

# The Green Whistle Blower

## MLP's pre-electoral promises and MEPA meltdown



A massive planting of eucalyptus and acacia trees has been going on unhindered for years in the clay slopes of Gnejna, increasing the rate of erosion of such slopes, unlike indigenous trees. MEPA officials are tackling the issue, ensuring public access to the area and preventing the destruction of further garigue for hunting on site.

So we are back to Byzantine politics again, with pre-electoral promises being the order of the day. This time it was the MLP and such promises were not veiled nor subtle but blatant and preposterous.

At a conference organised by the Building Industry Consultative Council (BICC), MLP spokesman Martin Debono had the cheek to say that the party was receiving details regarding projects and development ideas so that it can start considering them thus shortening the processing of these applications by the time it is in power.

The word "shortening", as used in the context, leaves little to the imagination, especially after the MLP already claimed, last May, that once in government it would bypass orthodox MEPA procedures and give the green light to mega-projects in Gozo such as the golf course, Qala Creek development and airstrip. Also, such a statement comes hot on the heels of statements by MLP whip Joe Mizzi!

Mr Mizzi said that Armier squatters would be heeded on dubious 'social issues' and also on recent pledges by the MLP that it would embark on 'environmental protection' once in government.

My criticism of the latest MLP statements is two-pronged. Firstly, the MLP should have some qualms about making such statements since they amount to clientelism and are grossly immoral. They are simply promising preferential fast-track processing of particular applications.

Secondly, we are all aware of the pall surrounding our environmental protection sectors in the dark late Seventies and Eighties, when permits were issued upon ministerial whims and when the PAPB (the PA's forerunner) was a very convenient smokescreen. Thanks to ministerial dabbling, illegal buildings in the most pristine and exclusive areas were condoned, drawing the ire of law-abiding citizens to this very day.

To prevent history repeating itself, MEPA should be beefed up, both in terms of manpower and finances. There have already been suggestions from the MLP that MEPA should be dismantled in future. Rather than exerting undue pressure on MEPA staff through explicit statements or reshuffling (as happened exactly two years ago under new legislation), both political parties should strive to buttress MEPA.

### **Mushrooming of Mellieha (after Mosta)**

Despite widely-accepted maxims being repeated over and over again, such as that further development should be curbed since a quarter of our islands is already under concrete, we give a carte blanche to an elderly people's home (housing 120 beds), a chapel and a substation to be developed on the fringes of Mellieha.

Nature Trust was the only dissenting voice among the lobbying chorus led by the Ministry for Social Policy and Mellieha council, not because it opposes projects with a high social utility such as this one but because of what it considers serious shortcomings.

First of all, the fact that MEPA did not deem a project with such a large footprint and lying in an Outside Development Zone (ODZ) as needing an EIA raises some eyebrows. Secondly, since Nature Trust had been clamouring for the project to be sited in an infill pocket within Mellieha proper, it wonders why such alternative sites considered by MEPA were not deemed

adequate. It seems that some were not considered fitting due to the steep gradient involved and too many steps - however, it's difficult to concede that no other sites were found.

Also, the rationale upon which the development was issued with the necessary permits - i.e. that the site is already excavated and that it is already surrounded by existing buildings - is not watertight as it seems. If one were to use such a rationale, then a whole housing estate should be built on site next year using this development as a precedent. Two wrongs do not make a right and any existing buildings should not have been used to encroach further on the environs of Mellieha.

The project will be sited in a street ominously called Triq il-Wied, since it is a stone's throw from the ecologically important Wied Ingraw and part of it is composed by garigue and two cultivated fields. Structure Plan policies prohibit development in any part of a valley system, yet obviously the site in question was not deemed to fall within such a definition. A few carob trees on site, which is also close to some medieval caves, will have to be uprooted, while no provision has been made for any light pollution mitigation measures in the project.

The disconcerting conclusion is that another ODZ site has been compromised, since Mellieha is fast becoming a carbon copy of Mosta, turning into one large conglomerate of suburban developments, such as one upon approaching Selmun.

In fact, Mellieha already has the destruction of Ghajn Zejtuna (below Santa Marija Estate) and San Niklaw Valley, through rampant tourist and residential development (with buildings precariously perched just to have a view of Ghadira), under its belt. Nature Trust calls for MEPA to schedule the medieval caves on site and also Wied Ingraw to save the last remaining morsels.

### **Another budding dump**

To include yet another chapter in the squalid saga of 'dump revealing', Nature Trust blew the whistle on the Ic-Cumnija dump, behind the Ghadira nature reserve and below the Red Tower. This dump has recently been buoyed up with the latest dumping of drainage pipes, complete with the stench of sewage still stuck in their interior.

I think that making some form of rummaging around to find the culprits will certainly not split anyone's hairs as the dismantling of hundreds of drainage pipes certainly can't go unnoticed. A decrepit government vehicle also lies put on site.

The site has been earmarked for a future sewage treatment plant - let's hope that the plant and its associated security measures also helps to mitigate dumping on land besides dumping at sea.

While a hue and cry exists around our major dumps - Maghtab and il-Qortin (Gozo), no-one bats an eyelid about minor dumps, such as this one and that at Wied Fulija in Zurrieq. I suppose that such minor dumps are not so 'charismatic' in terms of vote-catching since they lie outside areas normally frequented by the public.

### **Gnejna revisited**

In its sustained effort to save the clay slopes above Gnejna on the way to Fomm ir-Rih and Ras il-Pellegrin, Nature Trust alerted MEPA officials to the existence of a gargantuan grove, mainly composed of alien eucalyptus and acacia trees, above the boathouses on site. Such trees, besides exuding toxic chemicals from their roots to inhibit local vegetation, also draw up large amounts of water, exacerbating the rate of erosion of clay slopes.

Nature Trust had already cried blue murder three years ago when part of the clay slope was smothered to make a concrete road giving access to the grove. The developer even had the cheek to cordon it off and claim it as private, a fact which has prodded enforcement officers to do away with the makeshift fence and RTO signs.

The hilltop was once home to Punic remains (hence the name), probably since it is the first headland seafaring people would have encountered on their way from Tunisia/Africa. What still survived of such remains has long been stifled by hunters perched on the cliffs in their hideouts.

### **Silver linings**

Fortunately, some silver linings occasionally do break the grind and in February developers of the Golden Sands Hotel announced that the new hotel would be moved 40 m back to safeguard the underlying boulders. This is welcome news. Let us hope that the garigue behind the hotel is not overtly encroached upon, as happened through the Scouts' project on site.

Ecotourism was also high on the agenda in February when the embellishment of Chadwick Lakes in Fiddien Valley was completed. Such projects, part of the rural development plan, do serve to bolster ecotourism in our country. It was also heartening to see that the concept of 'embellishment' has somewhat changed in this country. It no longer encompasses gross anthropogenic interference in ecological systems, such as weeding of valley beds or diversion of watercourses, but limits itself to rubble wall and wooden bench building and the planting of indigenous trees.

Tighter controls on tuna fishing were announced in February. These included the fact that once the benchmark of the quota allotted for Malta (i.e. 300 tons of tuna) was reached, no more tuna would be landed on shore, as enforced by fisheries officers who would keep audit trails of

fish landings. One augurs that eco-sounders and other electronic equipment to be used by fishermen allows them to discern shoals of tuna and shoals from other fish species to help mitigate bycatch quiet common in the use of purse-seine nets (also announced in February).

The leaders of Spain, France and Portugal have urged the EU to speed up introduction of tougher maritime safety rules, especially a ban on single-hulled oil tankers. The three stressed that the tighter controls being sought would have prevented last year's Prestige oil spill.

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