

An unwarranted attack



A derelict property with a view. Mepa should order illegally developed properties to be demolished rather than simply requesting the ceasing of any works.

Stephen Calleja's comments in his article 'The men who stare at fields' (The Malta Independent on Sunday, February 3), must surely rank as some of the most blinkered and demeaning ever made.

Writing in a provocative manner, Mr Calleja says environmentalists should be harassed in the same way they harass other people, that environmentalists want to keep everything green and that they have hidden agendas underneath their green credentials.

By tarring all environmentalists with the same brush, Mr Calleja reveals his poor knowledge about the local environmental movement, which raises suspicions as to why he chose to write an article on a subject he knows so little about. He equates Victor Scerri's Baħrija development with Anton Refalo's development in Qala, erroneously concluding that since environmentalists did not whip up the same fury over Dr Refalo's illegal development in Qala as they did over the Baħrija development, then they are complicit in a political game.

The reason why the Baħrija case has attracted more attention than the Qala one is that the former is sited in a Special Area of Conservation and a Natura 2000 site. These are terms Mr Calleja might not be familiar with. They mean the area is of high conservation importance due to the floral and/or faunal species found there. Moreover, Dr Refalo's illegal development has been condemned. In fact, I have repeatedly featured the case in this column in 2006.

Dr Scerri's case may also have been more in the limelight due to the media attention it received and to the fact that in 2005/2006, the environmental movement was not the organised, coherent lobby it is today.

Nonetheless, citing one case of illegality to condone another, and to allege political discrimination is certainly not conducive to objective journalism. The time-proven maxim that 'two wrongs don't make one right' springs to mind.

Who exactly does Mr Calleja consider to be an environmentalist? Judging by statistics recently released by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, they comprise more than a small bunch of individuals. In fact, Mepa received a total of 632 objections for 869 Outside Development Zone applications submitted last year, while a total of 4,392 objections were received for 4,650 within-scheme applications submitted last year.

This indicates that the population is increasingly proactive when it comes to environmental issues, irrespective of the political colour of the applicants. Environmentalism goes beyond the narrow-minded calculations of people like Mr Calleja.

As I did some weeks back, I will back people like Lino Bugeja to the hilt, whose unwavering commitment over entire decades to Malta's cultural and natural environment is unrivalled. Such odious comments by the acting editor of a local newspaper only serve to harshen the discourse between environmentalists and developers, and to further tarnish the reputation of Mr Calleja who has repeatedly shown himself to be prejudiced and outright biased in his writings.

His comments do not bode well at this pivotal time for Mepa reform and it would be judicious for people to rebuke Mr Calleja for his callous statements.

Retired whistleblowers

Former Water Services Corporation chief Tancred Tabone's statements on the dire need to buttress our aquifer resources are more than welcome. However, the fact that he made them only after he resigned from the post somewhat water down the incisiveness they would have had if he had made them during his tenure in office.

It also indicates that public officials and civil servants are still coy when it comes to denouncing malpractices. This, despite all the political fluttering about an imminent Whistleblower Act that would safeguard the interests of all those who manage to pluck enough courage to speak out. In July 2007, government had even published a White Paper entitled 'Towards Greater Transparency and Accountability' on the subject.

Maybe Mr Tabone's latest comments will prod the political establishment into action so that the long-awaited Whistleblower Act may finally see the light of day.

Tourism (not) vs the environment

Michael Falzon's comments on Bondiplus two weeks ago that tourism and environmental concerns are perceived as being so antagonistic and incompatible that they cannot be housed in a single ministry are retrograde indeed.

Such comments are reminiscent of times when large swathes of coastline were frittered away for a pittance to tourist operators who went on to clutter the areas with soulless accommodation facilities. Years of unsustainable tourism practices resulted in 96 per cent of our accessible coastline (places where you can literally walk to the shoreline) being encroached upon by development.

It is thus unsurprising that Falzon's comments were met with a certain indifference since they illustrated how the mindset of some people has not yet changed. Nowadays, when identifying locations for yacht marinas, environmental considerations, such as whether any seagrass meadows are present, normally have the upper hand. In (hopefully) bygone times, the tourism authorities would run roughshod and developers would have been given a carte blanche as to where to site major developments.

Even the new owners of the Ħal Farf complex were quick to reassure everyone that construction would be limited to a minor part of the footprint of the complex in line with Mepa's development brief for the area. Nowadays, sustainable tourism and eco-tourism have almost become clichés, with back-to-back conferences being held on the subject. The Third International Conference on Sustainable Tourism was even held in Malta in 2008.

The Malta Tourism Authority has long since embraced the environmental dimension of tourism, adopting in 2002 a voluntary eco-certification scheme based on almost 100 criteria. Despite this, it seems some people are still inclined to cling to the past and express fossilised views of what touristic development should be.

Ozone layer - a success story

The ozone layer story is a success story indeed - in fact, all countries represented at the United Nations have now signed up to the Montreal Protocol, which bans the production of all ozone-depleting substances, such as chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). Timor-Leste became the 196th country to ratify the agreement.

Although the ozone hole over the Antarctic has grown by 36 per cent since the protocol first came into force, it is starting to bear fruit, and the ozone layer is expected to be restored to its former extent by 2050. Such a global effort should be emulated in the case of climate change.