

Sat Oct 22, 2005

The spring of hope... the winter of despair

Lino Bugeja

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea Europe is the lessee as well as if a promontorie were" - John Donne (1572-1631).

The situation of rambling in the Maltese countryside is reminiscent of the opening lines of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times... It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair".

Conceptually, it was the best of times when the Ramblers' Association of Malta was launched this year, a few weeks before the onset of spring.

We envisaged that, with Malta being a member of the European Union, any initiative that would improve the quality of life with no demands on the national exchequer would be most welcome. With an air of optimism we embarked on a series of meetings and discussions with various ministers and high government officials with hope springing eternal in our hearts of oak.

It is regretted that we have not registered any progress whatsoever except empty promises and false hopes. Our optimism, shared by thousands of foreigners who access our website, has been shattered as we sadly witness that our vanishing countryside is not only being clawed away by developers, pseudo farmers, squatters, trappers and hunters but now also by the state, giving away prime areas of scenic beauty, in the mistaken belief that golf courses will be the panacea to our ailing tourist industry.

Yes, we envisage "a winter of despair", in the face of the government's failure to issue a definitive map of the Maltese islands, our laissez-faire attitude in not defining the "foreshore" and "coastal zones", the ever increasing hostility, intimidation and harassment in the countryside and our insensitivity to our natural and national heritage.

All these factors have reverberated across the world via electronic mail to the extent that sarcastically foreigners have lately been taunting us that the term "rambling" is a misnomer as there is no longer an area where you can roam freely in these islands. In fact, one proposal that may be discussed at the association's general meeting on October 29 is for the Ramblers' Association of Malta to change its name to Roadside Walkers' Association of Malta.

The repercussions of such a move are obvious and would deal a mortal blow to the promotion of Malta as "a rambler's paradise in autumn and winter". It is being repeatedly pointed out to us that when the Temperance Movement of England was

instrumental in the setting up of the first Ramblers' Association of Malta in 1880s, Malta was under British rule and the countryside was open to all, (except for clearly defined military zones,) protected by "all the queen's horses and all the queen's men". Unfortunately, we cannot take heart from recent happenings in other European countries. In the South-West of England, on land mapped as open country in Devon, Cornwall and West Somerset, vast areas were opened up a few weeks ago. Ramblers can now explore freely land that was previously out of bounds under "the right to roam" legislation. In this way, some of the most beautiful areas that were privately-owned are being opened up.

For the first time, land owners in Britain had to accept not only "right of way" legislation but also well-behaved members of the public "to roam freely" on specified private land.

Since the setting up of our association last February, we have campaigned and lobbied for a parliamentary debate on the matter. We have managed to raise public awareness of the importance of rambling in a country where obesity has become a major problem. We have also kept the media informed about the local situation and tapped all sources that can help us in our campaign. Our potential overseas membership running into thousands, are well posted through our website.

The support we have received from private sources has been overwhelming. In fact, we have only managed to survive through voluntary work. A well-established publishing house has even offered to issue a coffee-table illustrated publication on rambling in Malta. This was our spring of hope.

Unfortunately, lately, these "great expectations" have been nullified and muted by the government's intentions to give out to third parties land that belongs to us all. Unlike Oliver Twist's plea, we plead to the government: "Please, Sir, do not give away much more". To keep to this Dickensian theme, we are seeing "hard times" ahead, a "winter of discontent".