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A GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN THE SHADOW OF WAR IN EUROPE

STATEMENT BY THE INTERDIOCESAN ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION

The campaign leading to the General Elections 2022 is taking place while the invasion of Ukraine by Russia is underway. This is a tragedy for Ukraine, Europe and the whole world. This war is sheer madness and a direct onslaught on what Europe stands for, after building itself again after the Second World War.

The current war has also brought to the fore the fundamental environmental issue relating to the sources of energy and their impact on the climate that maintains life on Earth as we know it. The attack on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, the largest of its kind in Europe, apart from highlighting the fact that the “logic” of war has no limits to its insanity, also highlights the vulnerability of the whole planet to the risks associated with nuclear energy whether in times of war or peace.

Against this depressing backdrop, the Interdiocesan Environment Commission (KA) would like to propose some degree of hope for a more sustainable future for Malta that respects humans and the planet.

Be serious about the shift to renewable energy sources

The main appeal of the KA to the administration that will be in place by the end of the month is to make all efforts both at a national and international level so that Malta, Europe and the whole world move decisively away from the use of fossil fuel and nuclear sources of energy. For too many years countries have dragged their feet in making the shift to renewable energy sources. Symbolic gestures or setting targets that are just not enough to effectively combat climate change cannot be entertained any more. Plans and commitments to make the shift to renewable energy must be reviewed, seriously embarked upon, and earnestly implemented. This also means a commitment to ensure that everybody in the country has access to “solar rights”, that is the building that one lives in has access in one way or another to solar energy.

The KA acknowledges that whatever efforts Malta makes in combating climate change are simply not enough to save itself. The same applies to any single country in the world. A worldwide effort is required. Climate change does not distinguish between Russia and America, or Malta and Fiji. At the same time, lots of talk and discussions in Malta about how to combat climate change can also be a distraction from decisive

action that should already have been taken to safeguard the natural environment and the sustained liveability of the urban environment. Climate change is only one aspect, albeit a massive one, that shapes our environment in Malta and consequently our wellbeing.

The need for real public consultation on development plans and planning policies that serve the common good

In EU fora, from the time of Malta's negotiations to become an EU member till today, Malta has always and rightly so put forward the argument that the EU cannot adopt a one-size-fits-all when formulating any regulation or directive. Unfortunately, what is emphasised at EU level is not always applied to Malta itself. Planning policies, and the decisions based on them, that are acceptable in one locality in Malta are applied to all localities with the ensuing degradation of the urban environment of villages and towns.

Public consultation can, at times, become a sham. While the public consultation is being carried out, big or small but influential narrow interests would be negotiating with the authorities on how the final development plan or policy should be finalised with the authorities acting as smokescreen for such interests. When push comes to shove, who will the new administration listen to: the suggestions that aim to address the common good or the small whispers from vested interests that would have contributed to an electoral campaign? Interesting promises are made in electoral campaigns but then, as usual, the devil is in the detail which is never spelt out in electoral campaigns.

Funds that would have been promised for environmental improvement might end up benefitting more some contractors and targeted interests rather than residents and the common good. The degradation of the Maltese natural and urban environment is not necessarily due to the lack of funds but due to ill-advised plans and policies. What is required to save the environment are laws, plans and policies that require no investment but crucially are based on conflict-free advice to the authorities and the latter's sincere upholding of the common good. Open spaces and, where applicable, the biodiversity they support, are constantly being sacrificed to accommodate so-called "development". No amount of tree planting will ever replace the biodiversity that is lost due to irresponsible development.

The issues that need to be urgently addressed

The KA looks forward to present again to the new administration, as it has been doing for many years since its set up in 2003, its views on the causes of the degradation of the urban and natural environment. As a matter of urgency, apart from the focus on shifting energy sources to renewable sources, the new administration is invited to:

1. Revise the Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development (SPED) and the local plans. Such revisions should be backed by solid data. These are the

two major pillars of development plans which do not hit the headlines or feature in politicians' sound bites. However, they, together with other planning policies and decision-making practices, are the main cause for the shock that citizens express at the degradation of the environment. The local plans should be the final arbiter of the height limitations of every street in the Maltese Islands so that the liveability of the urban environment is preserved. It is totally unacceptable that a web of policies undermines what is shown and stated in the local plan.

2. End the application of the concepts of "legitimate expectation" and "precedent" when decisions on development applications are made. These two concepts have no basis in planning law and are creating developments that go against policy and are incompatible with their surroundings.
3. Publish the revision of the *Rural Policy and Design Guidance 2014*, the public consultation for which closed in August 2020, which has been gathering dust thus allowing more buildings to be erected outside development zones even though, officially, development zones have not been extended.
4. Revise the *Development Control Design Policy, Guidance and Standards 2015* which is wreaking havoc on Gozo's ridges.
5. Be courageous enough to drop any electoral promise if such promise, after the necessary studies are carried out, would result in the erosion of the common good.
6. Take action so that agricultural land in the Maltese Islands is granted a higher protection status than it currently enjoys.
7. Present a Bill in Parliament that aims to partly finance political parties by the State and Members of Parliament have a decent salary that reduces their reliance on businessmen and contractors for donations.

Appeal to voters

Parliament needs people who have integrity, can stand on their own two feet and are able to challenge their own party to uphold the common good. Such people need to be on both Government and Opposition sides of Parliament. The KA appeals to voters to vote wisely to ensure that the respect for the common good is upheld in the next legislature.