

Thoughts on the 3,000 'extremists'



Conspiracy theorists should realise that the vast majority of the conscientious citizens who attended the protest march in Valletta against ODZ development were non-partisan and are disappointed with both major parties' environmental record.

Following one of the largest environmental protests ever organised locally (although a firm challenger for the top spot is the protest against the siting of the Delimara power station held in Marsaxlokk in the early 1990s), here are my thoughts on the event, having attended it and trawled through the extensive post-event debate:

- Every protest, however noble its motivations and unaligned its organisers, is exploited to a certain extent for partisan reasons by Opposition parties. With this in mind, the heckling and booing by certain segments of the protest march crowd at the mention of the Prime Minister's name comes as no surprise, even though some of the booing might not necessarily be attributed to those with a partisan agenda but rather to those who are genuinely disappointed with the government's track record on the environment.

All previous environmentally-themed protest marches and meetings included an element of government-bashing, with the public meeting organised in connection with the Sant' Antnin recycling plant enlargement in Marsascala perhaps being one of the most glaring examples.

However, Labour and Nationalist Party supporters must rise above such petty considerations and rather than going for conspiracy theories, they should realise that the vast majority of those who attended the protest last week were completely disappointed with both major parties.

In a country that pigeonholes its citizens according to their political affiliation, it is hard to admit that there is a growing number of people out there who do give a toss about the environment, and are ready to march and to protest when this gets trodden upon, irrespective of who is in government; gaining brownie points for their party is certainly not their intention. It is sad that we have to fight our own government to protect the environment, but it is equally sad that we have to justify our non-partisan motivation for attending a protest march.

- As in all matters of principle, consistency is the name of the game. The protest march in Valletta was steered by exponents of the environmental lobby who have been around, in most cases, since the mid-1990s, so they can hardly be accused of discovering their green credentials just now in the face of a Labour government. The accusations being levelled at leading environmentalists, to the tune of "you are simply there to put spokes in the wheels of a Labour government" are superficially plausible, but actually wrong and shortsighted, and are repeated after every general election.

The need to be consistent, however, saddles those protesting with a grave responsibility. Take the Church, for instance. It is true that one cannot consider the proposal to relocate St Albert the Great College from Valletta to an Outside Development Zone (ODZ) site in Ghaxaq in the same way as other ODZ proposals, such as the one for Żonqor. The ultimate purpose of the two proposed developments is different, as the first has a social purpose while the other is private profit-making one.



The Archbishop should ask the Dominicans to propose a committed site for the relocation of St Albert the Great College rather than the ODZ farmland at Ghaxaq. Otherwise, every time the Church wades into the environmental domain, it will be met with cynicism.

Having said this, in line with recent declarations by Archbishop Charles Scicluna, the Curia should ask the Dominicans to withdraw the Church school relocation proposal and resite it in an already committed site, in line with the 'practise what you preach' principle. Otherwise, every time the Church wades into the environmental domain, something it is fully entitled to do, it will be met with cynicism.

This is not a question of reaching 'middle ground' or a 'compromise' but of putting the brakes on further development of a non-renewable and extremely finite resource: ODZ land

For the record, I had first made such a statement eight years ago, in 2007, in this column.

- The Prime Minister has hinted that the Żonqor proposal is being scaled down (although probably not shelved), that 'common sense' will prevail and that the final proposal will be endorsed by all except 'extremists.' It was a very unfortunate choice of words as it led many leading environmental exponents to believe that the Prime Minister is labelling all those who oppose any form of incursion at Żonqor as 'extremists'.

Unfortunately, there can be no compromise on ODZ. Every hectare of ODZ land that is unjustifiably lost is the source of further angst for genuine environmentalists. The American University of Malta is not a public hospital. So if opposing the university's siting at Żonqor risks you being branded as an 'extremist', then so be it.

This is not a question of reaching 'middle ground' or a 'compromise' and not being 'intransigent tree-huggers' but of putting the brakes on further development of a non-renewable and extremely finite resource: ODZ land. It is inconceivable for those in authority to ask environmentalists to compromise on the uptake of ODZ land just to be 'reasonable' – it's simply a non-starter.

- Those in favour of the Żonqor proposal frequently mention other ODZ development cases in the same area of the islands, namely Smart City and the sewage treatment plant. While the analogy with Smart City holds somewhat, since the site is still basically a large gaping hole, with very little commercial activity to show for the massive uptake of land, the sewage treatment plant is a completely different argument.

Once it was decided in the 1970s to site the Wied Għammieq raw sewage discharge outlet at Xgħajra, it was self-evident that the Ta' Barkat sewage treatment plant had to be sited in the same area. Any other decision would have involved redesigning the sewage distribution network.

Granted, the development of the plant resulted in the uptake of ODZ land (although the area involved is not on the same scale as that proposed for the American University of Malta) but, significantly, it resulted in sewage being treated before being discharged in the sea. So the analogy simply does not hold.

Clarification regarding Qala quarry article

In this column a fortnight ago I criticised Qala local council for its lackadaisical reaction to the leaked proposal to develop a cruise liner terminal and luxury village at the quarry at Tas-Simar, drawing parallels with the 13-year-old Hondoq ir-Rummien saga. In doing so, I might have given the impression that I was also taking aim at Moviment Harsien Hondoq, a grassroots movement that has been working since 2002 to ward off the private development of Hondoq ir-

Rummien. If this was the case, then it was a grave injustice and I wish rectify matters with a clarification.

On numerous occasions in this column I have commended Paul Buttigieg, a PL councillor at Qala and founding member of the Moviment Harsien Hondoq, for his untiring and unstinting work to save Hondoq. He can rest assured that I still hold him in the highest esteem, especially in the face of the campaign of ostracisation he and his family have been subjected to as a result of his decade-long advocacy. It is difficult, to use an euphemism, to be an environmentalist in Gozo, and Buttigieg is feeling the full weight of this reality on his shoulders.

A landmark Dutch court decision to emulate

In the run-up to crucial talks scheduled to be held in Paris in December at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 21), a Dutch court has set a precedent by ruling that the Netherlands must step up its efforts to reduce domestic greenhouse gas emissions.

Citing science as the basis of its verdict, a district court in The Hague said the State must take measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 25 per cent by 2020, relative to 1990 levels, in order to prevent possibly dangerous climate change. The verdict is being hailed as a landmark one since it is the first time that a judge has required a State to take precautions to mitigate the effects of climate change.

"This is a landmark ruling," said James Thornton, CEO of Client Earth, an international group of environmental lawyers. "Most remarkably, it is based in essence on established science and the ancient principle of a government's duty of care. That reasoning is applicable in any legal system and will certainly be used by courts in other countries." A similar lawsuit has been filed in Belgium, he said.

The lawsuit was filed in 2013 by the Urgenda Foundation, a Dutch citizen platform which had filed the landmark lawsuit on behalf of 900 plaintiffs, including children. The foundation specifically sued the government for violating human rights by failing to take adequate action to prevent harmful impacts of climate change. "States are meant to protect their citizens," he said. "If politicians will not do this of their own accord, then the courts are there to help."

If only such reasoning was extended to ODZ areas in Malta!

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