

The party culture



Still pending at MEPA for a reply - a garigue site at Mgarr, abused as a dumping site in open daylight

As usual, at the start of the summer season, a party was organised in the once tranquil Paradise Bay at the far end of the island. Replying to a recent Parliamentary Question by Labour MP Adrian Vassallo, Justice and Home Affairs Minister Tonio Borg avoided the main spearthrust of the question - namely, that the cliffs surrounding the beach were known to host protected birds like the Maltese rock thrush (merill) - and instead commented laconically on the issuing of the police permit to control drug and alcohol consumption.

Government should seriously consider the ecological damage caused by thousands of revellers spilling on the boulders, cliffs and other sensitive habitats surrounding the beach. Despite eloquent assurances that the site is cleaned after the activity, the wanton damage wrought to the ecosystem through extensive trampling - not to mention the thousands of cigarette butts dispersed into the site's every nook and cranny - is enormous.

With only a handful of beaches at the public's disposal, the cordoning off of yet another beach for a private function is unpardonable, especially in the light of the recently announced 'beach concessions' system and the closing off of beaches like Golden Bay and Blue Lagoon for filming.

To rub further salt into the wound, what was once an almost inconspicuous retail outlet at Paradise Bay, prudently tucked away so as not to hamper the visual enjoyment of the site, has mushroomed into a large-scale development abutting literally on the beach. A local ICOD study has indicated that Paradise Bay is a heavily eroding beach (in fact the beach has been reduced to a narrow strip) - constructions on the beach itself could well be responsible for this.

In this connection, Mr Oliver Cardona from Birkirkara, should be lauded for his letter "Noise pollution" (The Times, June 9) complaining about the cacophony reverberating around Buskett from nocturnal parties held at Buskett Roadhouse. Despite timid attempts by some government quarters to ban such parties, it seems that the gravy train leaching from such 'events' is too mouth-watering to enjoy Buskett for what it really is - a nature haven.

It is rumoured that yet another massive party is in the pipeline - this time at Anchor Bay - while unofficial parties proceed unhindered in other picturesque areas such as the Latnija dough line near Paradise Bay.

Money certainly talks in this country and, despite the chagrin of residents of Madliena and Bahar ic-Caghaq and confusion reigning over whether promoters did indeed have the necessary 'change of use' permits, the 'Zinc' facilities party was allowed to proceed last Sunday after being barred on Saturday. It's getting more of a gruelling feat to find some peace and quiet away from the hullabaloo in this country in order to meditate - as testified by the objection filed in also by the Franciscans who reside close by.

With the top brass in this country rightly hectoring about hollowed-out values of our youngsters, they should put their money where their mouth is and clamp down on the ever mushrooming list of party 'events', synonymous with binge drinking and licentious behaviour of all sorts.

Yet another rather harmful effect of this new phenomenon is caused by the tomes of promotional flyers, booklets and similar ephemera which end up dispersing into the environment since they are frequently discarded from car wipers. Anyone issuing permits for such activities should also put their foot down when it comes to such paper waste.

Landscape value my foot!

Enemalta is currently in the dock for three main reasons:

1. The installation of obtrusive electricity posts on the Qlejgha ridge at Bahrija, just on the cliff edge. 'Dialogue' and 'consensus' are frequently abused words by politicians - however, despite such a verbal smokescreen, authorities still continue to ride roughshod over those concerned. Nature Trust (Malta) and the Light Awareness Pollution Group (LPAG) sent a letter to Enemalta's chairman on June 15, which has never been acknowledged, regarding works

starting on the following Saturday. Incidentally, this same site is partly featured as an MTA Ecotourist Walk!

2. The proposed olive tree-cutting spree at Has-Saptan (rather than homing in on the Ras Hanzir Marsa site, which has all the suitable facilities);

3. The failure to give sufficient financial incentives to those avant-garde individuals who purchase solar PV panels and plug in their surfeit of electricity back into the grid.

The cherry on the cake would be for Enemalta to be actually seconded for MEPA's recently announced Green Awards.

Mature dialogues with PM?

I was privileged to attend the latest in the series of public dialogues organised by the Prime Minister's Office in Castille. My sense of doom on the eve of the meeting was justified, since the hall was bristling with individuals with no notion of what 'environment' really meant.

Of the 42 individuals who intervened at the 'environment' dialogue, only eight did not give a blinkered recount of their personal problems (two of those who spoke even had the temerity to publicly mention their own planning case) - the majority of the Maltese appear to be still nostalgic about the days of 'clientelism' when ministerial fiat was the order of the day. Our authorities are certainly not helping, continuously floating palm-punctuated views of revamped roundabouts and other trivialities, while entire olive groves (Has-Saptan) are facing the axe.

The moderator of the meeting, Anna Bonanno, while insisting that interventions were not to be longer than two minutes when it came to stinging comments, such as the ones I made, was much more complacent when it came to individuals blowing the government's trumpets.

I here wish to reply to Dr Gonzi in the light of statements about Nature Trust and the green movement in general following the meeting. NTM is not against 'progress' (even though it has reservations as to its proper definition by authorities) as insinuated by the government - the NGO stresses the importance of ecological monitoring for projects in sensitive areas and that permits must be issued before any works are started to avoid the setting of any precedents by the Works Division which would then be promptly mirrored by private contractors.

In addition, Government should invest in giving its road workers an inkling of ecological knowledge since most of them cannot distinguish an oak tree from a weed. Dr Gonzi states that his government could not wait for the necessary permits to be issued due to the onset of the rainy season to avoid crippling floods and any loss of human life. Fair enough, so why did the Works Division wait for September to start the works at Salina? Why didn't it apply for a permit in April of that year so that works could start at the beginning of summer? The panic mode which grips many government departments is frequently symptomatic of flawed planning.

After I complained that we are building over our last remaining green spaces, Dr Gonzi said that the construction momentum should be maintained so that the price of property for fledgling couples does not spiral further - I wished I could rebut that there are currently over 25,000 vacant properties and the Structure Plan review states that we are building in far excess of our needs (we currently need about 1,700 new houses annually, while over 3,000 are being constructed). Will we scrap our published reports just to accommodate the construction industry?

Understandably, I felt a sense of resignation as I left the meeting, knowing all too well that politicians are cut from the same cloth... they will never mean business when it comes to the environment, despite claiming that the environment is one of our priorities!

What really rankles with many people who have the environment at heart is that the PM chairs the National Sustainability Commission and is then lobbying so vociferously in favour of golf courses.

Despite my many gripes, I am still grateful to Dr Gonzi for being given the opportunity to air my views.

Ta' Cenc - up for grabs

The two sides have long been rattling their sabres. On the one hand, Dr Gonzi claims that our country needs two golf courses to save the ailing tourism sector, Dr Alfred Sant invoking such golf courses in a more pressing tone, Victor J. Borg, a hotelier who owns the full 153 hectares and who publicises the fact that studies for the heritage park have cost him close to a quarter of a million liri (analogy with Verdala golf course) and who aims to construct 50 villas overlooking picturesque Mgarr ix-Xini, over 30 bungalows, hotel extensions, interpretation centre, pizzeria, even a shopping centre (which is essential in a heritage park!) and several other amenities on site, Gozitans clamouring for more tourist development

On the other, TOU 10 in the Structure Plan, which advises that a nature park at Ta' Cenc should take up most of the area and NGOs concerned about the scale of development on site and with meager firepower.

The public is free to rummage at MEPA through the Ta' Cenc proposals. However, proposals for the site are continuously changing coats... currently, 'Version 12' seems to be the latest, even though this might be already outdated! One hopes that the EIA teams are presented with

the final, 'surefire 'version' for the proposed development to be able to draw up their report in a level-headed way.

Before the development mechanism is set in motion, some points are worth highlighting: no non-indigenous plants should be used on site; access to cliff edge for bird-watching activities should be ensured at all times and not hindered through building of any walls, etc, no offensive lightning systems, no extraction on site of groundwater, no garigue 'reclamation' schemes, no villa and bungalow construction and, most of all, no 'private beaches' at il-Kantra ta' Mgar ix-Xini to savour the "red mullet and prawns in a Greek-like hut" - our small islands can't afford such plush stunts which despise so blatantly the public's right to enjoy the coast at no extra charge.

Silver linings

MEPA official takes a stand - Hats off to Joseph Falzon, MEPA's own audit officer, who wrote to MaltaToday last Sunday that "the Code of Ethics that MEPA officials are expected to follow is too general and has various lacunae for it to be applicable to the authority's employees' - this must certainly cause a stir among proponents of such a code, such as David Pace, president of the Chamber of Architects, since it is coming straight from the horse's mouth (i.e. an architect himself). Mr Falzon has himself drawn up a revamped code of ethics which is currently being scrutinised prior to eventual publication (hopefully) by Minister George Pullicino in an in-house consultation exercise.

Rent reform - Our two major political parties are ossified due to their overarching need for votes - hence, the initiative is being taken up by the AD "minnows", who have embarked on the collection of the necessary 30,000 signatures to call a referendum on the long overdue overhaul of our rent laws. If by some fluke, landowners are finally one day coaxed into renting out and the 25,000-odd vacant properties in this country start to be occupied, positive environmental effects might result.

HSBC - this multi-national bank has added yet another notch to its long tally of green successes by announcing on May 25 that it was launching a new guideline governing its project finance activities in the freshwater infrastructure arena. Coming down to brass tacks, HSBC commits itself not to be financially involved with projects that do not conform with the WCD Framework (such as certain dams) or that critically endanger or alter sensitive habitats such as World Heritage Sites and wetlands protected by the Ramsar Convention.

Xerox - Tthis printing mogul, through its authorised agent Image Solutions Ltd, recently announced that it was launching the Green World Returns Programme. The scheme will cover all Xerox print and copy cartridges, toner containers and waste toner purchased from Image Systems Ltd. The returned product is cleaned, inspected, and then remanufactured or recycled.

For some of the most popular product families, Xerox has in place a closed loop recycling process. The process enables scrap plastic from damaged cartridges to be reground, requalified, and moulded into the same parts. These parts - made of 100 per cent recycled plastic - are used in manufacturing new cartridges.

For the summer months this column will be appearing monthly, instead of fortnightly.

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