

The devil is in the detail



The recently-launched Nationalist Party environmental policy has, in general, received cautious approval by environmentalists. For instance, the call to relocate the university development from the Zonqor outside development zone (ODZ) certainly cannot be gainsaid.

In addition, the shifting of the onus for final approval of ODZ applications from the Planning Authority to a two-thirds majority in Parliament has added an extra veil of control, although it remains unclear which ODZ applications will be assigned to such an assessment.

Are we referring to large-scale ODZ applications only here, such as the building of schools and hospitals, or does this safety net also incorporate the hundreds of small-scale ODZ applications submitted each year and which are fragmenting the remaining open spaces in a piecemeal fashion?

I doubt that Parliament will be asked to vote on every single ODZ application, thus removing the sting from what could have been a very effective measure, since, in practical terms, very few large-scale ODZ developments are proposed during an entire legislature.

The PN's advisors on planning issues, including the perspicacious and upright Ryan Callus, must be aware that the current ODZ onslaught is happening not under the media glare on the Planning Board but rather at the perfunctory sittings of the Planning Commission. The commission is a decision-making board renowned for its lack of representation; in fact, it is dominated by architects.

For instance, during just four days between December 19 and 22, 2016, the commission discussed and decided upon a total of 184 planning applications in four five-hour sessions.

Crunching the numbers (provided by Flimkien Għal Ambjent Aħjar), this works out at a meagre 6.5 minutes for each planning application. Granted, only a small number of these planning applications were in ODZ areas, but such summary hearings do not suggest an in-depth evaluation of the issues at stake.

How is the PN suggesting to overhaul the system to address these deficiencies?



Bidnija before (above) and after. What was once dense natural vegetation in Bidnija has been totally dug up, courtesy of the umpteenth ODZ permit being granted in the area against the recommendation of the case officer and of the Environment Protection Department (PA 02511/12).

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The term 'rotten' might sound a bit too extremist to some, but after trawling through statistics regarding the issue of permits, one would probably agree that this term is fully justified to describe the current system to safeguard ODZ areas. For instance, over the period 1995-2015, about 12,500 ODZ permits were granted. This information emerged in reply to a parliamentary question addressed to the Prime Minister in May 2015.

Doing the maths, this works out at 625 ODZ permits each year during the 10-year period. Unofficial statistics for April-December 2016 (since the Planning Authority has yet to provide the requested corresponding statistics for all of 2016) indicate that approximately 1,200 permits in ODZ areas were granted during this period alone. This means twice the annual number of ODZ permits were granted in just eight months!

Callus is also very aware of the planning mayhem in ODZ areas currently being wrought by the revised 2015 ODZ policies, the so-called 'Rural Policy and Design Guidance'. These policies are very permissive, and although they were formulated with the stated mission of supporting farmers in their operations, they are very often being exploited by people who are not farmers to invest in luxury residences in the middle of nowhere.

The obscene case at Bidnija featured in this column two weeks ago is a case in point. The PN should tweak its environmental policy so as to include an overhaul of these permissive policies which have ushered in a flood of abuse. I know it is difficult for the PN to take this proposal on board given that the party will probably consider it as a vote-loser from rural communities and property developers. But you can't run with the hares and hunt with the hounds, can you?

The PN's policy document also makes a pledge to strengthen the Environment and Resources Authority. This is commendable as well, although it remains to be seen how this can be achieved in practical terms, given that the tools that the ERA was supposedly bestowed with through the demerger, such as the right to appeal, come with strings attached, such as a hefty fee and the need to prove one's eligibility to appeal, as in the Townsquare high-rise case. How does the PN propose to have a system where the ERA's recommendations on ODZ development are heeded more at the planning stage? Currently, most of these recommendations are overruled by the Planning Authority.

The pledge to revise the Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development (SPED) is very timely since the ambiguity of this vaguely-composed document is acknowledged by many, but here again, details of the proposed revision should have been provided.

A glaring lacuna in the PN's environmental policy is the lack of any reference to the shanty towns at Armier, Little Armier and White Tower Bay. Nothing but a complete removal of this ribbon development is acceptable, despite the electoral haemorrhage that this would invariably lead to.

The mind boggles as to why the PN policy has insisted on promoting agrotourism in Malta, considering that this will usher in more development in ODZ areas, including car parks and shops, whereas Sicily, which is renowned for its agrotourism facilities, is just a stone's throw away.

The PN's environmental policy has made a valiant attempt at being brave... but it has not gone far enough.

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