

Shooting from the hip



Mġiebah - After the authorities took the laudable decision not to clear the seagrass debris this summer from the beach at Mġiebah, the clay slopes over the same beach should be closed to vehicular access and parking as the same slopes are being inexorably eroded away, as testified by the deep gulleys forming after heavy rainfall. What's wrong with walking the short distance down to the beach?

Newspapers are currently awash with missives from soothsayers, all outlining their vision for the restructuring of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority.

Headlines like: 'How to save Mepa' or 'AN's plans for Mepa' often incorporate a list of muddled proposals, which expose a lack of informed opinion or smack of political expediency.

In this sense, the opinions being aired on radio and television programmes are even more disconcerting. Some of the more sobering include the ones aired by Anġlu Xuereb, namely to delegate to parliament responsibility for deliberating on Outside Development Zone applications.

Though aired out of desire for greater transparency, this would backfire since it would open the door to lobbying.

Some lessons seem to have been learned, however, with the two main political parties both generally avoiding the quagmire of Mepa reform, shying away from preposterous claims made in the past to water down the authority to make way for greater ministerial power. Mr Xuereb denies the over-development of the islands seemingly forgetting his construction background.

While endorsing the sacrosanct right of every individual and entity to vent their opinions, some clarifications are necessary. NGOs, through a series of protracted meetings with Mepa and the Environment Ministry, have jointly drawn up a list of proposed amendments to the Development Protection Act, some of which have been taken on board by the authorities. In fact, six changes are being proposed by authorities.

These are: 1) the suspension of development pending appeal by a third party; 2) extensions in the timeframe and scope allowed to the public for representations; 3) any changes being proposed by Mepa to existing local plans or other subsidiary plans should be submitted for public consultation; 4) of the eight independent members on the Mepa Board, one must be conversant with a cultural heritage; 5) studies must also be exposed to public scrutiny; and 6) a broadening of the publicising of applications.

Other constructive proposals I would have loved to see are the need to publish the lobbyists' diary/archive (a proposal which surprisingly enough was fielded by the General Workers' Union)

and the need to revamp the code of ethics governing Mepa employees, including those sitting on decision-taking boards.

In addition, NGOs, including Nature Trust, have each drawn up their respective memorandum to all political parties, embodying their recommendations for the environmental sphere. It would indeed be constructive if media exponents were to consult existing documents prior to commenting on the subject, for the sake of coherence and to avoid regurgitating the same proposals over and over again. Only then can some headway be made.

Byzantine behaviour

Robert Musumeci's opinion piece 'The case of Catherine Galea,' (The Sunday Times), makes for some absorbing reading. The main thrust of his article is not that clear, varying between the defence of fellow architects and the need to take urgent remedial action as soon as it becomes clear that construction is in a precarious state.

The latter point is sacrosanct and certainly not up for discussion, though architects frequently use the 'structure in ruins' or 'structure in a dangerous state' as a trump card when applying for permits on their client's behalf. More often than not, construction in ODZ areas is left in a derelict state for years (with none of the proverbial urgency being shown) on end so as to warrant their onerous rehabilitation (complete with ancillary pools and extensions) at a future date.

In view of Mr Musumeci's expansive experience in planning applications, which would be useful if relayed to readers, it would indeed be enlightening to have his opinion on ODZ sanctionings - does he agree with the frequency with which they are being meted out?

Does he think that the claim that some architects are well known for obtaining sanctioning of development infringements or for getting approval for ODZ applications is founded or not? Does he think that it is morally acceptable for an architect to sit on a decision board while representing a client on an application being decided upon by the same board, despite not visibly taking part in the decision itself? Does he subscribe to the Audit Officer's claim that Mepa's code of ethics is "too general" and has "various lacunae" for it to be explicitly applicable to the authority's employees? Would he subscribe to a carpet ban on ODZ applications, with exceptions accorded only for farming or recreational purposes? Does he agree that some areas, most notably Tal-Providenza in Siġġiewi, have become synonymous with ODZ sanctioning? Does he agree that often the case officer's DPAR report recommendations are simply brushed aside at decision time?

The title of Anne Zammit's article of January 20 in The Sunday Times (Cathy, Polly, Charlie and Bobby) is symptomatic of the subjugation to which the investigative arm of local environmentalism is subjected to - making names in articles, even on a legitimate basis, might expose one to a string of acrimonious law suits which might even result in hefty fines being paid as a result of the calibre of legal representation that the pro-development side can afford.

Election mood

In view of the feverish pace at which development ensues unabated in these islands, you may be forgiven for dismissing environmental columns as pointless. Think again. The environment is high up on the political agenda; just look at the election billboards recently erected by the PN, depicting Lawrence Gonzi conversing with members of the public against a natural, undeveloped backdrop, with not even a hint of a covertly-constructed tool room/shed. Can our politicians truly value such sights?

Silver linings

This column has pledged to feature silver linings only when they truly merit it.

The rehabilitation of Maghtab, where almost one-sixth of the underlying gas wells have been dug and 2,000 trees have been planted to compensate for the former eyesore, falls into that category.

Will the same commitment to such rehabilitation be expressed by the next political administration, especially once election fever has subsided?