

The Green Whistleblower



MEPA Enforcement was called in towards the end of June to stop illegal bulldozers opening a road through the clay slopes at Fomm ir-Rih. Further despoiling of the sensitive area should be legislated against.

It is high time for Cabinet to unfreeze the legislation proposed by Environment Minister George Pullicino, by virtue of which no more ODZ illegal developments would be sanctioned. This would put a stop to the current abuse, through which perpetrators of illegal developments are asked to sanction their misdemeanor rather than removing it first.

Such a move would contribute to eliminate the loophole to which most perpetrators of illegal development resort and, besides, such legislation was promised over a year ago, when it helped propel the scheme rationalisation proposals.

If Cabinet is not ready for such a long-overdue move, then it should publish the names of those MPs who are blocking this legislation and the Prime Minister should request, as he did for the rationalisation exercise, that all Cabinet members publicly state that they are not impeded by any conflicts of interest. Opposition to such legislation is also coming from a few architects, concerned that their workload would be drastically reduced if Cabinet draws the curtains on the ODZ sanctioning procedure.

Enforcement efforts would also be trumped if Cabinet approved landmark legislation by which the number of re-applications would be limited (to two, for example) to avoid the re-submission and nauseam of the same application after its initial refusal to further guzzle MEPA's stretched resources.

The green bandwagon

No sooner has the green lobby started to show some bottle than exponents from all across the political spectrum have hopped on its bandwagon. MP Anton Refalo was quoted as chastising MEPA and authorities over the Ramla I-Hamra impasse, while he personally tinkers in ODZ (Outside the Development Zone) areas around Qala in Gozo.

A number of other MLP exponents were also present - while this is laudable in itself, are we to construe that the MLP also opposes all the trappings of the Hondoq ir-Rummien and Ta' Cenc projects - the opposition to which was championed by the same protest march?

Also present was the GWU, on behalf of which Saviour Sammut insisted to a Malta Today journalist that he saw no contradiction in protesting against the 23 villas at Ramla while actively lobbying for the fast-tracking of the Danish Village extension, in which the GWU has more than a finger, since Ramla I-Hamra "had a greater historical value".

How is this for clutching at straws? Now it has also transpired that the GWU is conniving to push through a private beach concession at Ghadira for users of the Danish Village facilities. The GWU should resculpt its 'workers' union' image if it persists with the Ghadira beach proposals.

It seems that the environment is not high on the priority list of our trade unions, with the GRTU also being embroiled in a number of dubious developments.

Bottom line from all this hypocrisy is that there are very few genuine environmentalists out there - needless to say, come the next election, the environment will once again be milked to attain one's hidden agendas.

The objection quagmire

The Ramla I-Hamra hiatus was too juicy an opportunity for Lou Bondi to miss taking a shot at the green movement, albeit in his own covert ways. In fact, after indirectly ridiculing protesters

by fielding devious queries to them (all aired in his programme), he has the temerity to lambast NGOs for not objecting to the recently approved Danish Village extension in Mellieha.

Does it dawn on Mr Bondi that NGO exponents have a life to live and families to attend to, too? Does it dawn on him that, contrary to his aired antics, their efforts are mostly voluntary? Does it dawn on him that NGOs can only manage to address a few of the gamut of ODZ applications being churned on a weekly basis due to limited resources?

Does he not know that all parties objecting to developments are entitled to appeal, a process that involves countless court appearances and financial resources? Maybe Mr Bondi would like to dedicate one of his shows to highlighting the illegality rampant in our countryside, and the dire need for more enforcement, rather than just balking into this environmental sphere when it suits him?

Which leads to the question - why did Mr Bondi cherry pick the Danish Village development, of all ODZ developments? Is it maybe because the GWU is involved here, a union traditionally at odds with his political leanings?

It seems that the green bandwagon is in great demand yet again. So to put Mr Bondi's mind at rest, this column will still lambast the GWU's green credentials.

Skin-deep whistleblowing

I was heartened, like many others, to hear of the recent introduction of a 'Whistleblower Act' to encourage disclosure of instances of corruption. However, such a positive development blinks in the face of the refusal by MEPA to re-appoint its auditor's investigator of choice, Carmel Cacopardo.

One cannot but laud the auditor's staid and impartial composure when insisting to have Mr Cacopardo than some 'Minister's canvasser' (MaltaToday, July 8). By taking on board once more one of its most vehement critics, MEPA would only be confirming that it has grown of age when it comes to stomaching constructive criticism.

Summer deluge

While many are chomped up in the vortex of controversy surrounding a number of projects, such as Ulysses Lodge, few take the time to dwell on the exploits of those who face the music in the field when trying to placate the tide of illegal development.

Indiscriminate individuals have honed their skills well at skirting MEPA enforcement - they tend to intensify their efforts during MEPA's Christmas and August recesses and to visit their sites during early morning hours to exploit public land (since MEPA would then have to pursue the Commissioner for Lands to recoup costs involved in direct action and not the individual himself).

A team of resolute enforcement inspectors comb the islands when alerted to cases of illegal development. Environmental enforcement should be a priority for funding come next Budget, with the section being in dire need of a manpower boost.

Those involved in enforcement face many hurdles, such as the convoluted process to identify owners and perpetrators of land, and, the most insidious hurdle of all - sanctioning.

No ODZ reprieve

Architect Robert Musumeci in his piece on MEPA's role and ODZ buildings (The Sunday Times, June 25) clamours for the entrenchment in planning legislation of exceptions to the "blanket prohibition" of development in rural areas set up by the Structure Plan.

Such exceptions, in his own words, would include not only "broken down walls, discarded piles of building material and unsightly rubbish dumps", but also "disused farm buildings" which, due to their derelict nature, are marring their environs.

I diametrically oppose such a suggestion, since it would pave the way for members of the opportunistic cohort, who sniff out derelict buildings (the so-called field rooms), purchase them at derisory prices and then apply for subsequent "alterations, additions, reservoirs and all the associated jargon", to effectively end up with a fully-fledged luxury property in a prime site.

Such wheeling and dealing is already taking place, but at somewhat subdued rates - imagine entrenching such proposals! ODZ redevelopment applications should be assessed on an ad hoc basis by MEPA to distinguish between the genuine cases for redevelopment, filed by full-time farmers, from the ploys of effectively real estate agents.

Questions for the Gozo Curia

The Curia is the stage at which disparity between Maltese and Gozitan ideology culminates. While the Environment Commission of the Church in Malta has been vociferous in its opposition to projects or developments it deems unsustainable for the islands, including the recent rationalisation exercise and additional golf courses, in Gozo there is a recalcitrant minority within the top brass of the Curia who is opposing the setting up of a similarly-styled commission.

One may speculate on the justifications behind such a stance - could it be because Gozo clergy dabble in real estate (evidenced by unofficial pressures brought to bear by the Gozo Curia on authorities to greatly increase the footprint of developable areas in Gozo) or because

individuals employed by the Curia are also employed by large-scale property development entities?

If the Gozo Environmental Commission is inconspicuous, the Gozo Curia's dearth of environmental credentials is not. Two especially preposterous projects, bearing the stamp of the Gozo Curia, are ample proof of this. Firstly, the Gozo Curia is trying its hand at all forms of leverage to get approval for the proposed extension to the Citadel car park, despite very few slivers of feasibility in the PDS for the project.

To crown it all, there is the Nadur cemetery issue. According to the grape vine, Nadur parish did have the opportunity to buy the land abutting the existing cemetery to carve out an extension in an already committed site. Once such an opportunity was snubbed (purposely or not), a pristine site of high landscape value was chosen - the only snag is that the area is home to about 5,000 citrus trees which yield ca 150 tonnes of fruit every year.

The geologist (not a hydrologist), assigned the task of gauging effects on the aquifer, vouchsafes that the project will not impinge on the same aquifer - little solace indeed, considering what will be lost and in view of the fact that no EIA was carried out, despite one being requested for the recent Addolorata cemetery extension.

The fact that development is extending ever further into the vertical for the living, while ever horizontally for the dead is food for thought. If (when the cows come home) the Gozo Environmental Commission does materialise, this column will be the first to sing its accolades.

The Gozo Curia should lend a sympathetic ear to all those who have Gozo at heart and to the area's farmers, and to abandon its rhetoric to the tune of "The Nadur community needs more graves..." - the environs of Nadur are certainly not shorn of alternative sites for the cemetery. In so doing, it would be dispelling the perception out there that the cemetery is just another money-spinning venture by the Gozo Curia.

My last column fielded questions also to the Environment Commission of the Church in Malta, which have been promptly addressed by its chairman, namely that the Commission has no "jurisdiction" over environmental matters in Gozo and this is the reason why it refrains from decrying projects, such as Nadur cemetery.

Carobs burning at Bahrija

This feedback from MEPA reveals the repugnant nature of some Maltese individuals who resort to the most ignominious of ways to achieve goals.

Bahrija carob pillage - MEPA visited the area at Tan-Namura, l/o Bahrija, upon receiving complaints that carob trees were being felled in 2000. On the umpteenth occasion, ALE officers apprehended Mr Gaffarena 'pruning' the carobs on site, by virtue of a permit from the Agriculture Department.

He was duly informed that his "pruning" was too drastic and almost tantamount to felling. At the court sitting of July 4, he failed to show up and the case was put off to October 10. These questions are sacrosanct: Does the Agriculture Department scrutinise the applicant's competence when it processes applications for pruning protected trees? Or is it simply a case of open floodgates?

The same area in question (rumoured to have been earmarked for development) was burnt to cinders in the same week that the Valletta protest took place. All the hullabaloo about Ramla l-Hamra was an apt smokescreen for those setting all carobs on site ablaze - needless to say, Ramla l-Hamra has absorbed most of the limelight, with other environmental issues were sidelined. No one was apprehended for the fire and two resilient carobs still hang on for dear life.

What about introducing the same kind of legislation recently introduced in Portugal, in the wake of the mammoth summer forest fires of some years back, whereby burned, cleared land cannot be developed for residential use?

What about cordoning off the entire area and soliciting the owner (Mr Gaffarena) to replant the lost carobs?