bone of contention for the developers is that the site is scheduled as an area of ecological importance/site and scientific importance.

It is a proposed Natura 2000 site, located on scheduled salt marsh remnants, and lies in the buffer area earmarked for coastal protection. The application PA05880/07, referring to the discotheque application, also runs counter to a large number of existing Structure Plan policies.

Even more incriminating is the recommendation for refusal by the Planning Directorate of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority on grounds that illegalities were present on site.

Common sense must also be factored in - who on earth would fathom having a disco in the middle of a tranquil bay, so sought-after by families at weekends?

Must they start to expect the thudding noises emanating from discotheques while they seek some peace and calm?

By issuing the permit, Mepa has essentially set the precedent of condoning illegalities and issuing permits notwithstanding.

Only time will tell if another tranquil spot - Mistra Bay - is sacrificed to develop yet another disco, symptomatic of a culture which panders to youngsters who always crave for 'exclusive' venues, such as Buskett, Paradise Bay, La Grotta - overlooking a valley in Xlendi.

One hopes that the second application, still pending, is refused, thus making the first application obsolete, preserving the tranquility of Mistra Bay.

The bottom line is that there was no need for all the political spin to highlight this case - civil society should have blown the whistle.

### **A Pyrrhic victory at Safi?**

Now that Mepa's auditor has rapped the knuckles of the DCC Board members involved in giving the Safi supermarket development the green light, will the permit for the same

supermarket be revoked and the site reinstated? Fat chance you might say, especially since the developer was quick to ride the momentum and dig up entire place once permits were in hand.

The proposed mechanism whereby permits can be revoked if the decision-taking process was vitiated in some way (no Environment Impact Assessment was commissioned for this ODZ development, among others) should immediately be in place once the election hype is over. Otherwise, we risk having many Pyrrhic victories like the one at Safi.

## **Whistle blowing galore**

After years of clamouring for the safeguard of whistleblowers in the country, this column has finally been vindicated, by both large political parties who have pledged some form of Whistleblower Act. This column has for the past six years been a beacon to all whistleblowers who have submitted their issues for their eventual inclusion. If such an act (and not a cosmetic one) finally sees the light of day, people will hopefully be tempted to publish their stories directly in the press. Only time will tell if politicians will walk the walk, after talking the talk.

## **Lashing out at NGOs**

Saviour Balzan used to be talisman for me, with his irreverent crusades against the power-mongers in this country. Not anymore. His criticism of Nature Trust and his insinuation that the Dwejra boathouse owners now trust the NGO for its stand on the issue warrants rebuke and contempt, especially since it betrays an uncharacteristic uninformed opinion on his part.

Contrary to his ill-timed tirade against the NGO, the tenets of the Dwejra Management Plan were formulated by all members of the management committee three years ago. Had Mr Balzan bothered to consult the same plan on the Mepa website, he would have acquainted himself with the 23 different management proposals being fielded by the report.

This includes the restriction of hunting and trapping in the area, the sloughing off of fossils and the restoration of rubble walls.

The area is literally pot-holed with nine quarries, which is the real motivation as to why the site was not granted World Heritage Site status.

Mr Balzan did not even care to mention the fact that the second floors of all boathouses will be demolished and all apertures replaced with timber ones.

Nature Trust condemns all illegal boathouses - however, in order to make any headway, unfortunate compromises sometimes have to be made. Repeated attempts by Mepa and the Government to procure EU LIFE funding for the area failed, before the joint attempt by Nature Trust and the authority.

Numerous administrations came and went, and nobody batted an eyelid on the boathouse issue - all of a sudden, everyone expects the demolition of the same boathouses.

Would all the utopists have us believe that they would have preferred the previous status quo, where no management agreement was signed? Would they have preferred to keep believing in the eventual demolition of the boathouses, while the surrounding area was literally in a shambles?

Through his omissions, Mr Balzan wrought irreversible damage to the environmental NGO movement, as testified by the spate of derogatory letters against such organisations in Maltatoday.

Through his gratuitous comments, Mr Balzan sowed the seeds of mistrust in the operations of NGOs and in the judicious management of a protected area. The show of support from fellow NGOs is the only silver lining in the whole affair.

## **Hoping for meritocracy**

Now that the rumpus of the election campaign is finally over, my only hope is that meritocracy is finally given its rightful place by any administration. The density of monopolies enjoyed by sycophants in this country has to be one of the highest, worldwide.

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