

A last plea for rationale

Where is the Opposition?



Over 100 carobs and 20 olive trees are found at the gargantuan Msida site to be included within the scheme revision. This wanton destruction is tantamount to daylight sin and crime, no matter how many carob and olive saplings are sold and planted elsewhere by the MRAE. The message seems to be: "Fewer carobs and less Maltese rural countryside; more roundabouts and alien surroundings."

As is customary in this country, one party is emboldened to move on, however brazen the proposals, due to the ineptitude of the other party in what has become a well-oiled duopoly. Take the Opposition - yes, true, it was present en masse in last Wednesday's march in Valletta.

But when one considers what happened earlier in the week in Parliament, this stinks of no more than a vote-catching foray. In fact, The Times reported that, despite the Opposition (namely Charles Buhagiar and Roderick Galdes) requesting several changes in the parliamentary debate to the scheme revisions, they failed to move amendments, as official protocol would have it.

Many of these requests referred to additions to the proposed schemes. In addition, they abstained from voting on any of the amended plans - abstaining is tantamount to political limbo, aimed at not antagonising environmentalists nor aspiring within-scheme land-owners alike.

With such despondency, it's no wonder that The Times reported that "the vote in Parliament is expected to sail through". The Opposition can only gain credibility on the matter if it binds itself to not tampering with the development boundaries when in power - otherwise, its stance on the matter is irrelevant.

Quotable quotes on the rationalisation process

Just in case one might be tempted to think that the crowds that thronged Valletta last Wednesday were a pittance and that Astrid Vella's claim that "we have the silent support of the majority in this cause, far beyond the numbers who will turn up to the protest" is too hackneyed, then a snippet of the current anti-scheme revision deluge in local newspapers will give a fairer picture of the mood out there:

"Just because a person employs many people, it does not place him above the law. If flouting of the law results in more destruction of what is left of our precious natural surroundings, then it is everybody's business to expose it... We badly need a government that is strong enough to impose zero tolerance against the arrogance of certain individuals who think they own Malta." (George Debono, 'Equal Before the Law', July 19)

"The government would be far better advised - and would earn far greater respect - to deal with the long-promised Rent Act revision and to establish the long overdue National Sustainability Plan for the Environment than to pander to the hugely despised construction development lobby, thus wreaking further havoc on this much abused land." (Martin Scicluna, 'Illogical and Ill-Judged', July 18)

"Please stop all the excuses, and let us work for a common goal, i.e. safeguarding what remains of this precious environment. A government elected by the people should heed what the majority of the people want and not the needs of the egoistic few!" (Edward Camilleri, 'Serving the Few', July 17)

"The Gozo submissions in particular can only be described as a request to ravage its fragile landscape. No one with the good of Gozo at heart could possibly imagine that such submissions could be accepted, whether they interfere with archaeology or not." (Patricia Camilleri, president, Archaeological Society of Malta)

"If the government has its way and the development zones are further extended, more blocks will be built! Like Mr Busuttill, our family too 'will never forget, not in any election'. Lawrence Gonzi will then (again) say that the people misunderstood." (Annette Attard, 'Development Zones', July 13)

"To bypass our own planning and environment agency with a Cabinet memo is not becoming of any civilised country. To change the very goal posts for normal citizens to the advantage of mega developers is not European at all, to say the least." (Lino Busuttill, 'Development Boundaries', July 13)

For posterity, there were a couple of pro-revision letters, whose sole thrust was that their authors owned land to be included and they wanted to cash in - the average length of such letters was less than 10 lines, revealing a dearth of arguments on behalf of proponents of the scheme revisions.

Contradictions galore

George Pullicino was lauded by the environment movement early this year for announcing that he would be imposing heftier fines for ODZ infringements and that ODZ sanctionings would be next to impossible.

After the dust has settled on the initial euphoria, however, and the fact that a large number of ODZ illegalities will be included within schemes (rather than demolished as in the good old days, just after the PA's inception), the minister's initial claim is no more than a flagrant contradiction.

In a sanctioning, those infringing the law get to pay a fee at least - the scheme revisions spell out gratuitous sanctioning to people who have been flouting the law for years.

The list of names... now

Mr Pullicino is on record as stating that, in response to Dr Alfred Sant's challenge to publish all names of scheme revision beneficiaries, all such names would be duly published ("after the process is over"). What exactly this nebulous statement means still needs to be deciphered but, to date, the following has been confirmed:

Two MPs, one aspiring MP, five local contractors (including Polidano and Tumas), two ex-ministers, two priests (at least), a property dealer (Ta' Xaman, Sannat, site in Gozo) and a number of individuals closely connected to MP's, such as chauffeurs.

It seems that are too many Piju Camilleris on the list for comfort.

A case for social injustices

Rectifying social injustices is always laudable. Politicians tend to cook the books, however, when defining "social injustices".

Using the same yardstick that government is using (e.g. compensating Tumas Group for the loss of a plot in Mellieha, which was mainly excluded from development boundaries due to its geological instability and not for ecological concerns, with another sizable swathe in Mellieha), one should also compensate former owners of the land committed to the Freeport operations; land-owners subject to peppercorn rent payments due to archaic rent laws; former BICAL shareholders; and all those whose property amenity value will decrease due to current moving of the goalposts.

Carob-sighting tours to Sicily in 2015

The Cabinet memo elucidated that no site of ecological importance, among other criteria, is to be included in the scheme revision. How "ecological importance" was gauged raises a number of eyebrows, however, with hundreds of carob trees facing the cut in the current scheme revision.

Steve Borg's cri de coeur to save the carobs at Wied il-Ghajj (Sqaq il-Harrub) finds some resonance when faced with the prospects of over a hundred carob trees being cut at Msida, some 10 others at Mellieha and Iklin, and the list goes on.

This does not include olive trees, with both trees being protected. Most probably, MEPA will stipulate the planting of a number of indigenous trees elsewhere to compensate for the loss - as laid down in Annex I of the 'Guidelines on Trees, Shrubs and Plants for Planting and Landscaping in the Maltese Islands' of the EMU of MEPA's Planning Directorate.

Forty trees need to be planted for every 100-year-old tree or older uprooted within scheme. For the Msida site, taking conservative counts of 100 carobs on site to be uprooted and 20 olive trees, the total number of trees to be planted as compensation is a staggering 4,800.

Both trees are protected under Schedule II of the Trees and Woodlands Regulations and their uprooting (for trees older than 10 years) carry a fine of Lm150-Lm1,000. Evidently, such regulations, which would normally raise a hornet's nest for the proverbial man in the street, will be waived to expedite matters in the scheme revision exercise.

To further assuage any compunction the authorities may have for the cutting of so many carob trees, most probably the Environment Fest at Independence Gardens in Sliema will see an upsurge in the selling of carob saplings by the MRAE. While chopping down our venerable

trees, we paper up the cracks with saplings, which rarely survive for more than a few months in private gardens.

With the current onslaught on carob trees and all those species looked down upon with derision - but which embody so much of the Maltese rural character - the thought of taking people to Sicily in a few years' time to savour Mediterranean garigue, or to catch sight of a carob or similar foibles, would not be a bad idea after all.

MEPA enforcement... in dire straits

I have flogged MEPA many a time but am still able to discern between the genuine (and disillusioned) and not-so-genuine characters within the institution.

Two daunting concerns being faced by MEPA enforcement are the unsavoury characters they have to face (e.g., refer to 'Arraigned after assault on Mepa official' of June 17 in which the assault on a MEPA enforcement officer by an Iklin resident is reported) and the courts, whose machinations and lenient sentencing reveal a lack of conversance with the situation out there.

A case in point is the container dumped for over two years in a field in a scheduled area in Wied Siekel, Fontana, and the illegally constructed structure adjacent to it. MEPA duly meted out an enforcement notice and direct action was to be embarked on when the owner of the container successfully obtained an injunction from the court to stop Mepa taking direct action until the case is decided. A hearing is due on October 20.

The current brouhaha surrounding MEPA is not yielding the desired results. Instead of inducing those pulling the strings to prick the nettle, it is resulting in MEPA losing its best elements (e.g. architect Ruben Abela of Enforcement), who are moving to new pastures and in its remaining stalwarts losing faith in the system due to the spokes continuously being placed in their wheels.

Rather than enforcement, complaints and the PR office acting on every single report they receive, as their natural propensity would tell them to do, cold water is doused on their exuberance by the top echelons in MEPA and around MEPA who, in veiled terms, urge them to "take it slow", especially when it comes to individual planning cases.

In fact, it is very difficult to glean any information from MEPA on individual planning cases, even when breaches of current legislation are involved, such as ODZ development.

On the other hand, when queries relate to the dumping of waste in green areas or similar infringements, answers follow hot on the heels of these queries. It seems that different queries carry different political weightings.

Burmarrad stormwater channel

Ninu Zammit and Works are no strangers to riding roughshod over existing legislation, to "get things done". Salina, Wied Babu, Ghajn Rihana, il-Mixtla in Cospicua, etc., all bear testimony to this.

The proposed Burmarrad stormwater channel is the latest hot potato. Works only agreed to an EIA for the project after a myriad of objections were raised, including those by the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage and the Malta Archaeological Society.

What strikes the observer is the fact that the same division stated that it was determined to forge ahead with the project and that it expected the EIA to be ready within the next few weeks. It must be quite an extensive EIA then.

And how is it that the division is determined to forge ahead with the project? What if the EIA suggests the zero option - i.e., that the project be scuttled altogether? Is the EIA team malleable to any pressure from those commissioning the study?

Where is the state?

The state appears to be absent when it comes to beach concession management. The letter by Elizabeth Gatt ('Deckchair Abuse at Little Armier', July 16) is eloquent indeed since it exposes the citizen's vilification at being barred from most of our popular beaches by a few gung-ho beach concession owners.

Why can't the authorities, such as the MTA or Ministry for the Interior (or the elusive Lands) delineate physically the cordon within which beach concessions can extend?

Complaints by the public can then be addressed in terms of physical evidence vis-à-vis such boundaries. Is it too much to ask?

Some tourism considerations

The Malta Tourism Authority has hit the nail on the head, for once. When launching 'Brand Malta' to exponents from the tourism sector, the MTA listed Malta's historical heritage, stunning diversity of attractions within a 30-minute span and our warm hospitality.

No mention whatsoever was made of golf - Malta certainly has no 'natural advantage' when it comes to this land and water-profligate 'sport'.