

Is the tide finally turning?



Trammel nets (parit) deployed just off Wied Babu in Żurrieq. Such nets are deployed round the clock close to shore at Delimara, San Tumas, Golden Bay and at other important fish nurseries.

Local environmentalists must have received a boost in recent weeks following the landmark court decisions on two important issues.

Mr Justice Anthony Ellul set the house on fire by ruling that caravan owners permanently parked at Little Armier have no legal title to the land and that they should be evicted so that the immediate foreshore remains in the public domain.

However, the ruling will probably not spell the end of the decades-long saga at L-Aħrax, where the thousands of squatters will use their lobby's sheer electoral weight as their trump card. In fact, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat was quick to say he will seek legal advice before acting on the ruling and that the ruling can always be appealed.

For those who have campaigned long and hard to see all squatters evicted from L-Aħrax, this statement comes as a slap in the face. Muscat should realise that the historic opportunity of finally making L-Aħrax 'tagħna lkoll' once again is too good to waste.

If this wasn't enough, the illegal caravan owners have demanded an alternative site to which they can be transferred. Such 'compensation' should not even be discussed or considered since, if granted, it would set a dangerous precedent that a law-flouting lobby can always be accommodated if it is large enough.

If this was not preposterous enough, some of the squatters, who were reported to be 'devastated' at the ruling (rather than relieved that it did not include an order for them to pay the state financial compensation for the decades they have been illegally occupying public land), sought to justify their position by saying that when they first 'moved in' at the end of the 1980s, there was no Malta Environment and Planning Authority and they believed they were not doing anything wrong.

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Excuse me, but since when has moving in on public land, building on it and occupying it sine die become acceptable simply because the relevant environmental body does not yet exist? The former Labour minister who had the brilliant idea of supplying the squatters with water and electricity in the 1980s (the straw to which the lobby is latching on) must surely regret the mess his stroke of genius has generated.

For once, I find myself in agreement with former Nationalist Minister Michael Falzon that such issues should be nipped in the bud, a reference to the lack of support he received when he had tried to solve the Armier issue at a time when it had not yet become so unwieldy.

The Nationalist Party would do well to come clean about the whole affair, avoiding devious behaviour and doublespeak, and admit its past grave mistakes in the whole matter (such as the written assurance it sent to the lobby in April 2003 and the official meetings it held with the lobby in 2008) rather than seeking to play holier-than-thou. The analogy with the burning of Heavy Fuel Oil at Delimara is uncanny.

The second uplifting ruling concerns construction magnate Charles Polidano being fined the considerable sum of €100,000 for illegally cutting down mature trees in a Balzan garden some years ago.

If the tycoon eventually pays this money (appeals court and numerous other variables willing), it should be used to finance tangible remedial measures, such as the planting of hundreds of mature trees, and their watering and care for a number of years. Only this will ensure that the ruling achieves its desired objective.

Qbajjar coastal watch tower

Calls to return to the public domain the 18th-century coastal battery close to Qrolla l-Bajda on the promontory between Qbajjar and Xwejni, which in the 1980s was converted into a discotheque known as The Rook, have recently gained traction.

The battery has been leased to private tenants for over 30 years, although the last lease expired in 2003, with the Land Department and the tenants being locked in a legal battle over a possible eviction since then.

In view of its strategic location and the cherished status the battery enjoys with locals, the authorities should strive to have it returned to the public domain, possibly housing a permanent display on the Marsalforn fishing community, salt pan production and other cultural activities of the community.

A lifeline for carbon trading?

The European Parliament narrowly (by just 33 votes) approved a plan that is widely seen as a lifeline to the ailing carbon trading scheme. The scheme was originally conceived as an economic incentive through which carbon-intensive industries, such as those based on coal-burning, would eventually switch to less polluting methods of energy-generation.

However, through the flooding of the carbon market with a disproportionate number of permits, the price per tonne of carbon fell to below €5 per tonne, way below the €40-€50 benchmark needed for the financial incentive to really take root.

The plan sees the temporary revoking of about 900 million Emission Trading Scheme permits and the limitation of the Commission's market intervention to just one instance.

A weakened version of the plan, originally proposed by European Peoples Party MEPs, who feared business would suffer through a more stringent environmental regime, was defeated.

The plan needs the stamp of approval of the EU member states before it becomes law, and this is unlikely before Germany's general elections next September.

EU project on recycling of used asphalt

With over five million kilometres of road network, the EU is investigating ways to recycle decommissioned road infrastructure and materials, most notably, but not exclusively, asphalt.

A recent EU-funded project called Direct Mat has defined best practice in the recycling of discarded steel, concrete, tar and other materials.

The project outcome could be useful for Malta where such concepts are probably (I stand to be corrected) in their infancy.