

Planning zones rationalisation protest

Environment lobby poised to involve EU

Fiona Galea Debono



Photo: Jason Borg

An estimated 1,000 protestors attended yesterday's national demonstration against the proposed development zones rationalisation exercise.

The march down Republic Street, Valletta, was not the last but merely the end of the first chapter which served to show who was genuinely in favour of the environment and had the courage to stand up and be counted, the president of the Ramblers Association, Lino Bugeja, said.

The second chapter would involve the EU and Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas who will be shown the "disastrous state" of the environment.

The message to Europe would be "enough is enough!" The nibbling of the countryside and open spaces could not be afforded and had to stop. "We need to see an end to this speculation," Mr Bugeja insisted.

The participants in the march carried banners in favour of the environment and against the Malta Environment and Planning Authority and Rural Affairs and Environment Minister George Pullicino. George Bullycino, one placard read.

Among the slogans were: Gvern tal-gaffa (Bulldozer government), Vote Gonzi, get Caqnu and Vote George, get Worried.

They were fighting for quality of life and an end to the frantic development that was turning the country into a concrete jungle that was choking in dust and was even having an impact on the economy, Mr Bugeja said. It was not only the green NGOs that were fighting the cause, but other serious institutions, including the Church's Commission on the Environment, he added.

A crisis of values was blurring every sense of aesthetics, he argued. "How else could the unique square of Mgarr and its beautiful view be included in the scheme?"

Astrid Vella, spokesman for Flimkien ghal Ambjent Ahjar (Together for a better environment), a coalition embracing 10 NGOs, said her organisation was not against the government, nor against every proposal in the rationalisation process. "We are not against building where it is legally acceptable, for example, in true pockets between two houses, but not on a site the size of an airport landing strip!" In the fight against the rationalisation exercise, every day brought more "bad news", Ms Vella said, giving as a latest example the case of two priests, in partnership with two laymen, who had bought Church land in Gozo and which, she claimed, was included after the deadline.

The government's idea of public consultation left much to be desired, she said.

"Some MPs have a conscience," Ms Vella continued, appealing to them not to vote according to party lines. "All Malta is behind you," she said.

For every person at the protest, another 10 remained at home, meaning the cause was backed by 10,000 people, which translated into 10,000 lost votes, Ms Vella calculated.

A representative of Friends of the Earth also addressed the protest, calling on Parliament to listen to the Chamber of Architects, the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association, NGOs, Europe and the public. In voting for the development zones to be extended, the House of Representatives would be binding all future parliaments as it would never be possible to decrease land then.

The new EU Sea Directive was clever because it prohibited any authority, or Parliament, from changing planning laws without a Strategic Environmental Assessment, the FoE spokesman said.

The Maltese Parliament would be acting irresponsibly if it carried out such a change on the eve of the implementation of the directive, the spokesman added, calling for a free vote in Parliament - as democracy required in such circumstances - allowing MPs to vote according to their conscience, taking into consideration the interests of the public and the spirit of the new directive. The FoE representative requested that every MP who had a personal interest in the development zones rationalisation to abstain from voting.

Alternattiva Demokratika chairman Harry Vassallo also addressed the national protest, having approached Flimkien ghal Ambjent Ahjar to participate and being consistently and unequivocally in favour of the environment.

Dr Vassallo insisted that yesterday's protest was not the last chance for citizens but the last chance for MPs.

All that was needed were three politicians and the resolution presented to Parliament would not pass, he said, adding that it would be a test as to whether MPs really represented the Maltese, who did not want this disaster.

The government knew the public was against the rationalisation exercise, but it would soon be facing an election, Dr Vassallo said.

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