



The limits of loyalty

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In a country where 'political allegiance' often seems like an end in itself, it should have to take extraordinary circumstances to shake up one's political allegiances.

Yet recent history seems to point in a different direction. Limits to party loyalty do exist, but they are often rooted in matters of the heart: issues that may be unrelated to 'politics' in the narrower sense; and which may even appear trivial to anyone who doesn't share such emotional bonds.

Malta's budding environmental protest movements are a classic case in point. The ongoing Central Link project controversy – coupled with an arguably unprecedented construction boom – has resulted in a palpable wave of environmental unrest that cuts cleanly across the traditional partisan divide. In part, the

discontent can be traced to a profound emotional attachment (in this case, to a particular streetscape) that people fear may be permanently severed.

For it wasn't just any old 500+ trees that are facing the axe with that project. They included some of the iconic Aleppo pines that line the Rabat Road: an almost picture-perfect postcard of our collective nostalgia for the 'Malta of our childhood'.

It was more than just nostalgia, however, that drove a significantly higher percentage than usual to participate in street protests. There is also a fear that, projected into the future, the loss of those trees (and all they represent) will also herald the eventual loss of an irreplaceable part of our entire cultural identity.

Faced with this backlash, the traditional language of Maltese party-

politics finds itself uncharacteristically powerless. The time-honoured method of resorting to partisan 'warfare' – by appealing to partisan distrust of the political 'other', for instance – does little to assuage such fears.

To those who genuinely feel that emotional attachment, it doesn't really matter which political party is responsible for the defacement of our countryside. Their environmental angst becomes more important than the political cause they have always believed in; and this sentiment can only grow, when – on the environmental front, at any rate – there are no longer any clear policy differences separating the two sides.

Under such circumstances, one would expect cracks to start appearing in the structure. Glenn Bedingfield, one of Prime



Minister Joseph Muscat's closest friends and confidants, recently chose to publicly vent his frustration at his own government's choice of land for the construction of the new 'American University' campus.

Though it might be a coincidence, the choice of land itself seems to also resonate with the same emotional power. Bormla. Dock Number One. The beating heart of Malta's entire Socialist movement, whose birth can be traced precisely to the same shipyard in the distant 1920s.

More poignantly, it was also the site where Alfred Sant had famously denounced Dom Mintoff as a 'traitor', for bringing his government down in a confidence vote. Besides, Bormla is also Glenn Bedingfield's hometown: to which he evidently also feels a form of allegiance. Reading his article in *The Times*, it is in fact hard not to detect the entirely personal dilemma of a man who feels genuinely torn between his two most precious loyalties.

Bedingfield is far from alone in this predicament. Former Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi had also discovered that he could not rely on the same unquestioned political allegiance. The ODZ extensions of 2005 and 2006 (among other issues) had likewise brought thousands of protestors onto

the streets. Numerous Nationalists felt betrayed by 'their' government's actions, on an issue to which they themselves felt emotionally attached. So it unsurprising that today's Labour government is beginning to feel the same pinch.

Current times may well prove a pivotal consideration for the entire future of Maltese politics. Where does the present political landscape leave all those disgruntled former Nationalist or Labour voters, who feel betrayed by 'their' party on issues that matter personally to them? What good can switching party allegiance hope to achieve, when both parties doggedly pursue the same economic model?

Instead of turning to other parties large or small, they seem to be turning their backs on politics altogether: uniting in small but vociferous lobby groups, conducting activism online, or organising protests like the 'Enough is enough' (7 September) one against 'construction madness': to which Maltese political parties were pointedly (and explicitly) uninvited.

In the fullness of time, it seems inevitable that these limits of partisan loyalty can only continue to encroach on the traditional model of 'political allegiance for its own sake'. Calls to arms won't cut it. 