

Contradictions galore



Seventy years. That`s how long we will have to wait for the trees planted as compensation for the faux pas at Attard, with the tacit blessing of the Environment Protection Department to replace what has been lost.

A letter by Charles Buttigieg (The Times, October 9) is food for thought indeed! Mr Buttigieg complains about a disproportionate fine of Lm50 meted out to him by 'green wardens' for the repulsive crime of having spilled water from the back of his garden after watering his plants. He says that wardens rarely venture out into the countryside where the real infringements are witnessed.

These 'green wardens' are a far cry from the wardens Nature Trust has long been campaigning for since they are little more than housekeepers, on the lookout for trifling infringements and with a very narrow definition of environmental care - merely that streets should be clean!

Green wardens can only live up to their billing if they venture out at 5 a.m. every morning to curb the deafening cacophony produced by gun-touting hunters. Malta - the island of the thousand contradictions, where toothless green wardens mete out a Lm50 fine to a couple of pensioners while turning a blind eye to hunters running riot in the countryside. How many of those guilty of dumping have been caught in the act? Government appears to have finally put its ears to the ground and is seeking to remedy the situation, but by the longest of chalks.

The first dead bodies

Despite hunters federation secretary Lino Farrugia's defiant "over our dead bodies" stance, but the first 'dead bodies' are on the other side of the fence. In fact, casualties include ornithologist Joe Sultana, who rightly considered the temporary waiving of hunting infringements as the last straw and resigned from ORNIS, and all the ALE officers who made huge efforts over the last few years trying to cope with the flagrant hunting abuses in our countryside.

The current hunting impasse is also a good opportunity for hunting lobbies to gain some much needed credibility - they should be the first to dissuade the Police Commissioner from rescinding the amazing decision not to take action over hunting offences. They are the ones that need to convince the sceptical public that they are acting legally and so should clamour for police enforcement. Will the cue be taken?

On a different note, do the police really think that the public is so gullible so as to trust the courts to address the backlog of hunting infringements now piling up ever since it was announced that police officers are only to lodge reports and not take action?

Is there a politician who can stand up to irresponsible hunters? Malta is in dire need of such a rare political species.

The Budget

Looking at the environmental ramifications of the 2007 Budget indicates that the importance given to the environment is not as high as one would have hoped for, but all the same some important initiatives have been taken.

Tree-planting efforts have been encouraged, with an increase in the financing of afforestation projects and a target of 20,000 trees to be planted near year. A 20 per cent rebate has also been earmarked for energy-efficient appliances, while Government has pledged to help out with Nature Trust's Dwejra project and over Lm3 million to WasteServ for the rehabilitation of the three landfills on the islands.

Other positive steps include the allocation of funds for the maintenance of rubble walls, the preservation of the cultural heritage (including the Cittadella in Gozo) and the initiation of a rural funds (Lm800,000).

On a sour note, no funds for the financing of Natura 2000 sites have been earmarked, while rent reform has been shelved once again. In addition, most of the proposals made by NGOs like Nature Trust, such as a narrower definition of the duties of the ALE force, tax rebates for companies which finance conservation work, a proper 'green warden' system and a nationwide system of permits for camping and barbecues have not been taken up.

Still blinkered

John Zammit (The Sunday Times, October 15) states that a 17 per cent increase in the population over the last 20 years warrants a 0.4 per cent increase in developable land. No, it doesn't, since before such an extension, enough land was available in the existing schemes to cater for dwelling needs till 2020, with provisions being made for the envisaged increase in population in such a calculation.

In my letter of October 1 I stated that 75 per cent of all vacant houses are in an acceptable state of repair (NCD report). Mr Zammit inverts this figure and states that 25 per cent of such vacant houses are beyond repair! Rather optimistic, I must say. He also treats the 33 per cent of vacant houses being used as second homes in an equally flawed way, inflating the importance of this figure.

Mr Zammit argues that developers will not foolishly invest their money in property which is impossible to sell. I suggest he has an eye-opening chat with building contractors to realise how foolhardy such a statement is - property is currently the most fashionable form of investment and investors can wait years before they find the buyer at the right price since they can afford to do so.

On another note, Mr Zammit must have cringed when reading in Malta Today (October 8, 15) that two leading property dealers - Dhalia and Frank Salt - have debunked the myth that the recent scheme-extension exercise will pour cold water on soaring property prices.

Especially damning to advocates of such an exercise is the following from Mr Salt: "The people who own land that is now earmarked as a development zone will either sell it or develop it at the going market prices. They will certainly not sell other than at the going prices."

There you have it - straight from the horse's mouth - but still Mr Zammit, contrary to Minister Pullicino, who sounded more cautious, persists in saying more or less that the current high property prices indicate, economically, a lack of supply. By making such a hackneyed statement, Mr Zammit is also rubbishing MEPA's SPR document and the NCSO document, among others, which explicitly state that there is an oversupply of dwellings (1,700 needed annually, compared to the 3,000 being developed, with an oversupply of 98,000 dwelling units.

Mr Zammit should rest assured that young people who will continue to have ample choice where to live and this choice was possible long before the recent zone extension exercise, since most localities already had a large percentage of their 'within zone' area not fully developed - exceptions are few, such as Sta Lucija, Fgura, etc. This could have been addressed by extending building zones only in these localities, if concerns for allowing such a choice to young people are so acute.

I wish Mr Zammit could take up my challenge to state what his position would be if, once the Ta' Cenc, Hondoq, Hal Ferh, SmartCity projects are given the go-ahead, the 0.4 per cent increase rises to 0.7-0.8 per cent. Will he still call it "minimal"?

Maybe our protracted exchange did serve a purpose, after all - that of making Mr Zammit realise that the majority of environmentalists have no hidden agendas and their *cris de coeur* are genuine ones.

More on Hondoq

George Attard's letter (The Times, October 7) goes against the grain by supporting the proposed Hondoq project. Mr Attard justified his position by stating that youth employment is so high in Gozo and the tourist sector is on its knees.

Hence, the implication is that the project fillip for both sectors - maybe in the same way that L-Imgarr Hotel, Andar Hotel (both being demolished or refurbished) and San Lawrenz Hotel extension (sold off as apartments) did? Regarding employment, does Mr Attard condone the taking up of one of the last unimpeded beaches in Gozo so that jobs, such as room or yacht attendants can be offered to Gozitans? Is there a guarantee as to how many of such jobs will be offered to Gozitans?

The Labour Party has made its position on Hondoq public, by denouncing the real estate parts of the project (including the hotel extension) but committing itself in favour of the yacht marina on site. Our country's main chimera remains the politicisation of the environment, with both parties supporting or opposing projects in view of the other side's viewpoint.

Labour has taken a position of strength, in its opinion, on Hondoq - opposing Government's plans but at the same appeasing both environmentalists and the business community in what essentially is a half-baked position.

The whole project should be endorsed or rejected, especially since the yacht marina is the aspect which is of greatest concern to locals and environmentalists - hence, the dangling carrot presented to environmentalists has failed. Such vote-catching antics by both parties should cease. Government should also take note of the torrent of letters of protest against the project.

Quotable quote

The Ramblers Association has long been acknowledged as a stalwart in Maltese environmentalism and the association finds in its secretary, Alex Vella, a valiant standard-bearer. His latest piece "Pandering to the election tune" hits the nail on the head when it suggests that Government is currently too preoccupied to retain its post to make level-headed decisions on the environment.

The following exchange is especially cogent: "Expert advice for the benefit of the nation, forthcoming from NGOs made up of hard-working selfless volunteers, is being given lip service while speculators and shooters have their selfish way in no time at all. Exposed muscle and rowdy behaviour is proving more persuasive than logic to the extent that nobody gives a damn as brains give up top posts in frustrated resignation."

Untouchable construction industry

The GRTU's top brass cannot be said to be the most environmentally aware of people. After the vehement opposition to the bottle deposit/return scheme, the GRTU has again rattled its sabre, this time over the construction industry, by stating in no uncertain terms that Government should "keep its hands off" the industry.

Such a solicitation comes hot on the heels on the recently announced local plans, which the GRTU claims are unfair towards some developers. Developers should be the last people to complain, with the recent zone extension scheme paving the way for more 'business'.

To buttress its newly-discovered support for the construction industry, the GRTU argues that the construction industry is responsible for seven per cent of the country's GDP - while quoting such a figure, one must also take account of the fact that the country is losing revenue because of it, especially in the tourism sector, with many tourists explicitly stating that they are staying away from Malta because of over-development, billowing dust clouds, noise pollution, etc., caused by the construction industry.

The GRTU also stated: "We agree with regulations that protect the environment, but we cannot continue burdening this industry. We need a proper plan that increases production and creates real economic growth. This budget has to be pro business." Such a statement is highly incongruous since how can one protect the environment without paying a small price for shouldering a small burden?

A few weeks back, Angelo Xuereb laudably wrote on all the measures which can be taken by the construction industry to minimise its impact on the population. Imagine if Government were to act on such proposals or to enforce existing ones - the GRTU would be up in arms and claim that the construction industry is being stifled!

Silver linings

Biodiesel - Malta's largest producer of biodiesel, the EORC Group in Marsa, recently announced that biodiesel is now available in petrol stations in Ghaxaq, Kappara, Luqa, Marsa, Mellieha, Rabat and St Venera. Biodiesel continues to be our country's green talisman.

SPEAR - During the last scholastic year De La Salle College Sixth Form together with five other schools from four EU countries, namely France, Italy, Portugal and Romania, launched an ambitious project of co-operation entitled SPEAR - Schools Promoting Environmental Awareness and Recognition. Well done!

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