

Hands off our seas, Michael!



Michael Falzon could go down in history as the MP who sanctioned the dumping of millions of tons of debris in Maltese waters for land reclamation and more luxury real estate development. Seen here is Qalet Marku, one of the preferred sites for such a purpose.

Up till now, Parliamentary Secretary Michael Falzon has come across as a genteel, approachable and almost affable guy, giving the impression that he is solidly rooted in the domain of moderation and far removed from all sorts of extremism. But since he was made responsible for the Malta Environment and Planning Authority he has done everything to blow this rosy perception to smithereens and to burn most, if not all, bridges with the environmental lobby.

Rarely has a single individual embodied so many land-hungry interest groups and lobbies as Falzon, with the prospect of glaring conflicts of interests looming around the corner. For instance, he is a self-declared fireworks enthusiast and is responsible for Mepa committee currently drafting the fireworks factory policy.

He is also a champion of the hunting and trapping lobby, to the extent that he blurred the distinction between his position as an MP with legislative power and his involvement with the hunting lobby group by presenting the sham petition collected by hunters to Parliament himself. In such circumstances MPs should behave with aplomb and should not be engaged with any of the two sides in a contentious issue, let alone appointing themselves as the messenger for one of parties.

But the parliamentary secretary's latest bombshell dropped is his unequivocal support for the land reclamation scheme.

The issue is very unsavoury for two reasons; firstly due to the lack of transparency, with details of the 17 international proposals for the scheme being mostly kept under wraps so far; secondly, his wholesale support for land reclamation flies in the face of the contrary recommendations emerging from previous ad hoc studies and comes in the absence of any Marine Spatial Plan or comprehensive Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) for such projects. Contrast this with the case of the Sikka I-Bajda offshore wind farm, a project of national interest (to help Malta attain its 2020 renewables target) which seems to have been shelved and for which a detailed two-year-long EIA study was conducted.

Does touting the luxury property island for Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq in the national interest justify the smothering of hectares of *Posidonia oceanica* (Neptune grass) meadows? If the EU considers *Posidonia* meadows a priority habitat and key species, there must be some very good reasons to treat them with such disdain.

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Being so well versed with the property and construction sectors, Falzon is probably aware that once a keystone (the central stone in an arch) is removed, the arch collapses. Similarly, these

meadows have a disproportionate importance in the marine environment, including those of acting as ecosystem engineers supporting high level of biodiversity, as a nursery for many coastal fish species, as a buffer for the coast against storm swells and as oxygenators of the water column.

I urge Falzon to do his homework well and not be hoodwinked by those claiming that the impacts of land reclamation on the marine environment will be minimal. On the contrary, the impacts will be massive and, most probably, long-term, with the permanent impacts involving a deterioration of the water quality and visibility in an extended area to the southeast of Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq, due to the prevailing northwest currents, such as St Julian's and Sliema. These areas host a number of important diving sites such as Merkanti Reef, Beau Fighter wreck and the Exlies coastal area, an a large number of diving schools and clubs.

Falzon certainly does not have the gruff and roughshod manners of some notorious MPs previously entrusted with planning in these islands. Yet, the potentially detrimental impacts to the environment that will probably happen on his watch are on a par with some of the darkest periods in our environment's history, such as those taken during the era of the Planning Area Permits Board (PAPB), during the massive coastal hotel construction spree and during the 2006 rationalisation exercise.

If he wants to be remembered as such, the choice is his. June 2014 may well go in the annals as Black June for the environment, despite less than two weeks having passed since the commemoration of World Environment Day.