

When will they ever learn?



Minister George Pullicino planting an olive tree and setting the example at St Aloysius College to mark World Environment Day. Mr Pullicino has assured us that all avenues will be explored to try to find an alternative site to Has-Saptan to relocate the Birzebbuga fuel tanks to avoid uprooting any olive trees.

In a recent interview carried in *The Malta Independent* after the resumption of dredging works at Salina, Minister Ninu Zammit was quoted as saying that he could not understand why MEPA took so long to issue the necessary permits and also why permits were needed at all. "I don't know what the problem was. We did not ask to erect a large block of flats. We are just cleaning up 40 years of rubbish which was irresponsibly dumped in the sea."

The journalist should have rebutted: "Works were halted maybe because they were taking place in a protected area of high ecological value protected by several pieces of legislation and which harbours restricted plant and animal species and archaeological remains."

The minister's reply is symptomatic of a malaise in this country which does not recognise the value of 'ecology'. The Works Division can count on the services of an archaeologist, geologist, etc - you name it, they have it - except for a qualified ecologist.

The recent road works at Mgarr/Mtarfa/Zebbug, etc., further highlight the little importance the ADT gives to the ecological impact of their deeds, since a pittance was afforded to ecological monitoring, as well as the Works Division's surprise at being stopped by the Cultural Superintendence on stormwater relief works at Marsa after Roman remains were found there. Is it a case of 'development at all costs'?

The regular beach cleaning exercises (to remove *Posidonia* debris/banquettes from sandy beaches) also reveal the lack of green consciousness on the authorities' part. Although such banquettes harbour endemic faunal species, helping to stabilise the sand and accrete the beach, MTA continues to 'clean' beaches even in non-bathing winter months and also from non-bathing areas, such as Bahar ic-Caghaq! Cannot beaches be cleaned only from April to September?

The MRAE Website even lists *Posidonia* as a waste category under 'Mixed Trade and MSW' which comprises two per cent of our waste stream. So is *Posidonia* debris considered a waste? I refer both the MTA and MRAE to the welter of published data (also highlighted by the Church's Green Commission) pointing to the importance of such 'waste'. No reply has been forthcoming from the MTA or MRAE regarding my suggestions on the matter.

Even more ODZ applications

As you can see from the range of ODZ applications listed below, NGOs like Nature Trust (Malta) have quite a handful to deal with, objecting every week to each of these applications - a revamp of the current legislation is needed to preclude applications such as for 36 flats in an ODZ site to even see the light of day. Isn't it possible that MEPA's think tank cannot conjure the adequate amendments to legislate against such brazen applications? Or do we need to prop up the construction industry at all costs?

I was tempted to brand this section 'Let's build a block of flats' in view of the numerous flat-building applications.

May 7 - Ten ODZ applications, including 02111/05, referring to a number of sanctionings at Villa Fuente, Ta' Cenc, despite a despicable track record of illegal developments on site, 00995/05, referring to the proposed construction of an overlying/adjacent residential area in Triq Bingemma, Mgarr, after a first floor was already sanctioned in the past, 05145/04, referring to amendments to the camping site at Dahlet Xmajjar, although basic tenets of landscaping, respect for the surrounding habitats and light pollution mitigation are not being abided by, 01870/05, referring to a proposed extension to Quarry 29, Torri Falka, Mgarr, 00757/05,

referring to a further floor construction at Ta' I-Imbordin, close to Mizieb, and 00932/05, referring to the construction of six houses and five swimming pools along Triq I-Imgarr, Qala.

May 14 - Six ODZ applications, including 01938/05, for the proposed construction of a terraced house at Triq ta' Milord in Bidnija (in what has become a bedraggled street, due to MEPA setting a precedent by issuing the first planning permit on site), 01665/05, for the proposed construction of a block of four flats at Triq Ghajn Qamar, Xaghra

(This section was compiled with the help of Annalise Falzon, Nature Trust Malta)

Even more conflicts of interest?

At least three ODZ applications have been submitted on behalf of clients by the chairman of the DCC Board Division A, raising the possibility of conflict of interest. The same board is responsible to deliberate on ODZ sites, among other components of its remit.

The three applications in question are:

04894/03 to sanction pump room and reservoir and to construct an agricultural room in Mellieha;

01487/04 to construct three floors of residential units with garages at Triq Hompesch, c/w Triq il-Foss, Fgura; and

07617/03, construction of dwelling with garage at Fontana, Triq Ghajn Tuta.

One concedes that the honorarium of Lm3,000 that board members receive for their toils is a relatively paltry sum compared to the much more lucrative sums that a practising architect can earn. However, one feels that, with the huge number of 'inside scheme' applications out there, an architect chairing the ODZ board should shy away from ODZ applications.

An unfortunate consequence of the inundation of planning applications currently witnessed is that DCC boards have to decide upon a whole plethora of cases within a few hours with little time to delve into the merits of each and every case. Such a reality should be remedied, especially when ODZ cases are involved and the integrity of a green area, for example, is at stake.

Gozitan misconceptions

A recent meeting which the Prime Minister, Dr Gonzi, has had with Gozitans on the theme "Gozo: Distinctive Needs... Unique Potential", which focused on tourism, employment, the environment and the EU, has shed some useful insight about the Gozitan reality. According to a newspaper report of the meeting, "Gozo's structure plan was a cause of concern for locals since they feared it did not take into consideration the island's particular physical and social identity. Locals pointed out that decisions on the golf course and the airstrip needed to be taken..."

In a nutshell, more construction and development as a panacea to solve Gozo's ailing economy (and echoed by Evarist Bartolo in 'SOS Gozo Tourism', The Sunday Times, May 29). Misconceptions were aptly rebutted by Dr Gonzi who stated that:

In terms of services - not only tourism-related, but IT and back office - Gozo could generate lots of jobs.

Gozo's success depended to a great extent on how much of its character was preserved, so decisions had to be taken with great caution.

Gozo's allure to tourists depends on its unique identity which locals want to undermine by fuelling a rat race for hotel and flat-building exercises.

A new phenomenon

The flower-power hippy Seventies image of the Green movement is long buried, even though it still lingers on in some people's minds. Environmentalists are now much more diligent and punctilious in their work, always backed by relevant statistics and facts, and are joining forces to avoid being swamped by the cheek of some developers - enter the NGO Coalition. The Bahrija hiatus witnessed 18 NGOs, normally bickering over minor details, join forces in one common front to denounce the greed of speculators on site.

Hot on the heels on such a welcome development, 12 NGOs and two local councils (Ghaxaq and Gudja) have grasped the nettle in denouncing the proposed relocation of Birzebbuga fuel tanks to Has-Saptan with the consequent uprooting of over 200 trees. It is indeed a pity that both Zurrieq and Safi councils, also contacted to give their support, failed to endorse such a press release.

One only augurs that the momentum does not fizzle out when it comes to taking a position on the proposed Ta' Cenc project. Also, NGOs should continue to clamour for their dues in the form of a long-overdue NGO Bill which gives legal standing to NGOs and which has been promised time and time again by different administrations.

Has-Saptan... some further considerations

It has now transpired that Enemalta single-handedly earmarked Has-Saptan for its tank relocation exercise with minimum consultation. No word has been forthcoming of any alternative site - so I will duly suggest one myself (despite knowing too well that Enemalta has a list of

potential sites it is reluctant to publish) - Ras Hanzir in Marsa (down the Marsovin hill, close to Kordin). The site is dilapidated, to use an understatement, heavily polluted and industrialised and subject to squatting. It is already being put to some use by Enemalta, while the risks associated with eventual fires, explosions, etc are contained due to a ready supply of water.

Has-Saptan's nearness to the airport and the fact that some trees will be retained on site should certainly preclude shortlisting it, for safety concerns. In view of the availability of land at Ras Hanzir and the relative absence of land-use conflicts, the largest state-of-the-art fuel tanks can be built.

On another front, one can muse - which came first at Birzebuga, the tanks or the residences around them (since, after all, the need to upgrade such tanks is the bone of contention)? Since the fuel depot dates back to 1919, it is probable that the residents settled in with the tanks already on site - due to such planning faux pax committed in the past, over 200 trees could face the axe.

Another alternative could be the government's purchasing of the adjacent residences to have more leeway to upgrade the fuel tanks which could then be maintained on site. Doesn't all this bear some hallmarks of rationale to you? So why didn't our authorities realise this when they tackled the tank relocation issue? Why did they consistently point their finger at Has-Saptan without considering the other alternatives?

Tigné Point excavations

Following the picture of St Thomas Bay carried in "The Green Whistle-blower" of May 22, and the alleged dumping of Tigné Point excavation waste on site, James Vassallo, sales and marketing officer of the MIDI Consortium, has written to assure readers that all excavation debris from the project is disposed of by barge, in accordance with the development permits, at the MEPA-designated location for construction waste 8 km north of Grand Harbour, the island's earmarked site for such dumping.

Selling your freedom of speech

CETFREE, the Cetacean Freedom Alliance comprised of several local NGOs supported by international ones, in a press release issued on May 25, calls upon the public to refrain from supporting animal shows conducted in dolphinariums; it highlighted the fact the some of the children actually invited to attend the show refused to do so. This press release has not been published by most local newspapers.

Despite the glamorous candy-floss image being projected of the dolphinarium on local newspapers, airport billboards, etc, with local television stalwarts jumping on the bandwagon in promoting the venue, the stark reality is another one... people are actually cashing in on shows featuring animals in captivity.

In addition, despite past assurances that the dolphins on show were bred in captivity, no one can definitely dispel doubts that they were actually captured from the wild - in fact, evidence shows that the six dolphins brought over two years ago were caught in the wild in Cuba, thus blighting wild dolphin stocks.

Some months back, a spokeswoman for CETFREE, after actually being invited on a local TV programme to elaborate on dolphin-related local issues, was barred at the last moment by the programme's presenter from even mentioning the words 'dolphin' or 'dolphinarium', even though the same presenter regularly carried features on animal awareness.

Malta still deserves the wooden spoon

In a recent EuroStat news release item (Brussels, May 30), Malta was duly given the umpteenth green wooden spoon, this time for its current use of renewable energy sources. In fact, of the EU's 25 countries, Malta is the only one with zero percentage of its local energy coming from renewable energy sources, with the EU average being 6%. While Latvia leads the list with a staggering 33% of its energy coming from renewables, three countries (the UK, Belgium and Luxembourg) are just above Malta at 1%.

Rather than singing our Eurovision (where we finished second) praises, our top television gurus should feature such sobering statistics as well.

One daunting deadline - 2014 - is approaching fast. By then a tenth of our energy should derive from renewables. Is a Maltese derogation on the cards?

Silver linings

The Times' bold stance - The Times recently decided to draw a line in the sand and not restrict itself to just condemning littering and bird shooting instances in its editorials but also reproach the current tree-felling in Kalkara. One sentence in a particular editorial caught my attention: 'The construction industry continues to operate for the most part as though it was owed a living' - what about this for hitting the nail on its head in what has become a perennial construction site?

Mitigating light pollution - In a rare instance of green consciousness, the Ministry for Urban Development and Roads as well as the Malta Transport Authority (ADT) should be lauded for installing full cut-off lighting along the new road leading from Zebbug to Rabat to mitigate light pollution, bolster energy efficiency and avoiding a hazard to motorists. This comes hot on the heels on the despicable vandalistic act of uprooting hundreds of recently-planted trees along Triq Buqana, between Mtarfa and Mosta.

Correspondence - Newspaper correspondents out there are certainly developing a knack for venting their anger against misconceived projects. A case in point is the proposed promenade construction at Wied Babu in Zurrieq, rightly objected to in a letter by Mr William Azzopardi from Zabbar, who is "most opposed to pink cement, lamp posts and rusting benches devastating the area's simplicity" - hats off to all those who think out of the box, like Mr Azzopardi.

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