

## Long walk to...fields of dreams

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With apologies to Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk To Freedom*, it appears that our national campaign to open up the countryside in order to give the people "the freedom to walk" is not a bed of roses. What else can NGOs do to shake off the lethargy and crass insensitivity of those in the corridors of power to take immediate action to check the illegal misappropriation of public pathways, a birthright of the whole Maltese nation.

Correspondence by irate locals and foreigners on this pervasive malaise, like Tennyson's famous poem *The Brook*, seems to be going on forever. Yet, nobody seems to care.

Just to mention one example: In St Thomas Bay, Marsascala, the Munxar coastal path leading to the beach post and beyond, accessible to ramblers, hikers and casual walkers for generations, has recently been made inaccessible irrespective of the national and international laws regarding the foreshore. This is clearly in breach of the law.

The same applies to access to Fomm ir-Rih Bay, limits of Mgarr, Malta and, apparently, at Xatt l-Ahmar in Gozo. The media has given extensive coverage of these irregularities, the attention of the authorities has been drawn, NGOs have organised protest walks, local councils have been alerted - but nothing has changed. We do not even get the decency of an explanation or a reply. This silence of the lambs is deafening.

I have always maintained that, as things stand, the law is heavily tilted in favour of the wrongdoers. What takes transgressors an hour to flout the law, would take years for the authorities concerned to start proceedings, let alone the necessary action.

Call me an incurable Anglophile but, in the bad old colonial days, in such situations "all the King's horses and all the King's men" did manage to give to the citizen the "freedom to walk" in his own countryside. In my younger days, under a foreign flag, we never encountered any difficulties or threats.

Yes, some areas were clearly defined as military zones and out of bounds. But now we are in a worse situation and the time will soon come when, like the poor but resolute peasants, of 15th century Malta who paid 40,000 florins to Monroy to be masters in their own land, we will have to pay a huge ransom for the privilege of rambling "in our fair land" (*f'din l-art helwa*).

As a Maltese citizen, proud of our rich historical and archaeological heritage, I cannot fathom the policy of successive governments to farm out or renew leases on government land in zones of historical importance such as Qlejgha tal-Bahrija (limits of Rabat) without the mandatory provision of access by the public. This is a sore point which should be addressed at once before "mass trespass", so successfully resorted to in other civilised countries, is organised locally by the massive body of Malta's NGOs.

Outraged by blocked paths and arrogant notices, many militant ramblers have had to be restrained as their frustrations are compounded by veiled threats, shotgun or ferocious dogs. No place has escaped the illegal privatisation of public land.

The idyllic valley of Ta' l-Isqof, on the Buskett side of Rabat, has undergone so many mutilations, so much wanton destruction, that in a few years this historical pastoral site has been reduced to a shambles... and this without the ecclesiastical authorities batting an eyelid.

Furthermore, a public path leading to the Mgarrfa (the remains of a crumbling church closely associated with Bishop Cagliares) has been closed. Those who dare walk there do so at their own risk.

It seems to be political dynamite to associate with ramblers and articulate our grievances regarding the plight of our countryside. A petition by the Ramblers Association to Parliament sent last July requesting a White Paper to discuss the sorry state of affairs is still shelved while frustration has reached alarming proportions along the political divide.

Again, I end my plea with another apology, this time to Nancy Sinatra and her boots. Our rambling boots are made, not only for walking, but also for voting, it seems. Let people power prevail.

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