

## More about the rationalisation madness

The prime minister, addressing the media at the Auberge de Castille on June 24, argued that the rationalisation of the development boundaries would lead to lower property prices. Yet Environment Minister George Pullicino rebutted this claim a few days later in an interview on Radio 101.

Dr Manuel Borda, writing in *The Sunday Times* (June 18) also concludes that the release of new land for development will not bring about a decrease in property prices. The statistics he quotes also substantiate this claim - between 1994 and 2004, in fact, there was a fivefold and a two-fold increase in the number of apartments and maisonettes developed per annum respectively - the population did not increase so much over the same period. Yet the surfeit of properties on the market did nothing to lower prices. So why is the PM using the social expedient to justify such scheme inclusions?

A Gozitan wrote to object to my mentioning Ta' Xaman in Sannat, in my "Green Whistleblower" column, accusing me of never having visited the area and so claiming that I had no right to object to its inclusion in the scheme. He also rejected the claim that the area has some historical or agricultural value. He added that in 1988 he bought some land at Ta' Xaman to build a house for his two daughters... but since permits were not issued, his family had to move five times since. This, I thought, was indeed a social case.

Yet when I went into the case, some intriguing facts transpired. This individual has been lobbying for years for his land to be included. He is running a tourist site promoting farmhouses in Gozo, effectively donning the attire of a property speculator. So much for a social case!

As for the historical and agricultural value of the site in Sannat, I will leave it up to readers to judge after having visited [www.adgozo.com](http://www.adgozo.com) and the photo gallery for the site... I have also talked to Sannat residents. It seems that a Roman burial site was found in the vicinity and that the place was quarried over 100 years ago and you can see all the marks in the stone how our great-grandfathers used to cut the stones. There is a very old small room built like a little cave, besides the fertility of the land.

Government rebuts claims that the process is being rushed through by stating that it wanted to restrict the objection period to six weeks so that developers would not have time to submit proposals for development, etc.

But even a couple of weeks would have sufficed for developers to make their representations, as evidenced by the over 1,000 submissions they made. Secondly, doubts have cropped up on the July 21 date - i.e. when the two-year grace given by the European Commission to Malta regarding the transposition of the Strategic Impact Assessments (SEA) is up.

In fact, the European Commission has launched an investigation on whether Government's rationalisation process is in breach of such legislation. In addition, how will MEPA manage to sift through the myriad objections in time, especially with staff on half-days? Will some critical feedback be given to those who cared to object?

Government should come clean by extending the objection time to beyond July 21 and allow objections to be filed against new submissions made after June 23. In addition, vacant property should be taxed, except single properties, and new permits should only be issued when it is proved that the property will be inhabited within six months of completion to nip the speculation game in the bud.

Government (through MEPA) boasts that over 1,000 submissions had been received by the June 23 deadline and that 80 per cent of these were in favour of more development. But these 1,000 submissions were delivered on behalf of developers. MEPA turned a blind eye to the hundreds (if not thousands) of objections submitted by conscientious citizens - we still do not know the exact number. Is pressure being made to bear on MEPA not to publish the official number of objections for fear of an outcry?

Yet another point to ponder is the multiplier effect. Are the proponents of such a foolhardy scheme considering the actual numbers behind petitions and press releases by NGOs? For example, if a 550-signature petition was submitted on behalf of Mellieha residents, and if an NGO like Nature Trust (with over 2,000 members) also submitted its objections, will MEPA consider that two or 2,550 objections?

In an interview with Steve Mallia (*The Times*, last Monday), Minister Pullicino explained that, through the scheme revision, five per cent less land will be up for development when compared to the 1987 boundaries. It is very convenient to make comparisons with the 1987 boundaries,

rather than with the 1988 ones, as justly pointed out by Mr Mallia, since otherwise a net increase in the land to be developed would result. By drawing the line at 1987 (when it returned to power), the PN is effectively telling the public that it will develop less land than the MLP.

In addition, the PM harps on the fact that 18.5 per cent of the land to be included within schemes is already built-up but in ODZs - this is little solace indeed since it effectively sanctions illegal development. Environmentalists lauded Mr Pullicino for announcing a toughening of measures against development of ODZs - now, he's campaigning for sanctioning of hitherto illegal development.

Half a million square metres of land to be developed had already been proposed in Local Plans - what about the other 600,000 square metres which hadn't?

A common barb thrown at environmentalists is that their hackles seem to be raised only at the eleventh hour. The Prime Minister and Mr Pullicino have repeatedly quipped that it is anomalous that environmentalists did not object before to such inclusions - e.g. at the local plan stage. A case in point is the Tal-Papa area in Birzebbuga, included in the Marsaxlokk Local Plan.

It is very easy to point the accusing finger at people who spend a lifetime objecting to all kinds of hackneyed proposals and not being paid for it, but doing it out of a sense of civic pride, when you are a developer with resources to waste (and paid consultants to do the work for you) or part of a government that is always dishing out voluminous policies and proposals to comb through in a few weeks.

Hence, the question prompts itself: why then don't you bog down environmentalists perennially in the objection chair and deprive them of a life? By not stemming further development, this is what authorities are effectively doing.

True, the public is being consulted, but to a certain point ...to within touching distance of the tender flesh... close, but not enough. Take the criteria presented to Cabinet; who drew them up? It wasn't MEPA. A few top brass (mainly architects) did. Was Cabinet consulted? No. They were simply presented with a fait accompli. MEPA was not consulted either. It simply drew up the maps, using the criteria already imposed upon it.

And to twist the dagger even further, another bombshell was dropped just a few days back. MEPA, through its PRO, stated that no further objections will be allowed after June 23, despite the new development proposals being submitted. What a convenient loophole!

Minister Dolores Cristina's promise that the NGO law would soon see the light of day has been forgotten. So it seems that this legislation will be further shelved, as has been the reform of the rent laws.

In my column a fortnight ago, I suggested Minister Pullicino give compensation to those to whom an injustice was done in 1988 - a reasonable sum of Lm10,000 for every individual case, with the exact sum to be fine-tuned depending on the exact dimensions of the plot.

Way back in 1988, Lm10,000 could buy you a decent property, after all. So, given 200 'injustice' cases Government would pay out a not-so-prohibitive figure of Lm2 million, which can be given out over a number of months or years.

One does not have to delve too deep to realise why Government will not embark on this route, despite being lambasted by all sectors of society, including the Chamber of Architects and the MHRA.

Roughly half of the land in question is government-owned... hence, the injection of cash envisaged from the development of such land and its eventual sale is more than welcome, on the eve of a general election.

Forget the heart-rending scenes of couples defrauded of their land on the eve of their wedding... rather, those who are set to benefit are somewhat more high-heeled than that. Take three large "illegal" stores in Qormi, which have now been included in the new rationalised boundaries announced by MEPA. Such stores had been served with enforcement notices in the past and at least two appeals regarding this case had been lost.

There are at least four other major contractors who will benefit from the scheme revision and this is too much of a coincidence.