

Not a green electoral campaign



This huge rubble mound at Delimara will need to be shifted to make room for the PL's proposed new gas plant. One hopes it will be disposed of properly.

If ever any further proof was needed of how many ladder rungs the environment has slid in the local political agenda, the current electoral campaign is the most effective mirror of all. For instance, both the PN and the PL are pandering to the aspirations of most Gozitans for more development (of the concrete type) on their island.

This 'fast-tracking' allure is becoming viral... first the PL pledged to scupper the entrenched environmental impact assessment (EIA) procedure for the proposed gas plant at Delimara, and to water down bureaucracy for 'large (unspecified) projects', to extend building permits beyond their term of five years and to promote agritourism through 'projects in fields' in Gozo.

The green groundswell seems to have faded to oblivion as both parties warm up to the construction lobby

- Alan Deidun

On its part the PN recently pledged to 'fast-track' planning applications for five-star hotels in Gozo.

The green groundswell our islands witnessed a few years ago seems to have faded to oblivion as both parties seem to be warming up to the construction lobby, evidently away from the limelight.

Promoting job-creation in Gozo through large-scale development projects is a mothballed concept, as testified by the hollowed-out shell of the Mgarr Hotel and the temporary nature of most construction jobs. Extending the current five-year lifetime of planning permits might appease the Malta Developers Association but might result in a proliferation of open construction sites as works may be extended over a longer timeframe, to further the embitterment of neighbours.

While both parties seem intent to come to grips with the protracted EIA process, which incidentally happens to be enshrined in an EU directive (duly transposed in local legislation), the PL has been more explicit in such a pledge.

For instance, at Delimara, the PL is pledging to resort to a mere 'expression of interest' and adjudicating the job over just four to five weeks (when the conventional handling period for a planning application is six weeks, let alone a gargantuan development as a power station), thus undermining the consideration of alternatives sites, the right of the public to object and of bidders to appeal, for instance.

The PL says it is vindicated when it refers to other vitiated planning processes conducted under the PN's watch, such as the Sant'Antnin sewage plant, where public consultation had clay feet.

However, such a tit-for-tat attitude is not conducive to a better planning process and the PL should seek to shore up the EIA process, especially clauses referring to public consultation.

One hope that this column serves to encourage both parties to spruce up their environmental proposals during the ongoing electoral campaign. As things stand, more of the same (namely, unnecessary construction) seems to be on the cards for the coming years.

Concerns over PL's Delimara proposal

Now that the PL's proposals about Delimara have been disclosed, it is legitimate to discuss a number of environmental issues that need to be addressed if the party is elected.

For instance, the PL pledged to locate its new gas-powered plant on the footprint currently taken up by a big mound of rubble generated during the excavation for the foundation of the first Delimara plant.

Naturally, this mound, composed of thousands of tons of rubble, would need to be disposed of at an alternative location. Provisions need to be in place to prevent at all costs this rubble ending up in the sea, either through wilful or inadvertent spills from barges en route to the spoil ground off the Grand Harbour.

A second environmental issue to ponder is the surplus volume of hot seawater that will be generated at the new Delimara plant through the re-gassification of LNG (Liquid Natural Gas) and which would need to be disposed of. Currently, warm cooling water from the Delimara power station is disposed of at Ħofra ż-Żgħira bay and, in view of the possibility of thermal pollution (and possible regression of Posidonia ocean meadows), the Malta Environment and Planning Authority requested an onerous Appropriate Assessment (AA) study to accompany the EIA for the BWSC extension to the existing power station.

Presumably, these and other environmental considerations will not be sidelined during the planning process if the PL forges ahead with its plans for Delimara.

While politicians waffle, NGOs act

While politicians skirt around prickly environmental issues in their trademark wary fashion, some NGOs have taken the bull by the horns by embarking on bold initiatives that would make mainstream politicians bristle.

For instance, Din l-Art Hejwa has floated an initiative aimed at further promoting environmental issues – it is conducting an online poll to assess the hierarchy of the public's perception of 12 of the most pressing local green issues.

At the time of writing, the three most pressing issues according to this online poll are the halting of further development, the safeguard of water resources and greater respect for trees. I wonder why I am not surprised at all.

Another NGO, Birdlife, has vociferously condemned the rampant 'vote-hunting' at the moment, with both the PL and the PN kow-towing to the hunting lobby.

The only way the two big parties can win brownie points with the electorate is to bite the bullet and unequivocally state their position on thorny issues such as the shanty towns at Gnejna, Armier, San Tumas and elsewhere; on drastic measures to reduce traffic on the roads (such as mandatory car pooling); and on a permanent moratorium on further ODZ development that is not agricultural or of national importance in nature.

Will this challenge be taken up in the coming six weeks?

Mepa enforcement ploughs ahead

Locally, the perception that electoral campaigns usher is a stalling of all Mepa enforcement is all-pervasive. This perception is probably fuelled by the assumption that such enforcement would alienate potential voters and thus result in a haemorrhage of the all-important votes. This does not seem to be the case during this electoral campaign, at least.

For instance, I and other members of the public recently alerted Mepa about a case in Għaxaq, and Mepa enforcement acted promptly, resolving the issue within a few days. The culprit had breached cordons separating his heavy machinery yard from surrounding fields and embarked on the levelling of fields and removal of topsoil.

Mepa enforcement, armed with the trump card of daily fines imposed on perpetrators of infringements in ODZ areas, obliged the owner to reinstate the site by levelling the soil back to the original sloping levels and to remove the mechanical shovel from the site.

For Mepa enforcement, this is just another run-of-the-mill operation which usually does not make it to the headlines and hence does not serve to counter cynicism directed against the planning authority.