

## A historic green step



Żonqor. Prima facie, there appears to be national consensus against further development in ODZ areas. However, getting both the PL and PN leaders to commit to a complete repeal of the 2014 ODZ policies proved too tall an order.

Last Monday, in commemoration of World Biodiversity Day, history was written when all 23 local environmental NGOs coalesced in a single coalition to present 10 key environmental proposals to political parties.

Despite the palpable tension and angst that suffused the Din l-Art Helwa premises where the meeting was held, with bouts of sparring mingled with inspired rounds of interesting proposals, getting all leaders around the same table to discuss thorny environmental issues just two weeks before the election was already a feat in itself.

The leaders made a commitment to meet up with eNGOs within the first month of the new administration to kickstart the implementation of at least some of the proposals. They will be held accountable for the pledge.

Condensing an environmental manifesto into just 10 proposals was challenging, given the breadth of issues. The proposals ranged from the need to entrench within the Constitution the listing of ODZ areas to the repeal of the 2014 ODZ policies, revamp of the SPED, relaxation of planning appeal fees for ERA and NGOs, greater representation of NGOs and civil society on planning boards and the formulation of a master plan for high-rise buildings and land reclamation.

The recommendations touched upon the need to regain momentum in afforestation by investing in at least one such project a year and to introduce a Natura 2000 site management agency.

Also featured was the need for a vision for a fossil-free Malta, incentives for bicycle use through support for electric bikes and pedestrian and bicycle-only roads, greater incentives to scrap old cars and investment in on-the-road exhaust monitoring facilities for Transport Malta.

Other proposals are for mandatory waste separation at home, a national water management plan and greater safeguards for groundwater, the proper labelling of GMO food products imported into the country and better controls of pesticide contamination of our food.

As for built heritage, it was proposed to give maintenance grants to owners of heritage properties to ward off demolition, even outside Urban Conservation Areas; to beef up the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage and safeguard village streetscapes as well as the Cittadella, Grand Harbour and Mdina skylines; and to boost enforcement at sea and have effective

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Marine Protected Areas and sustainable fishing practices.

The NGOs expressed dismay at the unilateral application by Malta of the bird trapping derogation, recommending a complete moratorium of the practice in view of its environmental impact. The need to consolidate the Environment Impact Assessment process was underscored, with the proposal that political leaders avoid anticipating the outcome of future EIA studies by promising the implementation of major projects, as well as the need for solid alternative site selection exercises with the full participation of ERA.

Expect the usual shenanigans next weekend, when everyone is engrossed in the voting process and the usual cowboys proceed with their illegal developments fully aware that everyone is looking elsewhere. March 8, 2013, had witnessed the pouring of concrete on the coast at Marsalforn to make way for more restaurant tables, and along the coastline at the Dwejra Inland Sea.

Prima facie, a national consensus against further development in ODZ areas appears to have taken root, with PN, PL and even the Malta Developers Association asserting their opposition to further ODZ uptake. However, getting both leaders to commit to a complete repeal of the 2014 ODZ policies ushered in by Elizabeth Ellul – who presides over the three-membered Planning Commission, which in turn implements these policies to grant hundreds of ODZ permits each year – proved too tall an order. The PL and PN probably fear it would cause a haemorrhage of votes among ODZ plot owners eager to capitalise on these policies.

The ODZ policies are taboo for both big political parties, in the same way that the shanty boathouse squatters have become untouchable and never feature in any electoral programme. This means architects like Robert Musumeci, one of the perpetrators behind the 'death by a thousand cuts' of ODZ areas, will continue to make hay come June 4.

These architects enjoy the unimpeachable status of being an indirect ally to any party in government through the 'feel-good factor' they help foster among John Citizen eager to get some returns on his ODZ plot. In doing so, they help convey the image of a planning system 'close to the man in the street' and receptive to the cries of the weak – a warped version of reality that neither the PL nor PN is eager to upset since they rely on the votes of the masses. The avalanche of permits for agricultural rooms and all sorts of facilities, even for ODZ villas on the eve of an election, as happened at Kalkara last week (yet another of Musumeci's achievements), is set to continue in the coming years.

Returning White Rocks to the public domain, writing off any development at Żonqor (assuming this is legally possible), instituting Malta's first underwater eco-museum, revamping SPED, safeguarding our valleys and prohibiting land reclamation for speculative purposes are all commendable environmental proposals by the PN.

On the PL side, we have similar commitments to safeguard our valleys and not to increase the footprint of current development boundaries, the provision of filtered sewage water to farmers to cut down on groundwater usage and the Constitutional entrenchment of the right of citizens to a healthy environment.