

President's Address

Friends and Colleagues,

The situation of rambling in the Maltese country side is reminiscent of the opening lines of "a tale of Two Cities" by Charles Dickens"

" 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 was launched two years ago before the onset of spring.

We envisaged that, with Malta being a full member of the European Union, any initiative that would improve the quality of life of the Maltese citizens, with no financial demands on the national Exchequer would be most welcome in the corridors of power. Since then, with an air of optimism, we embarked on a series of meetings and discussions with various ministers and high government officials with hope springing eternally in our hearts of oak.

Regrettably, I have to state that we have not registered any progress whatsoever..... except empty promises and false hopes. A petition requesting Parliament to issue a White Paper on the state of the Country side fell on deaf ears.. And this at a time when all the civilised countries in the world have passed new legislation compatible with to-day's needs, giving access to all citizens to the country side with the right to walk and roam unhindered. We are still bogged down by medieval laws drawn up when the concept of walking for pleasure and well-being never entered the minds of the legislators.

Our blind optimism ,shared by thousands of foreigners who access our web site, has been completely shattered as we sadly witness our countryside being systematically clawed away by developers, pseudo-farmers, squatters, trappers and hunters as pathways, garigue and prime areas of scenic beauty are closed up with impunity, WHO IS GOING TO STOP THE ROT ?

Yes, we had to endure another "winter of Despair" in the face of government failure to issue a "definitive map" of the Maltese Islands, in the laissez-faire attitude in not defining "the fore-shore" and "coastal zone", in its failure to open up idyllic Fomm ir-Rih Bay, in its failure to curb the ever increasing hostility, intimidation and harassment in the country side and the insensitivity to our natural and national heritage.

In April last year a Conference on a Report prepared by a national Commission "Sustainable Development Strategy for the Maltese Islands, 2006 – 2016" held at the Mediterranean Conference Centre in the presence of top government officials underlined the urgency of addressing the blatant irregularities mentioned But the feedback we get from the hundreds of ramblers who participate in our walks is indeed alarming.

Ladies and Gentlemen, repeatedly we have witnessed the classic example of politicians "campaigning in poetry ... and governing in prose". Without exception all those at the helm have been verbally and emphatically sympathetic to our cause, but unfortunately they develop cold feet when it comes to execution as an impotent nation watches the rape of our natural heritage.

In this hallowed place, headquarters of Din L-Art Helwa (This Fair Land) – the opening lines of our national anthem..... in this historic building where the first sparks of national consciousness about our natural and cultural environment were ignited about fifty years ago, it is incumbent on us all "to strive and not to yield" in the face of these unending tribulations and frustrations. It is ironic that in this place I have to declare that with the increasing hostility Maltese citizens and foreign visitors are experiencing in their walks , the first lines of our national anthem are being abused and debased as "Din l-Art Qarsa" (This Sour Land" lies prostrate at the mercy of the unscrupulous speculator and the greedy developer.

However, I strongly believe that human pressure and needs will ultimately prevail for as the French philosopher Voltaire once proclaimed: "There is nothing as powerful as an idea whose time has come". Future generations will not judge us by the number of roads we have opened up or by the concrete jungle scarring our towns and villages but by the quality of life we have prepared for them in the form of open spaces, and an unspoilt, unpolluted natural environment accessible to all.

Before I close, I have to stress, on a positive note, that we did have our minor successes particularly in raising national awareness about the beauty of our country side.. and your massive participation in our varied walks is an indication of your conviction that rambling in the wild improves the quality of life. And here I must express my deep gratitude to my hard working Committee particularly Hon Secretary and his wife Mrs Carmen Vella as well as the commissions who go beyond the call of duty to ensure the best possible results. A special "thank you "goes to Mr J C Sullivan who has regaled us with an excellent web site by way of appreciation for our work.

We did register some minor achievements such as the re-opening of scenic Munxar Point thanks to the intensive research by our secretary; as well as, possibly, the exclusion of the unique Church Square at Mgarr (Malta) from the Rationalisation Scheme. But I have to stress that in the world of conservation and protection ALL OUR VICTORIES ARE TEMPORARY ; ONLY OUR DEFEATS ARE PERMANENT. (National Geographic - Oct 2006).

Dear friends, Just as we are saddened by those who are indifferent to our cause, we do appreciate and acknowledge your massive support so readily given at all times.

3rd Feb 2007 Lino Bugeja

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