



By Raphael Vassallo

'Death by a thousand blows'

There can be no doubt that the event of the week was the sudden disappearance of one of Malta's most iconic landmarks: the Azure Window in Dwejra, Gozo.

In a classic 'chronicle of a disaster foretold', it was something we all knew would happen sooner or later. Yet when it did, the ensuing shock and sense of national loss was nonetheless almost palpable. Some even read a 'message from Mother Nature' in the event... as though we had been warned that we tamper with the forces of nature at our own risk.

On another level, however, it was also just a case of a rock formation that eventually fell through the entirely natural process of erosion. This might explain why an environmentalist like Alan Deidun would take to Facebook to put a sense of perspective on things. It's all well and good to mourn the loss of the Azure Window, he seemed to be arguing... however, the real threat does not concern random natural cataclysms... but the consistent damage being perpetrated on a daily basis.

That, at any rate, was my understanding of his comment... but I could be wrong, because the example he actually gave had more to do with frogs being boiled alive. "It's a well-known metaphor," he begins when I ask him what on earth all that was about. "If you put a frog into boiling water, it will jump out immediately. It will be aware that there is a danger. But if you put a frog into lukewarm water, and slowly raise the temperature... its tolerance level will increase, it will become less aware, and it will stay in the water until it's boiled to death. I made the comparison with Dwejra, because it's the equivalent of the boiling water: something happened, it was a shock to us, and everyone snapped out of their lethargy... suddenly realising that we are losing our natural heritage. But when it comes to what's been happening all along in the background – the 'death by a thousand blows' of the environment, including endless permits, sanctioning, extensions, etc – it's as though we're all desensitised. It's like the lukewarm water that is being heated by slow degrees..."

The pattern, he continues, is not limited to natural disasters like Dwejra. "Let's imagine the government extends the development boundaries again, as happened in 2005/6. It would be another case of 'shock treatment'... another wake-up call. There would be protests, and so on. But what is actually happening around us, right now, is more insidious and more dangerous, because it's happening in the background without anyone noticing."

There is also a slight paradox in reactions to Dwejra, because ulti-

mately the collapse of the Azure Window was itself a natural phenomenon... more than 'environment damage', it was actually a case of nature being left to take its course without any intervention. Doesn't that make its loss part of the same broader 'environment' we are all committed to respect and preserve?

"It is part of nature, yes... which also means that it is beyond our control. We should be nudged into action over issues which are under our control. People took it so badly because the Azure Window is part of our collective memory: some-

TRAGEDY

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thing that is part of our patrimony; that has been photographed and displayed all over the Internet. But if you look at its actual environmental value – in the sense of how many species were affected, and so on – you could say the impact is very small.

"There's another metaphor I like to use: the Window was a word in the middle of a sentence. It came from something, and will give rise to something else. We have other natural arches; others are in the process of being formed – not by man, but by geo-morphological processes. So why all the outcry? The real tragedy at Dwejra is not that. I am shocked and saddened by other disasters that happen in Dwejra every week.

"For instance, fishing that is taking place in the middle of a marine protected area, using [illegal] trammel nets. Ask any of the thousands of divers who come to Malta every year: the internet is awash with photos they have taken of trammel nets in a marine protected area. Is this how you protect the marine environment, they ask? But that is out of sight and out of mind – literally under the sea – and when something above the waterline collapses, we all start crying. Perhaps I'm a little cynical, but that is the situation..."

It is a situation that has persisted for as long as I can remember. It is not just marine protected areas that are 'protected' only on paper. Deidun is very vocal on the issue of ODZ development: technically, the acronym implies that no development can take place 'outside the development zones'. Yet over the years we have seen the actual green areas shrink at an alarming rate, and the PA continues to issue literally hundreds of ODZ permits each year.

Could it be that, for all our increased awareness over the years – and all the public political commitments to 'make the environment a priority' – we have not actually improved the standards of environmental protection accordingly?

"When it comes to the sea, the situation hasn't changed. Ask any diving school on the island, and they'll all say that all they really want is at least one, single 'marine protected area' that actually works. But on land it's a slightly different story. We have tightened regulations on land; you can't say we're in the same situation as we were before the Planning Authority. But at the same time, the brazenness of it all has increased. We have improved the system, but we have also increased the number of creative ways to go around it."

Speaking of which, we got an interesting insight into a few of those creative ways this week: with revelations of the extent of undeclared party financing by (among others)

CONSCIENCE

The ERA objected to a large number of these permits; and its advice was overturned in 70% of cases. This alone should give an idea of the situation: the ERA represents the environmental conscience, as it were, of the planning regime

leading developers. Does Alan Deidun agree that this situation contributes directly to the undermining of environmental protection in Malta... and if so, what can realistically be done to address the problem?

"I'm glad you said 'address the problem', not solve it. I'm afraid I've become very pessimistic. A problem of this magnitude can only be 'addressed' at this stage. First of all, the discussion on party financing did not begin today, but at least 30 years ago. At the end of the 1980s, Alternattiva Demokratika – to give them due credit – had already started the debate. It is nothing new. In my opinion, there are two methods to address it: one, full-time politicians. We need full-time politicians. Mario de Marco said as much recently: one way he defended himself when confronted [over legal services to db Group] was to say 'I am a part-time politician'..."

Malta, he hints, is also one of the few places where you will not find MPs in Parliament during ordinary work hours. "When you watch Striscia La Notizia, and they go to Montecitorio to heckle politicians... they go there in the morning. That's when you'll find politicians at work in Italy. In Malta, when will you find MPs working in the morning? When there is a marathon sitting about something controversial, like the power station."

"And all they do is deliver their speech and leave. So I agree with full-time politicians, and with raising their salaries. I don't see why there should be such a fuss whenever a government tries to increase MPs' stipends (call them what you will). At present, an MP's pay is not adequate. Recently there was a story about how a CEO in a government department was earning twice or three times the salary of her own minister. That is not on. In the proper hierarchy the minister should have the highest pay. But then, they need to shed their private interests, and do it in a comprehensive manner. No tokenism: no leaving your junior partners to work in the firm. You would have to detach yourself completely. This way, the terms and conditions would be clear: anyone going into politics would know what they are getting into..."

The second method concerns public financing of political parties. "Political parties should not be financed by the private sector. Their funding should come from the public domain. Perhaps not everyone will agree with me, but I think parties should be funded directly by the taxpayer. It might take us 10 years to hit on the right formula: what percentage goes to which party, whether it's on the basis of parliamentary representation, which would be discriminat-

ing against smaller parties. I know it will open up another Pandora's Box; but I see no other way to end the dependence on private commercial interests."

The collapse of the Azure Window might have impacted Malta like a cataclysm... but environmentalist ALAN DEIDUN argues that our natural heritage has more to fear from the gradual impact of smaller, more insidious threats



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS MANGION

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One of the people who disagrees is Finance Minister Edward Scicluna, who also argues – and to be fair, our own polls bear him out – that the taxpayer would never accept that kind of arrangement... "I think, with the situation as it is today, the taxpayer is still indirectly paying the parties. When you have these vested interests, it is always ultimately the taxpayer who foots the bill. What I'm suggesting is to be more forthright about it: to make the system accountable, so that people know exactly how they are financing the parties... and not get to know about it only through corruption scandals. So I don't agree with the finance minister. I think the only way to stamp out this network of vested interests is to create a chasm between political parties and private businesses..."

All the same, the environment is a vast topic; and closing party financing loopholes can hardly be expected to solve all issues. Earlier, Deidun mentioned a 'death by a

thousand blows'. How much of this 'death' is being caused by the large projects we associate with the above-mentioned 'political-private partnerships'... and how much by our own daily activities as ordinary citizens?

Deidun admits that his pessimism arises partly from the latter consideration. "For me, one of the top priorities for the environment should be ODZ. We have a limited amount of undeveloped space, and it is forever decreasing. I divide applicants for ODZ permit into two categories... the large developers, of whom there are around 10 or 20 – everyone knows who they are, they've become household names – and John Citizen. Let's take the first: that there is a connection with party financing is clear. The electoral promises are there for all to see. To mention but one example of how it impacts the environment: high-rise. People ask me, what is the environmental impact of towers in Mriehel... isn't it a degraded area anyway? But if you delve deeper, you realise that there has to be a new traffic junction. Where will they put it? In the ODZ area across the road. This did not

come out in the public hearing..." But it is the second category that may prove more insidious in the long term. "The vast majority of ODZ applications in this country, and most of the development that is going on in green areas as we speak, are done by ordinary citizens. Last year alone, there were 750 permits granted for ODZ developments. That's no joke..."

Those permits in turn represent only an estimated 5% of the total number of development applications – in any area – submitted in 2015. "We must bear in mind that many of the applications would be for very minor things: internal alterations in a development zone, for instance. But still, 750 ODZ permits were granted last year. The Environment and Resources Authority (ERA) objected to a large number of these permits; and its advice was overturned in 70% of cases. This alone should give an idea of the situation: the ERA represents the environmental conscience, as it were, of the planning regime..."

Paradoxically, Deidun argues that smaller developments may actually pose the bigger problem. "The

larger developers can be monitored... they are few in number. The real problem is the much larger number of smaller applications that are not immediately visible. And this has an effect on how parties approach the problem. One example is the PN's environmental policy document. On the whole, it is a good initiative, but it has one major flaw. I am sure they thought about it; perhaps they were not courageous enough to include a reference, or perhaps someone took it out. But it only tackles the large ODZ developments. Only those go through the additional level of checks and balances proposed by the PN: that is, approval by a two-thirds parliamentary majority. That applies to Zongor, all the high-rise developments... but you're not going to realistically go to parliament with 750 small ODZ cases..."

Yet these collectively cover a comparable, if not larger, footprint than the so-called 'mega-projects'. "We're all turning the big guns onto these big developments – myself included, mind you, I'm not defending them – and rightly so; but we're not look-

ing at the complete picture. The reality is that collectively, we as Maltese citizens would not hesitate to make money out of ODZ land, given the opportunity... in 2006, for instance, after the development boundaries were increased, MEPA received nearly 7,000 requests – 99% from ordinary citizens – to have their land included in the new zones..."

This pre-empted a question I was going to ask anyway. Doesn't this also mean that our collective angst over environmental issues – Dwejra being a case in point – is only skin-deep?

"Our environmental credentials as a nation... well, they're not there, really. But it's not necessarily because we're 'bad people'. This comes from our lack of understanding of what the environment is. Appreciation of the environment arises from an understanding of how it works. What is the role of a gecko or a lizard? Unless you know its role, you can't appreciate its importance in an ecosystem. I've heard even politicians say that, 'U iva, what are four lizards? Do you think we're going to stop a permit because of four lizards?'"