

Three cheers for clientelism



Since only pre-1967 boathouses have been fully legalised, the owners of those built pre-1992 have political clientelism to thank for their impunity. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

The Malta Environment and Planning Authority's decision on Enemalta's application to build a substation at L-Ahrax tal-Mellieħa last week was a tonic for all those who are appalled by the sheer gall of the squatters hiding behind the façade of 'Armier Developments Ltd'.

However, the hearing preceding the decision revealed some disturbing mindsets.

For instance, Tarcisio Barbara, the de facto mouthpiece for the boathouse lobby, made some damaging remarks during and after the hearing that need revisiting. Chief among these is his bold stance in the aftermath of the hearing that, even though the lobby was disappointed with Mepa's quashing of the substation application, the decision did not affect the integrity of 'their' boathouses since these were here to stay.

With a general election on the radar, the PN and PL should declare their stand on these boathouses

- Alan Deidun

One has to thank political clientelism in this country for this perverse situation – a squatters' lobby boldly asserting its claim for public land in front of Mepa. The fact that such a lobby is so assured of impunity that it can make such statements is the worst kind of indictment of our political class.

Mr Barbara further defies credulity with his claim that he did not expect environmental groups to come out so strongly against the substation application. His further claim that the lobby he represents will hold Mepa and others responsible for any accidents on site due to low voltage also conveniently ignores the rampant and illegal unmetered distribution of electricity by the 110 boathouses to other boathouses that do not have a supply.

Rather than thanking their lucky stars (or some benevolent minister from the 1980s) for their privilege – namely that these 110 boathouses are practically the largest group of boathouses having access to electricity (those in Gnejna, Dwejra and other locations don't) – they have the cheek to ask for more.

Even Enemalta's defence of the indefensible defies credulity. For instance, during the hearing, Enemalta's architect said there was a dire need for a substation as the closest one was over five times the average distance between substations.

Since we are speaking of Malta's backwater here – L-Ahrax tal-Mellieħa – which should stand for remoteness and wilderness, it is perfectly understandable that hallmarks of civilisation are less profuse here, in the same way that you don't expect to find an electrical substation in a nature reserve, for example.

The same architect was also evasive when repeatedly challenged by Sandra Magro from the Mepa board to identify the businesses and developments he had alluded to as being in dire need of such an electrical supply.

What is most disturbing, however, is the presence at the hearing of boathouse owners, with reports saying that around 50 of them were present on the day.

Since only the pre-1967 boathouses have been fully legalised, with the preservation of the pre-1992 ones being solely the subject of political pledges, it is probable that some, if not all of the boathouse owners present have absolutely no legal claim to the public land they have usurped, and thus should never have been admitted to the hearing in the first place.

By letting such people attend the hearing, one is automatically bestowing on them a certain legitimacy they are very quick to assume.

One may counter this argument by saying that even environmental NGOs have no legal claim to the land, but one must acknowledge that these NGOs, which are now a legal entity in their own right, have a vested interest in such cases.

With a general election seemingly on the radar, the Nationalist Party and Labour Party should take up Alternattiva Demokratika's challenge and openly declare their stand on these boathouses if they want to gain credibility with the local environmental lobby, which has advanced into something more than a simple lobby.

This would also help counter the recent trend of backroom agreements reached by both political parties with the illegitimate boathouse lobby and reverse the sins committed in the early 1980s when some of the boathouses were furnished with electricity and water supply.

Long- and short-sighted arguments

When ecologist Garrett Hardin first published his 'Tragedy of the Commons' theory in 1968, most probably he did not anticipate how relevant his theory would still be decades later.

In a nutshell, the theory denounces the public exploitation of a finite resource in which the lack of regulation promotes the interests of those unsustainably exploiting the resource.

The current impasse between the fishing community and the government is a case in point.

While I fully sympathise with the grim social reality being faced by the fishermen who are dwindling presumably as a result of lower profitability, one cannot have a situation whereby some of the proposed new fishing regulations are criticised on frivolous grounds.

For instance, during a recent edition of the TV discussion programme Affari Tagħna, hosted by John Bundy, that focused on the issue, a particular comment went beyond the pale in my opinion.

A woman, presumably a fisherman's wife or a fish vendor, asked what was wrong with selling swordfish weighing less than 10kg, justifying her stance purely on economic grounds, namely that such small swordfish are more affordable.

If such young swordfish continue to be caught, there will not be any swordfish left for the woman – or her children to that matter – to sell in future.

So rather than being viewed as an imposition, this regulation should be viewed as a godsend by the fishing community as it protects their long-term livelihood, as opposed to short-term profit.

Long-term scientific arguments should prevail, not short-term economic ones.

The fishing community should present scientific arguments, if there are any, to counter the proposed regulations, rather than allowing melodramatic individuals to steal the limelight, as this reflects badly on the whole fishing community.

While it is perfectly legitimate to ask for greater enforcement against foreign fishermen who enter Malta's fishing grounds with illegal drift nets, one would have expected the local fishing community to come out strongly against other practices detrimental to their industry, such as the continuing deployment of trammel nets (parit) in bays and close to coastal areas.

Austerity hits the environment too

The current economic meltdown and its implications are being extensively discussed and communicated in the media. Europe is well and truly in the eye of the storm, with The Economist anticipating that the Old Continent will be the only region to experience an economic contraction, with average GDP shrinking by 0.2%.

However, few have delved into the effects this recession is having on the financing of environmental projects in general.

In a recent spate of correspondence sent to International Monetary Fund managing director Christine Lagarde and European Commission president José Manuel Barroso, the World Wildlife Fund warned of severe environmental setbacks resulting from the economic adjustment plans aimed at helping to pull Greece out of economic crisis.

In particular, the correspondence highlighted the environmental issues lurking behind the headlines of the impending Greek economic and social crisis.

The austerity and bailout measures effectively mean the scrapping of Greece's 'green fund' and its absorption into the main state budget, the axing of environmental permit regulations, the emphasis on large investments with dubious environmental scrutiny, legalisation of illegal developments in protected areas (sounds familiar?), hasty and uncontrolled sale of public land, downsizing of environmental staff in public authorities, dismantling of environmental governance institutions and a questionable support of dirty energy sources such as coal.

When announcing a recent downsizing of our national expenditure, the Prime Minister pledged that these cuts would not affect education and social services. Such a laudable ring fence should also be erected around expenditure related to the environment.

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