

OPINION&LETTERS

Sitting on the fence is safest (unfortunately)

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The President's recent appeal to academics to speak their mind and to contribute to public debate is sacrosanct, to say the least, given the conspicuously absent public participation of the academic body over the years. In a day and age where we strive to promote a knowledge-based society and evidence-based policy-making, the unstinting contribution to public dialogue of academics is sorely needed more than ever.

Having said this, I am in two minds over whether the current low profile maintained by Maltese academics is justified or not. Staying perpetually on the fence, consistently avoiding to commit oneself on any issue and to seek refuge exclusively in academic disciplines of choice, which is the strategy followed by many, has a number of low-lying fruit. Chief among these is avoiding the proverbial egg on one's face or the burning of one's fingers for speaking one's mind, as well as accusations of harbouring particular partisan leanings.

Take the current concerns over the welfare of mature roadside trees expressed by environmental NGOs (such as Flimkien Għal Ambjent Aħjar) and by several members of the public in response to plans unveiled by our transport authorities to enhance a four kilometre-long stretch of the road network through the Central Link project. No sooner had these concerns seen the light of day than they were shot down by partisan online commentators, who

invariably ascribed hidden agendas to these 'detractors' of progress and investment and as sabotaging the present government through their actions. Mind you, this is not a novel phenomenon, given that I was consistently taken to task prior to the change in government in 2013 when I voiced similar concerns over the footprint of major road works.

The arguments being fielded by our transport authorities to justify the considerable prospective loss in mature tree cover and even agricultural land at Santa Luċija, Luqa, Attard, Mosta and Mrieħel through the various projects in the offing are not without their merits, contrary to some of the arguments being bandied online (such as that roadside trees are a major hazard to drivers).

For instance, no one objects to the reduction in carbon dioxide emissions and in toxic gases as a result of improved traffic flows in the targeted areas, or to the effort that will be made to transplant, where possible, the trees that need to be removed, or to compensate for tree losses through new tree and shrub planting.

However, without going into the validity of such an approach to mitigate traffic congestion (detractors contend that one cannot completely eliminate bottlenecks from the traffic network in a situation where over 30 new vehicles are joining the road network on a daily basis), transport authorities should be more receptive of environmental considerations.

Ways of doing this could include a closer liaison with environmental NGOs and the Environment and Resources Authority; the judicious selection of the period when to start works (e.g. summer is the least congenial period for the successful transplantation of trees); to avoid, as much as possible areas hosting non-transplantable tree species (e.g. Aleppo pine/żnuber);

and, where this is not possible, to incorporate such trees in the new road designs (the Kennedy Grove/Salini area is a case in point) and to include mature, indigenous tree species in compensatory tree-planting exercises.

Most importantly, the transport authorities need to realise that those objecting to the proposed massive loss of mature roadside trees have no hidden agenda but simply have a deep-rooted love for trees.

As long as the current partisan-split environment prevails on these islands, most academics will choose not to get off their proverbial fence and to give public dialogue a miss. This relegation of academics to lecturing rooms will deprive society of an important tassel in the informed dialogue infrastructure it aims to establish.

Single-use plastic: Malta biting the bullet

Environment Minister Jose Herrera's recent tasking of the ERA with drafting a strategy and legal framework to address the chimera of single-use plastic is indeed a step in the right direction, which follows on the heels of a previous laudable initiative of launching a public consultation on a proposed plastic bottle return scheme.

Despite recycling around 43 per cent (far higher than the Maltese rate of 15 per cent) of the estimated 13 billion plastic bottles in circulation on its territory, the UK has still recently introduced such a deposit return scheme (DRS) since it is calculated that, in the



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38 countries worldwide where such DRSs exist, plastic bottle recycling rates have surged to over 90 per cent (in Germany, for instance, these currently stand at a staggering 99 per cent).

Hats off too to the individual entities taking similar initiatives, notably the Gharghur Primary School, which has recently banned plastic straws.

The plastics industry is fighting back

Given the sheer scale of its environmental impact, the European Commission and international bodies (such as the G7) are apportioning a lot of attention to the issue of plastics accumulation in the marine environment. For instance, the EU has established the ambitious targets of having 55 per cent of all its plastic being recycled by 2030 and the number of plastic bags used per citizen slashed from 90 to 40 by 2026.

Individual countries are taking the cue, with France, for example, banning non-compostable plastic plates and cups, and the Netherlands introducing the first plastic-free aisle in supermarkets.

The Corporate Europe Observatory recently unveiled an insightful report into the way the plastics and packaging producers lobby in Europe is insidiously seeking to deflect binding and tough restrictions on the further production of single-use plastics due to be published by the Commission in the coming weeks or months. The lobby, spearheaded by Plastics Europe, Cosmetics Europe and the European Chemical Industry

Council (CEFIC), invests profusely in lobbying (committing annual lobbying budgets running into the few millions of euros, with eight full-time lobbyists and holding regular meetings with Commission officials).

The same lobby is actively seeking to avoid binding bans on single-use plastics and a tax or levy on plastics that have been mooted for some time by the Commission, and instead promoting lacklustre voluntary, non-binding targets that revolve mainly around the year 2040 (10 years later than most of the dates set in Commission targets) and actively supporting anti-litter and clean-up campaigns across the continent.

Through the latter (such as funding NGOs engaged in clean-ups), the lobby has effectively managed to shift the onus of responsibility from producers to citizens and NGOs, while it is widely acknowledged that 'reduction' occupies a higher rung than 'recycling' and 'reuse' in the waste hierarchy.

Intriguingly, in some EU countries, the plastics and packaging industry is actively funding consortia and campaigns that aim to recover and clear littering – the Mooimakers ('beautifiers') in Belgium, Nederland Schoon ('Clean Netherlands') in Holland and the Clean Europe Network across the continent are cases in point.

The full report from the Observatory can be consulted at: https://corporateeurope.org/power-lobbies/2018/05/plastic-promises?hash=-vhyU2-U_wC_ulbJffofjqT9LrVXm-3QhtE_827xPzA.

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Plastic waste: The government's signal that it means business in addressing the plastic litter challenge is positive. The momentum should be maintained despite resistance from some business sectors that will invariably arise.