

Pandering to an election tune

Alex Vella

The Ramblers' Association of Malta is concerned that with the election still some time away the government is already pandering to an election tune and increasingly betraying signs of crisis to the extent that it is losing sight of its objectives and is laying rationale by the wayside.

The document issued at the National Conference on Sustainable Development last April, drawn up at considerable taxpayers' expense, was explicitly clear in its objectives and rationale, listing priority areas of attention to achieve balanced and sustainable development. A straight, sincere and sagacious strategy was proposed, and the Prime Minister rightly blared fanfare when officiating at its launch. The Ministry of Rural Affairs and the Environment patronised the worthy effort and George Pullicino himself participated throughout the whole day in the proceedings and closed the programme.

All and sundry from every economic sector lauded the document for its simple rationality.

But hardly had the mellow echo died down in the corridors of the MCC that the government adopted abrupt policies diametrically opposed to the priority areas, warranting foremost attention for the attainment of development goals in Malta.

One has just to consider two priority areas in the light of recent government policies to see how official policy has gone haywire:

The Sustainable Development Strategy for the Maltese Islands declares:

7. Land use. Protect, maintain and improve the urban and rural environment and through planning system protect the open countryside from uses, particularly residences, which can be more appropriately located in urban areas.

The recent enlargement of the development boundaries does precisely the opposite.

18. Enforcement. By 2008, put in place an audit of enforcement arrangements to assess the adequacy of the current enforcement mechanisms and to promote integration of responsibilities and reduction of overlaps.

The more recent memo to the police administrative law enforcement unit, unopposed by the Police Commissioner, to file a report, but not press charges, against hunters/trappers caught contravening the law, does precisely the opposite and, even more, throws legality in disarray. Not everybody remains equal before the law.

In the light of the above and other alarming considerations, foremost among which is the fact that the accelerated positive response to the protests of the hunting lobby contrasts sharply with the delaying tactics and bureaucracy our association always encountered when dealing with various government departments, the Ramblers' Association of Malta strongly deplores such pandering at the cost of equality, the rule of law and the increasingly vulnerable rural environment.

Expert advice for the benefit of the nation, forthcoming from NGOs made up of hard-working selfless volunteers, is being given lip service while speculators and shooters have their selfish way in no time at all. Exposed muscle and rowdy behaviour is proving more persuasive than logic to the extent that nobody gives a damn as brains give up top posts in frustrated resignation.

Furthermore, the association protests strongly that the petition submitted over a year ago highlighting the importance of heritage sites, access to the countryside and coastal zones, protection from harassment by hunters, trappers and squatters, as well as the publication of a definitive map of the Maltese Islands, has remained totally ignored. If anything, this implies that the government considers it more important to promote the island of St Paul as a bird killing field rather than a rambling paradise, at this crucial moment in time for the tourism industry.

The nation, made proud at the United Nations some 40 years ago by the Pacem in Maribus declaration, is presently losing face and respect in the European Union environment circles through its irreverent neglect and insensitivity to the environment, placing it in a position to fully deserve the Dunce Cap.

Mr Vella is secretary of the Malta Ramblers' Association.

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