

Delimara needs gas, not hot air



Any further extensions to the Delimara power station should be restricted to disturbed land so as not to encroach further on the peninsula.

Energy generation in Malta has been firmly entrenched on the political agenda for many years now, mainly in terms of utility tariffs, security of supply and its air pollution impact. So one can understand why political squabbling and fire-fighting trumps rationality in debates and proposals for the future of this essential sector.

The Nationalist Party's choice of heavy fuel oil (HFO) was almost exclusively motivated by cost-cutting considerations, as gas-powered generation is purportedly more expensive, a claim refuted by a small number of experts. This dented the party's environmental credentials at Delimara. So the ball was in the Labour Party's court to rectify the PN's shortcomings through its proposals.

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- Alan Deidun

The PL succeeded to do so, but only to a limited extent. The shift from HFO to gas is highly commendable, irrespective of economic considerations, as public health is an overriding concern which should transcend any economic one. The PN seems to be embracing this view, albeit somewhat late in the day, with Government proposing a gas pipeline in the recently-launched national environmental policy, so as to support gas-powered facilities at Delimara.

The PL's pledge to remove the 'high' chimney at Delimara will also be welcomed by the people of Birzebbugia and Marsaxlokk, as chimneys symbolise air pollution and all its baggage in the public imagination.

Besides questioning the economic feasibility of the PL's proposals (this is beyond the scope of this column), detractors of the proposals point to two major shortcomings. Firstly, the proposed timeframe; anyone remotely acquainted with procurement and the Environment Impact Assessment process knows this project will not fly before four to five years' time, and certainly not in 2015, as stated by the PL. Secondly, there is concern over the security of the supply of gas, as tanker shuttles are nowhere as reliable as a gas pipeline as they are at the mercy of the elements.

I would add two further weak points of the proposals, which have been discounted by many: the generation of surplus energy, and the development footprint at Delimara.

The PL is proposing retaining the BWSC extension, albeit firing it using gas, retaining the interconnector, and hooking up a further 200 megawatt gas-powered plant on the same site. When all the energy-generating facilities are on board, our islands will have a peak generation level almost 250MW above current peak demand, raising legitimate doubts as to whether the

proposed new plant, and/or the interconnector for that matter, would be obsolete. While the fuel would be cleaner we would be burning a wasteful amount of it.

Secondly, the footprint of the energy-generating facilities at Delimara would grow through the development of the new gas-powered facility. It is true that the PN drew first blood by siting the power station at a pristine area in Delimara 20 years ago but further extensions on virgin land at Delimara should be avoided by confining the new facilities to disturbed land.

Despite their fundamental shortcomings, the PL's proposals for Delimara have an element of validity which will doubtlessly be scrutinised in greater detail by analysts in the coming weeks, right up to March 9. If anything, the PL has firmly anchored the future of power generation at Delimara in gas, which is instrumental for improving air quality in the area.

Now that both the PN and the PL are finally singing the praises of gas, why not reach a cross-party consensus on converting the BWSC plant to gas in the shortest timeframe possible, rather than going for an entirely new plant, the actual need for which is doubtful? Such a move, coupled with the interconnector coming on stream, would invariably lower utility bills without the need for bolder interventions by the administration of the day.

The major impediment to reach this consensus is the political pressure to reduce utility tariffs today, rather than wait for reductions to come tomorrow as a result of new infrastructure coming on stream.

Power overshadows water

You would expect that on a semi-arid island like Malta, where seawater desalination consumes about five per cent of all generated energy, water would feature prominently in any discussion on utility bills. Wrong; water is being eclipsed by its more prominent brother – electricity – in the ongoing discussions.

The PL has proposed a five per cent reduction in water bills, but this populist move does nothing to compensate for the PN's inability to cut down on over-extraction of groundwater. Private bowers are still not metered, and the obligation to build wells in new constructions has literally been 'watered down', although some improvement has been made through measures such as the use of reservoirs to enable runoff rainwater to seep in and replenish groundwater.

Water pricing, along with enforcement at private boreholes and making sure new buildings incorporate rainwater capture facilities and wells, are perhaps the most effective measures to slow down over-extraction of groundwater.

A slip on land reclamation

In his defiant defence of land reclamation, faithfully towing the party line, Leo Brincat, the PL's chief spokesman on environmental matters, made an uncharacteristic slip during a recent edition of the One TV discussion programme Affari Tagħna.

When Environment Minister Mario de Marco rightly underscored the importance of conserving most of our coast, Brincat sought to reassure viewers by boldly asserting that the PL would conduct all the necessary studies to identify the most suitable site in local waters for land reclamation.

Two such studies have already been conducted six years ago, and together these studies constitute a comprehensive assessment of all coastal areas of the Maltese islands. The Malta Environment and Planning Authority commissioned the CarlBro report to evaluate the suitability of six different coastal sites to host large-scale land reclamation exercises. The report was completed in 2005.

Criteria used to assess the different sites include possible conflicts with nature conservation strategies, the water depth, the proximity to cultural heritage sites and to urban centres, the present coastal land use, and the possibility of conflicts with commercial interests.

Three sites, two off the coast of Magħtab and another to the southeast, off the Xagħjra coast, were subsequently shortlisted for the development of artificial islands, with the Scott-Wilson report on the feasibility of such sites being completed in 2007, identifying the latter site as the most amenable for land reclamation purposes, albeit with a number of major caveats.

Tree theft from public places

Afforestation efforts have gained increasing momentum locally, with thousands of trees being planted in public spaces across the islands in a concerted effort by individuals, companies and the Government alike. This positive groundswell has understandably hit the headlines on many occasions.

A substantial number of these trees, however, end up embellishing privately-owned fields as they, especially olive and cypress trees (both highly coveted for landscaping purposes) are stolen in the middle of the night, without a single comment being made in the media about this despicable practice, contrary to what happens when planted trees are vandalised.

For example in Gudja, where 300 trees were recently planted by the Malta International Airport and the Tree4You campaign, around 10 trees have already vanished into thin air, during successive nights. This is undermining the willingness of individuals and companies to contribute to such tree-planting schemes.

The upshot from all this is that tree-planting schemes need meticulous follow-up after the media glare abates; they need watering and, most important of all, CCTV.

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