

Michael Falzon's Christmas gift



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On the eve of Christmas, Parliamentary Secretary for Planning and Government Land Michael Falzon dropped a bombshell with his development boundary 'tweaking' comment, which gives the developers' lobby cause to rejoice but rubs salt in environmentalists' wounds.

Thirty per cent of the Maltese islands is already built-up area. This is six times the average for any EU country. But such a damning statistic is lost on politicians like Falzon, whose track record includes staunchly defending planning policies that pave the way for more fireworks factories in Outside Development Zones (ODZ) areas.

These politicians have short memories too. As Petra Caruana Dingli aptly pointed out in her blog about the 'tweaking' issue, on the eve of the last election and following a meeting with environmentalists and developers in January 2013, then Opposition leader Joseph Muscat had solemnly pledged not to extend ODZ boundaries.

Even exponents of the Malta Developers Association (MDA) have, on more than one occasion this year, said that ODZ areas should not be encroached upon. So this is the perfect opportunity for the MDA, which its president Sandro Chetcuti claims "loves the environment more than environmentalists do", to voice its opposition to Falzon's 'tweaking' proposals.

If he fails to do so, this would mean that either: (1) the MDA's 'love' for the environment, contrary to what Chetcuti claims, is only skin-deep and is restricted to media stunts and to 'loving' the environment as long as it is from a terrace or from a penthouse, or (2) they fully support the 'tweaking' proposals as some of their members will probably benefit from them.

Perhaps Falzon should take a leaf out of President Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca's speech on Republic Day, in which she implicitly defended the public's right to remain in touch with nature:

"Adults and children alike have ended up confined to the built environment, away from contact with nature and with few spaces where they can roam... It has become difficult to find internal peace and be able to enjoy nature. Such an enclosed environment deprives people from the possibility of renewal and causes people to become introverts."

The President's appeal risks sounding like a swan song for the few remaining open spaces in this country. Not that

*In January 2013, then
Opposition leader Joseph*

many give a toss about this. The latest 'tweaking' comment is but the tip of an iceberg on which the environment is floundering. It follows the approval of

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planning policy changes that will usher in further development in ODZ areas (not in so-called 'infill sites' but in the open countryside, far from established settlements) on the pretext that 'agritourism' needs to be promoted. Add to that the current land reclamation proposals, the 'Bugibba in the south' brainwave and the White Rocks coastal encroachment... and the President's words sound like a echo in the darkness.

In this column I have repeatedly called for the publication of all requests received by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority for plots in ODZ areas to be included within the development boundaries. One may speculate that a database of potentially hundreds of such requests for exists.

Publishing these requests would be entirely consistent with current drive to introduce legislation on political party financing, since it would reveal, at least partly, the intricate network of patronage associated with the issuing of development permits. Needless to say, Mepa have never published these requests

Considering the mistakes committed in the 2006 'rationalisation' exercise, George Bernard Shaw's quip that "success does not consist in never making mistakes but in never making the same one a second time" finely encapsulates the general sentiment regarding Falzon.

A vicious cycle of boundary revisions

One of the pill-sweeteners that had accompanied the 2006 rationalisation exercise was that no further boundary extension would take place for the following 10 years. This would seem to preclude the proposed 'tweaking' before 2016. But it might also usher in a vicious cycle of successive boundary revisions every 10 years, with every government seeking to redress what it labels as 'injustices'.

Falzon and his team may have engaged the services of a linguist prior to dropping the latest bombshell in an effort to avert the environmentalist backlash associated with the 2006 rationalisation exercise. They may be hoping that the more benign term 'tweaking' will exorcise the demons of 2006. However, on the contrary, they are bound to generate a few more.

The 2006 extension of the development boundaries was approved on the presumption that injustices conducted during the drawing up of the temporary provision schemes (TPS) in 1987 had to be corrected.

In an uncanny reliving of history, the current 'tweaking' is being touted as an exercise to iron out injustices meted out during the 2006 exercise.

While they are busy resolving these individual injustices, Falzon's team should ponder the greater injustice their actions are creating... this time on the entire nation, by depriving the vast majority of people – who will not be benefitting directly from the 'tweaking' – from enjoying more open spaces, and increasingly confining them "to the built environment".



More agricultural land and several mature carob trees and will be lost after the Environmental Appeals Tribunal approved the opening of a new quarry at Wied Moqbol, Żurrieq.

Yet another quarry to open at Wied Moqbol

The perseverance of some Mepa applicants is legendary, and in some circumstances it pays off. Despite a string of previous refusals dating back more than a decade, the Environmental Appeals Tribunal has finally decided to give the green light to PA 2700/00 for the excavation of a new hardstone quarry at Wied Moqbol, Żurrieq. The new quarry will rub shoulders with an existing quarry in the same area.

Despite the Mineral Subject Plan imposing a blanket prohibition on the excavation of new quarries, the application was treated as a relocation, with the new site being given in lieu of an existing quarry at Ғағар Qim that had to cease operations in view of its close proximity to the Neolithic temples.

It is understandable that the applicant should be compensated for the loss of earnings resulting from the forced closure of the existing quarry, but some of the reasons for the approval given in the appeals tribunal report raise eyebrows.

For instance, the new quarrying activities will result in the uprooting of seven mature carob trees, besides the further loss of agricultural land. Although some of the carob trees along the western margins of the site are to be retained, how will the applicant compensate for the loss of these ancient trees that will be uprooted?

The applicant contested the latter, saying that the agricultural land in question was of poor quality, and the tribunal acknowledged that the generation of dust from a quarry could not be fully mitigated. A visit to the existing quarry at Wied Moqbol, perched high on the cliffs on the southwestern corner of Malta, will reveal the environmental impact that the dust generated from the quarry is having on the surrounding dust-laden vegetation. And as the quarry is only a short distance from the sea, one can speculate that most of the dust ends up in the sea.

Considering the anticipated environmental impact of the development and the high incidence of asthma in this country (the generation of even more fine dust won't help in this regard), did the tribunal consider awarding financial compensation to the applicant for the cessation of the quarrying near Ғағар Qim, rather than allow him to open yet another site for quarrying?

One hopes that the Ғағар Qim quarry site will be fully rehabilitated and reclaimed from the gaping crater it is today, especially given that the latest approval for a new quarry site was granted against such a condition. If such a rehabilitation is not a comprehensive one, then we would simply have extended the existing footprint of quarries.

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