

Another opportunity goes begging



The proximity between the controversially-approved Lidl supermarket in Luqa and the cars parked in a field with no permit in hand.

In December, the two main political parties' fundraising marathons once again relieved people of some of their disposable income to finance their causes. While healthy democracies need political parties to function, the latest round of fundraising may be seen as another opportunity gone begging.

Either of the two parties could have taken the lead to put its money where its mouth is by introducing a system whereby any donations above a certain reasonable threshold are publicised and all donations are audited.

During the campaign for the European Parliament elections, I had called on the PN to start such a system. The call went unheeded.

This might sound like a cliché but the only way to shed light on the perceived close links between business and politics in Malta is to publicise donations, something both parties seem too coy to do - who will take the lead in 2010?

Away from the limelight

Public scrutiny tends to hover over 'celebrity' planning cases, such as the Mistra, Baħrija and Portomaso ones, largely ignoring the undermining of the rural fabric which goes on unabated in the background.

The rural fringes of the major road joining Qormi with Luqa is a case in point. It must surely rank as one of the swathes with the highest concentration of unpublicised infringements, rubbing shoulders with more illustrious counterparts.

In the past few months everyone and his aunt must have heard of the Lidl Luqa supermarket case, the permit for which was issued despite strong misgivings by the Civil Aviation Department which had rebuffed a previous application for a garage lodged by a car-hire firm. The impropriety in the case was further highlighted by Mepa auditor Joseph Falzon, who branded the whole permit-issuing process in this case "completely irregular".

Just 100 metres from the supermarket, a smart guy has decided to start storing cars in a field located along the upper reaches of a valley known as Wied il-Knejjes. The large concentration of cars jars with the once rural environment, with backdrops of carob trees and rubble walls now competing with sights of parked cars and vans.

Further down the same road, what were formerly fields flanking Wied il-Kbir watercourse have been carpeted with a mixture of shredded tyre rubber and building aggregate, presumably to cushion the floor for horses.

Stables are normally synonymous with rural landscapes; but not in Malta, it seems. Rather than blending in, local stable operators scar their rural surroundings beyond recognition. God forbid permits are granted to smother such a large rural area for each and every horse and stable in this country.

The same site faces the petrol station and car showroom that have been cordoned off since it started operations when no permits were in hand for the showroom, although a sanctioning application has been predictably submitted. Can anyone in their right mind expect Mepa to refute the sanctioning and ask the applicant demolish the showroom and restore the site?

This rural stretch of sorts is fast being turned into an extension of the Grand Harbour urban conurbation, under the guise of car showrooms, stables (of the environmentally-unfriendly type), makeshift car parks, and so on. A precedent already exists - the approach to Żebbuġ from St Dorothy's School is punctuated with car showrooms, some of which are simply left as hollowed-out skeletons perennially awaiting deployment.

What's in store for 2010

2010 promises to be a make-or-break year, with major developments in the environmental field already on the cards. January will see Spain assume the reigns of the European presidency for its six-month term. While some are already musing over the prospects of Malta assuming such a post in 2017, few have grasped the significance of having a Mediterranean counterpart assume such a pivotal role.

Earlier this year, France had conceived a plan for a 'Union of the Mediterranean', which would have given the Mediterranean basin a higher profile among the cacophony of European voices and issues, to deal with the unique challenges it faces. However, the plan was watered down by Germany and other Nordic countries to a 'Union for the Mediterranean', with a corresponding whittling down of its wider scope.

Spain's presidency might inject new vibe in the Barcelona Treaty process and use it as a launching pad for further pan-Mediterranean agreements, furthering Malta's causes and profile in the process. It will be some time before another Mediterranean country - Cyprus - assumes the EU presidency in the latter half of 2012. Hence, the opportunity to bring Mediterranean challenges to the forefront in the next six months should not be ignored.

2010 should hopefully see a correction of the charade that was the Copenhagen summit, with the public outcry over the lack of steadfast will shown by many developed countries, such as the US and China, hopefully leading to a legally-binding and hard-hitting pact in Mexico.

A Swedish legacy

The objective of halting loss of biodiversity by 2010 was first mooted around the time of the last Swedish EU presidency in 2001.

This was later to be reinforced in a pledge at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.

To coincide with the 2010 deadline, the UN had designated next year as the International Year of Biodiversity, also to highlight the abject failure that the Countdown 2010 initiative has been so far.

Since many still have no idea what the elusive term 'biodiversity' really means, it would be a good idea to read how it is defined by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), of which Malta is part: "The variability among living organisms from all sources... this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems" (Article 2, CBD).

Malta has seen its fair share of extinctions of, and regressions in species over the past few decades, although, officially at least, the situation is on the mend. Quoting from Mepa's website, of 189 Maltese species of international importance, 183 (or 97 per cent) are protected by Maltese legislation.

These figures contrast sharply with the protection regime in 2002, where 39 per cent internationally important species were unprotected.

However, the man in the street still does not care about biodiversity, as can be seen by occasional infringements in areas protected under the EU's Habitats directives (such as the approval of dwellings at Ta' Baldu and close to the cliffs, both in Dingli, the ongoing trapping and garigue scarification along cliffs, and the wilful introduction and release of alien species).

All this points to the need for wider educational and enforcement measures.