

Is the tunnel vision wise or blinkered?



The closest island to Malta, after Sicily, where Maltese ‘fishermen’ have made a bad name for themselves by resorting to illicit fishing tactics.

Last week’s presentation by Transport Malta of proposals for a possible Malta-Gozo tunnel brought up some sobering prospects for the area concerned.

I will not go into the economic arguments as there are no doubt more suitable platforms than this column to discuss such arguments, although prima facie, costs do appear somewhat prohibitive.

The granting of Mepa permits should not be used by any political party to win brownie points

- Alan Deidun

Of the four tunnel options under consideration, option 3, which would emerge at Hondog ir-Rummien, would have the worst environmental impact, as it is expected to affect the seabed as well as the area’s coastal landscape.

The marine survey commissioned as part of the proposed Qala Creek development highlighted the conservation importance of the site’s marine habitats, including high-density seagrass meadows.

The greatest enigma is that concerning the eventual fate of the large volume (millions of cubic meters) of excavation waste resulting from the tunnel boring process – where would such waste be dumped?

The only official marine spoil ground in Maltese waters is about 20km to the southeast, off Grand Harbour, which leaves plenty of room and scope for spillage of waste from shuttle barges.

Labour’s stand on Gozo and Comino

Strangely enough, the positive ramifications of last week’s refusal of the Portomaso extension by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority’s board have not been commented upon in the mainstream media.

The fact that the Mepa board gave heed to the St Julian’s community and to the environmentalist lobby, and gave the cold shoulder to the Fenech family, who are well-known property developers, could represent a paradigm shift and, possibly, give a new lease of life to the Mepa reform.

In view of the justified reasons to turn down the proposal, the Mepa board’s decision should not have been such a close call, having to be decided at the 11th hour by the chairman’s casting vote.

In this regard, the vote of the Labour Party's representative on the board, Roderick Galdes, who is normally highly critical of controversial Mepa decisions, but who voted in favour of the development, raises some eyebrows.

The Nationalist Party's board representative, Joe Falzon, was away, so one can only speculate how he would have voted if he were present on the day.

Mr Galdes would probably rebut his detractors by saying the development conformed to all Mepa policies, without admitting that he and the Labour Party are coy, at the moment, at rubbing developers the wrong way.

In the same way that I have repeatedly taken the current administration or Mepa to task for incongruous decisions affecting the environmental sector, I am equally sceptical and concerned about the Labour Party's stand on major development projects earmarked for Gozo and Comino.

Such fears are borne out by statements made by the Labour Party and its leader that matters would be expedited and bu-reaucracy would be watered down when it came to such major projects, which have been somewhat framed by the Labour Party as a panacea for Gozo's employment problems.

The Ta' Ċenċ development, the airstrip and the extension of the hotel on Comino are the first such projects to spring to mind.

Against a backdrop of the Labour Party hobnobbing with the construction lobby (through meetings it admitted it held, behind closed doors, with this lobby) and not coming clean about its intentions for Gozo and Comino, Leo Brincat's assertion last Sunday that "a Labour government will no doubt be committed to putting its money where its mouth is, and will ensure that Eco-Gozo will be promoted and implemented as it should be, rather than merely in terms of lip service", ring hollow.

The Labour Party, like all political parties aspiring to be at the helm one day, should be projecting just one message to the construction / developers lobby – Mepa rules are there to be observed by all and there will be no cutting of corners to ingratiate anyone.

Sowing false aspirations in the lobby through vague statements and pledges only serves to fuel fears in environmentalists and delusions in developers.

The granting of Mepa permits should not be used by any political party to win brownie points with particular lobbies.

Plan to protect the dusky grouper

Mepa's launch of a three-year action plan to safeguard and possibly increase the local population of the dusky grouper (Ċerna – *Epinephelus marginatus*) could not have come early enough.

As the catalysts behind the action plan rightly conceded, on its own the existence of the right - legislative framework to protect the species is not an effective enough safeguard, with pillaging of the species, especially of undersized individuals, still being the order of the day.

The involvement of important stakeholders, especially the diving and the fishing community, in the eventual implementation of the action plan is welcome, as is the proposal of innovative measures such as the certification of restaurants that comply with the suggested measures.

However, while this local initiative is laudable, the same cannot be said of the behaviour of so-called 'sports fishermen' plying their 'trade' beyond our shores.

During a recent trip to Linosa, a sister island to Lampedusa in the Sicily Channel about 130km to the west of Malta, a number of locals accosted me when they learned I was from Malta, to vent their grievance about so-called 'fishing' activities by Maltese on a chartered fishing trip last summer.

According to these locals, the Maltese who took part in a renowned fishing trip organised each summer used spear guns during scuba dives, a practice which is outlawed, besides being highly unethical, to land an estimated 30kg of grouper.

The situation is uncannily similar to the bird shooting scenario, where Maltese hunters travel to countries like Egypt and Romania to shoot bird populations there.