

Undue pressure prior to Verdala decision



The National Commission for Sustainable Development (NCSDD) should occasionally visit Gozo to gauge whether it has any clout or not on local authorities - building in Gozo is proceeding at a fast pace, fuelled by island's main construction tycoons in Gozo. The quaint little village of Ghasri, as well as Gharb, is the subject of a number of ODZ applications for the construction of villas with pools, as is Bidnija in Malta.

When Dr Lawrence Gonzi became prime minister, he declared that the environment ranked high on his list of priorities. NGOs, like Nature Trust, were quick to praise the PM for his green pledges.

Through all this, however, I had a nagging thought that most probably, like all political figures in this country, he was referring mainly to waste management when speaking of the environment but I still decided to give him a chance. To my dismay, Dr Gonzi appears to have been swayed in favour of new golf courses in Malta and Gozo.

What is especially saddening, however, is the timing of Dr Gonzi's statements - the date of the Verdala golf course hearing (on Wednesday) is Malta's worst kept secret and Dr Gonzi's sortie is tantamount to undue pressure on the eve of such an important decision.

While a member of Dr Gonzi's Cabinet, Dr Louis Galea, rightly asked for no undue prejudicing of the stipend revision system decision before talks were over, Dr Gonzi chose to spill the beans before any decision on the golf course has been taken. What happened to MEPA's supposed independence?

What Dr Gonzi basically said was that he wanted a golf course in Malta and one in Gozo, together with a yacht marina, since the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. So the PM has a scientific background and has critically analysed the copious (to use an understatement) Environment Impact Assessment for the Verdala golf course and came up with a decision even before the MEPA technocrats did so!

I refer him to some hard facts below for his perusal. By saying that he wants a golf course, Dr Gonzi is leapfrogging MEPA, an institution whose integrity his predecessors strove to establish. The ardent and unethical way in which other members of Dr Gonzi's administration rallied to his call to take a stand just days before the crucial decision is disconcerting - Tourism Minister Francis Zammit Dimech said that the main question was where to put golf courses, not if we needed them, with the Malta Tourism Authority also joining the fray.

Taking on the role of a Cassandra, the government will probably vaunt its green credentials on the eve of the next election, claiming that it has introduced green measures, such as the eco-tax, which came into force after minimal consultations with environmental NGOs but was mainly moulded in conjunction with trade unions and business associations out of fear of losing votes. While the eco-tax is a sound initiative, it is of meagre consolation for the cordoning off of large swathes of land to be given to individuals.

When Dr Alfred Sant, on the eve of the last general election, in a mad dash to garner the last few votes, claimed that he would bypass MEPA in establishing a golf course and yacht marina in Gozo, many sought refuge in the PN out of fear of a return to the bad days of ministerial diktats of the Seventies and Eighties.

Disappointingly, Dr Gonzi has been unable to provide such refuge from developers, especially after his initial green pretences. With the MLP also in favour of a golf course and yacht marina in Gozo, the MLPN duo leaves no choice to the discerning voter but to opt for sound alternatives.

Hard facts against public ignorance

▫ Water consumption: Estimate by AX Holdings EIA is 73,000 m³ a year. However, applying the figures of World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in their recent report "Freshwater in the Mediterranean" of 10,000 to 15,000 m³ a year per hectare, this would be 220,000 to 330,000 m³ a year.

▫ Land footprint: 7.2 km², 72 hectares, 658 tumoli - 0.7% of all farmland in the islands

While the environmental impacts of such a project are well known (water consumption, pesticide use, alien species introduction, etc), the forecast benefits that the country will reap are minimal, as shown below:

▫ Contribution to GDP: Lm2.8 million or 0.18% of Malta's total foreign exchange earnings on goods and services (October 1999-September 2000), 0.28% of expenditures in 2000 by Maltese.

▫ Contribution to government revenue: Lm814,000, or 0.158% of Government revenue in 2000.

▫ Cost to government of related infrastructure works. Not given! Who will pay? The taxpayer?

▫ Market value of the land: Using the current market price of Lm6,000/tumolo, the market value of 658 tumoli is Lm3,948,000. How will AX Holdings pay for such land? Government loans? More light needs to be shed on this matter, since this is public land after all.

▫ Additional employment (generated by forecast additional tourist flows of + 21,600): 194 or 0.13% of Maltese gainfully employed in 2001.

According to the PMF European Golf course directory, there are already a number of golf courses in the Mediterranean - France (Mediterranean area only) 45; Spain (Med. area only) 106; Portugal 53; Greece five; Cyprus three; Italy 51; Slovenia four; Tunisia eight; Turkey 11; Egypt nine; Morocco 19 and Malta one - a total of 315.

Agreement with Holy See

The advocates of the golf course in Malta have rarely come to terms with issues concerning the legal status of the land, most of which had been ceded to the government under the Holy See-Malta agreement, incorporated in the Ecclesiastical Entities (Properties) Act 1992. Art. 2. states:

1. The government shall use the property transferred to it by virtue of the present agreement to promote the safeguarding of the environment and the development of agriculture, and to meet the country's most pressing social requirements, such as social housing and public utilities, as well as for humanitarian, educational and cultural purposes. The aims and activities of political parties and of entities directly or indirectly connected with them are not, however, to be considered among such purposes in the interpretation of this article.

2. This same property shall not be transferred, directly or indirectly, to persons entities whose nature, aims and activities are not in conformity with the moral teachings of the Church.

Those who want to delve deeper and not just take my word should visit www.nogolftmalta.cjb.net/, from where key documents, such as an analysis of the economic projections by AX Holdings, an analysis of the environment impact of the golf course as stated in the EIA, the report by the Church Commission on the Environment and a letter to the PM.

The recent flood of pro-golf correspondence stating that we need golf courses since in Malta we don't have anything concrete to offer to tourists amounts to a national throwing in of the towel.

I refer all those who have lost heart about the alternatives we can offer to a letter by a German reader, Mr Martin Wrigg (The Times, August 28) lamenting the loss of the "Old Malta"... i.e. the Malta where "please" and "thank you" were the order of the day, where fun pubs did not dominate the nightlife with their riff-raff outlook, where bus drivers were a bridled lot.

Other ideas which spring to mind are the safeguarding of the marine quality to bring back the divers and the promotion of agrotourism (rather than converting farmhouses into plush, pool-dominated guest houses). The 'uglification' of certain spots, like Sliema, should also be stemmed.

However, after all, Malta already boasts one of the highest tourism densities in the world, as shown in myriad reports left to gather dust at our tourism authorities and of the most tourism-dominated coastlines in the world.

As Mr Wrigg puts it... more tourists, but at what cost? Can't we be content with the one million tourists/year mark? Putting all our eggs in one basket (tourism) is a chronic problem our predecessors should have foreseen, even though we are still oblivious to it. In fact, while the occupancy rate for five-star hotels is below 50%, some hotels, as in Marfa and Xemxija, are still finding the courage to apply for extensions. Malta's dependence on tourism (22% of GDP) is the highest figure in the Mediterranean (even higher than Cyprus').

Rather than seeking to embark on risky new ventures like the golf course, we should first aim "not to soil our own nest" (with apologies to Lino Briguglio).

Mr Salt's initiative

Frank Salt's latest 'environmental' initiative recalls the sale of indulgences denounced by Martin Luther in the 16th century.

After his eulogy of the government's stance on golf courses, how does Mr Salt reconcile his taking such a position with his offering Lm1,000 for "promotion of the environment"? So Mr Salt believes that ardently pushing for a golf course will help the environment. It's tantamount to saying that I have applied to build a villa in Mgarr ix-Xini valley but I do throw my rubbish in the bin.

Mr Salt has always projected a rather strange interpretation of what the environment is - merely cleanliness, the historical heritage and public manners. It is hard to expect Mr Salt, a leading real estate agent, to stress the need to curb further building development as one of the ways to promote the environment since, as he puts it, he has had "a good business life".

The adjudicating committee chosen by Mr Salt has, to use a euphemism, been inadequately chosen to gauge environmental work being carried out in the country since all its members (Din I-Art Helwa, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti and Dr Philip Farrugia Randon) hail mostly from the historical heritage background, about which they are highly competent.

Mr Salt claims that he wants to award those involved in promoting Malta's culture, environment and national pride and that this year's award will focus on the environment - so why isn't anyone directly involved in the environment on the adjudicating panel? Is historical heritage the sole meaning of "environment" as intended by Mr Salt? Why not the natural environment?

Beach furniture - someone finally takes a stand

Someone has finally decided literally to draw a line in the sand and clamp down on the beach furniture abuses, after repeated prompting by Alternattiva Demokratika and concerned citizens.

As explained by the Lands Department, three major permit conditions are contravened by kiosk tenants, namely that beach furniture is laid down on the sand before 7.30 a.m., that kiosks do not put up such furniture once requested by the public, but early on in the morning and that they colonise vast stretches of the coastline outside their jurisdiction.

And now for the crunch - who will enforce the law against such infringements?

Mgiebah - seaweed should not have been cleared

While I commend Joe Vella of Birkirkara for his letter to The Times of August 21 on the clearing of the mounds of rubbish at Mgiebah Bay, I cannot support his call to clear the seaweed at this bay.

While unsightly, the seaweed (*Posidonia oceanica* - a flowering plant), when forming beached banquettes, helps to mitigate sand erosion, a major threat to Maltese beaches (sandy beaches comprise just 2.4% of our coastline).

If such banquettes are cleared from tourist hotspots, like Ghadira and Golden Bay, they should be allowed to accumulate on less frequented beaches, like Mgiebah. In addition, as stated in one of the prayers issued by the Church Environment Commission, the seagrass banquettes themselves are an important habitat for many invertebrate species, although this, in the opinion of many, might pale in comparison to the sand erosion justification.

Silver linings (and hope for Mgiebah)

I wholeheartedly appreciate MEPA PRO Sylvana Debono's endeavours in her reply to my article last Sunday. However, even queries pertaining to hot potatoes like the Golden Bay staircase should be addressed.

MEPA should seek to expand its PR office since such a pro-active stance by its PRO is to be encouraged in view of the increasing deluge of planning-related queries by NGOs and citizens alike.

Nature Trust will be monitoring the Mgiebah site very carefully to ensure that it is actually restored to its original state since any remnants of debris on the garigue could be latched upon by future developers aiming to depict the site as a degraded one.

Hence, one only augurs that MEPA will enforce the thorough removal of all such debris by the perpetrator, who after pledging to remove the structure himself, failed to remove it completely, with the job being completed by MEPA officials.

One also commends MEPA's DCC decision to turn down an application for the opening of a waste separation plant in Wied Garnaw - another victory for civil society (i.e. the Save Wied Garnaw lobby group).

The proposed changes to the Litter Act to increase minimum fines for litter louts meted out is to be lauded - this would certainly be bolstered by the introduction of green wardens, because who else is going to catch such louts red-handed in remote parts of the island?