

Wanted – a grand coalition to fight for the environment - Alan Deidun



The Prime Minister is encouraged to call for the re-classification of this large parcel of land in Attard which made it to the development zone courtesy of decisions made in 2006, since, in his own words, "some areas are simply too beautiful to be open for construction".

Save for a dissenting minority who seem bent on perpetually mistaking the wood for the trees, the vast majority embrace the view that the situation in environmental spheres is indeed verging on the desperate.

It is clear to see, from a proliferation of sprawling fuel stations within Outside Development Zone areas to an unremitting and unabashed approval of other small-scale ODZ development ranging from 'tool sheds' to fully-fledged dwellings; from applications for fast-food parlours in ODZ land to a relentless expansion of the road network (to the detriment of mature roadside trees); from the expansion of industrial estates in Bulebel and in Xewkija to the desecration of sites of ecological importance (Tal-Wej in Mosta, for instance) and even to grand plans for land reclamation at sea.

To add insult to injury, we are still reeling from the impacts of the 'scheme rationalisation' exercise of 2006, where large tracts of previously ODZ land are being ushered into the development zone, with Attard being the latest to face such a gauntlet, as the above photo amply shows.

Invariably, the question arises: where is the culprit in all this? Flawed ad hoc policies that pander to very specific interest groups while ignoring the interests of the vast majority... these are to blame.

Desperate times call for desperate measures and this is why I strongly believe that a grand environmental coalition is urgently needed to counter the unrestrained encroachment onto our open spaces.

Take 'grand' to be a synonym for 'umbrella', by inference to include all those groups that have an interest in maintaining our open spaces just as that. These would range from the obvious choices (environmental NGOs, local councils, at least in many cases, and the Environment and Resources Authority) to the less obvious (hunters, trappers, fireworks enthusiasts).

As far as possible the coalition should be shorn of partisan politics (although its complete exclusion in an island addicted to factionalism is a delusion). Active politicians would not be able to be part of the coalition.

The inclusion of groups traditionally perceived as diametrically opposed to one another (such as environmental NGOs and hunters) will definitely cause a stir and is bound to be met with resistance. Trapping and the

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development of fireworks factories, especially recent extensions courtesy of yet another flawed ad hoc policy, are not exactly conducive to the

encroachment onto our open spaces

safeguarding of open spaces and to retaining their natural value. But the magnitude of the current threat to this country's open spaces is such that one must look at the bigger picture and strive to collaborate, along common lines of interest, with those one perceives to be on the other side of the fence.

Hunters, trappers and fireworks enthusiasts are a highly cohesive and organised regiment... the lack of such harmony has been one of the main chinks in the environmental lobby's armour, with politicians capitalising on the many divergent hues within the latter lobby.

The grand coalition would become a force to be reckoned with, an entity that every Tom, Dick and Harry can look up to, only if it reacts promptly to emerging planning applications and policies, if it makes representations during public hearings and Environment Impact Assessment consultations, if it steers clear of any petty partisan considerations, if it formulates alternative proposals and policies, and if it does not shy away from publicly venting the prevailing frustration at the ways things are going.

A feisty personality needs to lead this coalition, an individual whose consistent track record speaks for itself and who does not shy away from confronting the political establishment, even through non-conventional measures, with the mantle alternating temporally between different entities within the coalition.

Who will assume the onerous responsibility of moulding together what looks like a highly disparate group but which cherishes the value of open space? A rarefied list of names, which does not include yours truly, springs to mind.

It's high time to concede that green parties, environmental NGOs and even the ERA cannot counter the development lobby in isolation.

McDonald's cheating Maltese farmers...twice over!

Within the space of a few months, Premier Restaurants, which is actually a misnomer given that the company operates the McDonald's fast food outlets in Malta and in a slew of other EU countries, has applied to encroach on two ODZ parcels of land: one next to the Gudja Airport so as to relocate its existing drive-through facility (a proposal deemed 'unacceptable' by the ERA), and one at Żabbar for the development of yet another drive-through facility, complete with parking spaces and a terrace for patrons.

Aerial photos indicate that the latter site is characterised by a clutch of farm buildings and substantial tree cover and even a greenhouse at the back of the site.

By following the footsteps of Lidl, which developed at least three of its local supermarkets on ODZ land (Luqa, Safi, Xewkija), McDonald's is cheating Maltese farmers at least twice, given that presumably most, if not all, of the raw materials used in their outlets in Malta are sourced in Sicily, rather than locally.

Turning the clock back at Tal-Wej

It's a parrot's secret that no site is too sacred in the Maltese islands to ward off development, and the shenanigans we are witnessing at Tal-Wej in Mosta are ample proof of this.

For instance, through planning application PA 09387/17, the de-scheduling of the site is being solicited so as to conduct an archaeological assessment of the area. You might be happy that there is nothing wrong with this, until you get to know that the site has presumably already been advertised commercially.

What further raises eyebrows is the fact that the ecological survey of the site commissioned by the applicant was conducted during the dry season (i.e. June), which is very convenient given that a substantial number of local plant species (including orchids, for which the site is famous) have already partially or completely shrivelled up so as to tide over the dry season, besides the fact that the same report apparently even missed a couple of elephants in the room – i.e. carob and almond trees present on site.



This frog, a highly endangered local species, still calls Tal-Wej home. Photo: Guido Bonnett

These odious tactics are occasionally resorted to in EIA reports as well. Will the Planning Authority allow the applicant to turn back the clock by approving the de-scheduling of the site and the piecemeal fragmentation of this ecologically sensitive site on the margins of Mosta, thus setting yet another dangerous precedent?

For those of you who have no inkling where Tal-Wej is and why its preservation for posterity should get us ticking, just enjoy Guido Bonnett's stunning accompanying photo of a frog, which illustrates one of the highly endangered local species that still call Tal-Wej home.