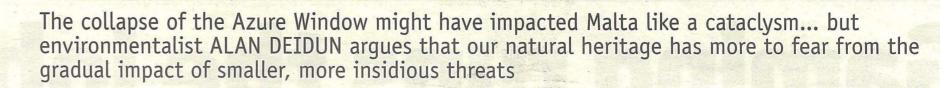
By Raphael Vassallo



'Death by a thousand blows'

event of the week was the sudden disappearance of one of Malta's Window in Dwejra, Gozo.

In a classic 'chronicle of a disaster foretold', it was something we all knew would happen sooner or 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 wakeup 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 notic-

There is also a slight paradox in reactions to Dwejra, because ultimately 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'

"It is part of nature, yes... which also means that it is beyond our control. We should be nudged into

our control. People took it so badly because the Azure Window is part of our collective memory: some-

TRAGEDY

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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 development zones'. Yet over the years we have seen the actual green areas shrink at an alarming rate, and the PA continues to issue

actually improved the standards of

"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 crea-

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)

that has been photographed and displayed all over the Internet. But mental value - in the sense of how many species were affected, and so on - you could say the impact is

"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.

The ERA

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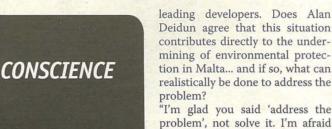
conscience,

"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,

the acronym implies that no development can take place 'outside literally hundreds of ODZ permits

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 environmental protection accord-

tive ways to go around it."



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 Demokraobjected to a tika - to give them due credit had already started the debate. large number It is nothing new. In my opinion, there are two methods to address it: one, full-time politicians. We need full-time politicians. Mario permits; and de Marco said as much recently: one way he defended himself when its advice was confronted [over legal services to db Group] was to say 'I am a partoverturned in time politician' Malta, he hints, is also one of the 70% of cases. This alone should give

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 "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 vourself 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 representa-

tion, which would be discriminat-



ing against smaller parties. I know thousand blows'. How much of come out in the public hearing..." the dependence on private commercial interests."

Finance Minister Edward Scicluna, who also argues - and to be fair, our own polls bear him out - that arises partly from the latter conthe taxpayer would never accept

"I think, with the situation as it is parties and private businesses..."

a vast topic: and closing party fi- delve deeper, you realise that there regime..." nancing loopholes can hardly be has to be a new traffic junction. Paradoxically, Deidun argues that expected to solve all issues. Earlier, Where will they put it? In the ODZ smaller developments may actu-Deidun mentioned a 'death by a area across the road. This did not ally pose the bigger problem. "The and rightly so; but we're not look-

it will open up another Pandora's this 'death' is being caused by the Box; but I see no other way to end large projects we associate with the above-mentioned 'political-private partnerships'... and how much by One of the people who disagrees is our own daily activities as ordinary

> Deidun admits that his pessimism sideration. "For me, one of the top priorities for the environment should be ODZ. We have a limited

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 de-

velopments. That's no joke..." Those permits in turn represent today, the taxpayer is still indirect—amount of undeveloped space, and only an estimated 5% of the total ly paying the parties. When you it is forever decreasing. I divide number of development applicahave these vested interests, it is al- applicants for ODZ permit into tions - in any area - submitted in ways ultimately the taxpayer who two categories... the large devel- 2015. "We must bear in mind that tackles the large ODZ developfoots the bill. What I'm suggesting opers, of whom there are around many of the applications would be is to be more forthright about it: to 10 or 20 - everyone knows who for very minor things: internal almake the system accountable, so they are, they've become house-terations in a development zone. that people know exactly how they hold names - and John Citizen. for instance. But still, 750 ODZ are financing the parties... and not Let's take the first: that there is a permits were granted last year. get to know about it only through connection with party financing is The Environment and Resources corruption scandals. So I don't clear. The electoral promises are Authority (ERA) objected to a agree with the finance minister. there for all to see. To mention but large number of these permits; and I think the only way to stamp out one example of how it impacts the its advice was overturned in 70% this network of vested interests is environment: high-rise. People ask of cases. This alone should give to create a chasm between political me, what is the environmental im- an idea of the situation: the ERA pact of towers in Mriehel... isn't it represents the environmental con-All the same, the environment is a degraded area anyway? But if you science, as it were, of the planning

tored... they are few in number. The real problem is the much larger number of smaller applications that are not immediately visparties 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 someone took it out. But it only ments. Only those go through the additional level of checks and balances proposed by the PN: that is, a nation... well, they're not there, approval by a two-thirds parliamentary majority. That applies to cause we're 'bad people'. This Zonqor, all the high-rise develop- comes from our lack of underments... but you're not going to standing of what the environment realistically go to parliament with 750 small ODZ cases...'

larger developers can be moni-

Yet these collectively cover a print than the so-called 'megaprojects'. "We're all turning the big guns onto these big developments - myself included, mind you. I'm not defending them -

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 velopment boundaries were in creased, MEPA received nearly 7,000 requests - 99% from ordinary citizens - to have their land

This pre-empts a question I was to include a reference, or perhaps this also mean that our collective Dwejra being a case in point - is only skin-deep?

really. But it's not necessarily beis. Appreciation of the environment arises from an understanding of how it works. What is the comparable, if not larger, foot- 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