

Simon's Hobson's choice



Simon Busuttil (right) could have argued that, 10 years down the line, there have been innumerable incidences where, besides turtle dove and quail, many more species have been systematically targeted by hunters in spring, blatantly flouting the derogation conditions, and that self-regulation by hunters, coupled with watered-down enforcement, has simply failed. Photos: Mark Zammit Cordina

Prior to pronouncing himself on the spring hunting referendum, Simon Busuttil must have been in an unenviable position.

On one hand, trying to the endear the Nationalist Party to (or at least, not further alienate it from) environmental NGOs, following years of sparring between the two sides regarding dubious decisions taken by previous administrations, and handling the albatross around his neck – his active involvement in obtaining from the EU a derogation for Maltese hunters to be able to practise their 'pastime' even during the spring season. By declaring his intention to vote in favour of retaining spring hunting, Joseph Muscat effectively served Busuttil with a Hobson's choice.



Busuttil chose to opt for damage limitation and to steer clear of the 'inconsistency' minefield, as declaring a different position would have handed brownie points to detractors pointing to his inconsistent stance. While I understand that politics is all about choosing your battles and that constant fire-fighting comes in the way of upholding your principles, I feel that Busuttil should have been bolder. U-turns are generally perceived to be anathema to good governance, but reasoned ones are certainly not.

Adaptive management – a concept that has nowadays become a cornerstone of management protocols in many disciplines ranging from the environment to the financial sector and marketing – dictates periodically going back to the drawing board and revisiting your plans after the emergence of new evidence suggesting that your previous strategy is not working. Evidence-based policymaking has almost become a mantra nowadays, rather than cast-in-stone positions.

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have argued that, against such a background, he is compelled to rethink his position as it is increasingly self-evident that hunters are not complying with conditions stipulated in the EU derogation and that he is taking such a position responsibly to put a stop to the widespread pillage of biodiversity caused by the abuse of the derogation.

He would have opened himself to broadsides from various quarters in the short term, but things would have panned out in a far more rosier way in the long term. One hopes that his position is not yet another signal that the PN might have given up trying to win over and overcome the cynicism of the environmental lobby.

The upshot from all this is that people in politics simply don't have the luxury to take positions they are naturally inclined towards since they are perennially out to garner the numbers necessary to retain their position. Only time will tell if Busuttil's indirect choice of not pitching the referendum outcome along the political divide will pay off or not.

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For sure, if the referendum was held this May, rather in April prior to the annual two-week spring hunting season, the outcome would have been a foregone conclusion, with the widespread poaching of protected species and other infringements by the community, which invariably happens each spring, tipping the scales in favour of the No camp.

The question that inevitably beckons is the following: which Labour or Nationalist MP (aside from Mariene Farrugia, whose laudable stance is tempered by her professed intention not to contest future elections) will have the fibre to publicly declare his or her opposition to spring hunting? This would entail going against the flow and winning permanent opprobrium from the hunting fraternity, but it would certainly win the respect of the public.

The garbled and mind-boggling Toni Abela approach, who is personally against spring hunting but is still towing the unofficial party line as a deputy leader and voting yes, is certainly not one to follow.

Tunnara Museum is in dire straits

The most viable testimony to the ancient tradition of the tuna fishing (tunnara) is the existence of the Tunnara Museum on one of the flanks of Mellieha Bay. The museum is housed in the Westerne Battery, a beachside defensive outpost originally constructed by Grand Master Ramon Perellos in 1716 and which was the first to be overrun by the marauding French during their invasion of the islands in 1798.

A result of successive events, the battery is inextricably linked with the tunnara industry. In fact, on June 1, 1748, Grand Master Manuel Pinto de Fonseca visited the battery and officially opened the tunnara season in Mellieha Bay. The following day, the first tuna fish was caught through this technique and it was presented to the Grand Master as a gift. This sealed the building's fate for centuries to come, and although during World War II the British added a beach post and a searchlight to the building, its raison d'être was always been intrinsically linked with the tunnara and the storing of caught tuna.



Tunnara Museum at Tunnara (The Tunnara Battery) Mellieha Bay's Defensive Outpost - original building owned by Grand Master Ramon Perellos in 1716.

The Tunnara Museum in Mellieha is a gem, unique in the Maltese Islands. For this reason, one cannot understand why the museum rarely features in tourist brochures, is rarely, if ever, included in touristic promotional activities and currently largely lies off the touristic beaten track, overshadowed by the ravenous building development around it.

The profile and stature of this attraction should be raised. It is inconceivable that, while Sicilian islands like Favignana are synonymous with the tunnara, we choose almost to discard this heritage. The volunteers who keep the place alive, especially Tony Valletta, should be lauded for their work and, although Mellieha local council subsidises the museum's upkeep, the

authorities, private sector or NGOs should provide more tangible encouragement. Entrance to the museum is against a humble donation.

The battery's facade is showing the hallmarks of prolonged exposure to the elements and is in urgent need of restoration. Who will invest to save the Tunnara Museum housed in the Westreme Battery from its current plight and ensure that this memory of a bygone era and practice of our Mediterranean fishing legacy is preserved for posterity?

Breakthrough in fight against pollution

Some of the most insidious chemical pollutants in the environment are persistent halogen-containing organic compounds, such as the dreaded polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

Although PCB production has been phased out globally since 2001, it is estimated that, in view of their recalcitrant nature (they resist chemical attack from acids and bases, and from heat), an estimated 10 per cent of the two million tons of PCBs produced since 1929 remain in the environment. Incineration of domestic (such as some refrigerators) and industrial products (such as fire retardants and transformers) containing PCBs leads to highly toxic by products, such as dioxins, being released.

The 15-year EU-funded project research project Dehalores by the team of scientists led by David Lye from Manchester University, has finally managed to provide a feasible bio-remediation (addressing pollution through a living organism) solution to PCB contamination.

The project identified strains of bacteria which, in the presence of vitamin B12, are able to detoxify PCBs by extracting halogen atoms from them and incorporating them in their proteins. The team was even able to prove this by generating 3D images, through a technique known as X-ray crystallography, of the proteins produced by bacteria.

For details on this cutting-edge research visit the website below.

http://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/87942_en.html



The Mepa board unanimously rejected planning application PA 1822/14, proposing the construction of a dwelling on Marsalforn Road, Xaghra, acknowledging the site's high scenic value.

The odd silver lining

Despite the relentless mill of sobering environmental news, the odd positive news item somewhat helps to uplift one's spirit. This is the case with planning application PA 1822/14, proposing the construction of a dwelling on Marsalforn Road, Xaghra, which has been extensively featured by this column in previous weeks.

Despite a plethora of legitimate reasons why the proposed development should be rejected outright, which were all diligently listed by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority case officer (such as high scenic value, site lies in a scheduled valley and aquifer protection zone), opponents of this development were apprehensive about the eventual outcome.

Following a recent site visit by the Mepa board, the proposal was unanimously rejected by its members, who acknowledged the site's high scenic value.

The perseverance of some applicants is legendary and the site has already been in developers' sights in the past.

One hopes that Mepa's latest decision is the ultimate dampener on further development aspirations for the site.

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