

Editorial

Private enterprise and the national interest

Is the proposal by the developer at Ta' Cenc to expand the present hotel, to build more than 100 villas and holiday bungalows, a large hotel, 66 small "tourist units" and a golf course spread over an area measuring 400 tumoli a manifestation of private greed? Or is it a vital investment for employment and the tourism industry in hard-pressed Gozo, which is in the national interest?

The developer's case is an understandable one. He bought the famous Ta' Cenc Hotel, and a large area of surrounding land, some years ago. While the previous owners only opened the hotel in the season, he keeps it open all the year round and thus provides constant, rather than periodic, employment. But, he contends, this on its own is not an economically viable proposition.

In his judgment, his business will only flourish if he is permitted to develop his land the way he now proposes. This way he will maintain employment, perhaps even increase it. He will help to attract more tourists to Gozo and, thus, further contribute to its economy. He considers that his plans are reasonable. The Heritage Park he proposes and the planned golf course will, in his view, enhance the area, while the new hotel, villas, bungalows and other buildings will be constructed in such a manner as not to despoil the environment.

On the other hand, the detractors of this development proposal respond with a number of powerful arguments. The most potent of these is that the proposal runs directly counter to the Structure Plan passed by Parliament in 1992.

The Structure Plan comprises the sole bulwark against further rampant development in Malta and Gozo. With respect to Ta' Cenc, it could not be clearer. The Structure Plan recognises the environmental and cultural landscape importance of Ta' Cenc and seeks to protect and preserve it - albeit allowing for limited development adjacent to the existing hotel. It also lays down that most of the rest of the area should be kept as a national park. Judging by what is being proposed, the developer's application appears to fall foul of both these stipulations.

There is an equally forceful secondary argument advanced which is not based simply on the law, but which strikes a visceral national cultural chord. This is an argument which anybody who loves the rugged beauty of Malta or Gozo would make, and it is no less telling for being an emotional as well as a practical response.

Ta' Cenc is one of the few unspoilt open spaces remaining in either of our islands. It is rich in flora and fauna, in cultural heritage and that indescribable "spirit of place" which epitomises all that was once beautiful in so many parts of Malta - but which has now been largely lost to construction development. There are the strongest reasons on these grounds alone - even if the legal arguments under the Structure Plan were not themselves so compelling - for rejecting the development application. Ta' Cenc may belong to a private developer but, in truth, it belongs to all of us. He holds it in trust for generations still to come.

While some development adjacent to Hotel Ta' Cenc, as envisaged under the Structure Plan, seems permissible, it would not be in the wider long-term national interest for this outstanding area of natural beauty - our patrimony - to be radically transformed as is being proposed. Once gone, it is lost forever.