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## Getting it right

*David Felice*

The exchange of opinions in The Times of February 5, 8 and 21 between Martin Scicluna and George Pullicino are of great interest to the Chamber of Architects and its members, also because they inevitably expose the wide vacuum that exists between public perception and the realities of our planning process.

In his last contribution, Mr Scicluna contended that "... we must find ways of reducing systemic conflicts of interest by ensuring that technical expertise informs the decisions reached by Mepa without undermining the objectivity, transparency and ethical base on which decisions of such importance are made".

I would support any measure that improves the quality of decisions taken by these boards. But are we sure that "'systemic" conflicts of interest exist?

Mr Scicluna then proceeds to suggest a selection process similar to that in Ireland, where an independent committee is appointed, chaired by the president of the High Court, to select the chairman and other board members. Earlier, he had also referred to the incestuous composition of the boards - again he is presumably referring loosely to both the Development Control Commissions (DCC) and the main Mepa board. I would disagree that these be considered in the same manner.

These boards decide on different types of projects and their composition is totally different. Moreover, though he refers to all members of the different boards, his main thrust is towards the architects members of the DCC. Is he not aware that only four of the 15 Mepa board members are architects, one of whom is nominated by a political party, being also an MP? And that each DCC board is composed of seven members, only three of whom are architects? Are the rest of the board members so spineless that they are led to take decisions that favour the private and vested interests of these architects?

Indeed, if the only proposal arising from Mr Scicluna's contribution is that we need the equivalent of the High Court of Ireland, presumably the office of our Chief Justice, rather than our Minister for the Environment, to nominate board members, then, what can we say, this promises to be another missed opportunity to deal with those real issues that are of primary importance. If the focus is to be on increasing credibility in the system and the removal of all suspicions, do we really think that the removal of architects from these boards is the solution? Do board members have to be non-architects to ensure that they are beyond reproach? Should other sectors of society also be excluded from appointment to the boards for us to have a visibly fair process?

Mr Pullicino provides some interesting statistics in this regard; three per cent of all applications submitted to Mepa are made by architects (on behalf of their clients) who are DCC board members. It would be interesting to ask the minister how many architects actually lobby to be board members or, better still, how

many architects who he has approached to become board members have actually turned down the appointment.

In his first article, Mr Scicluna also referred to how a distinguished senior member of Malta's judiciary - commenting in a personal capacity - has spoken of a web of intrigue, involving a confraternity of inter-connected architects, each looking after their mutual interests. With the same reasoning applied earlier, does not this claim itself represent a conflict of interest? After all, this member of the judiciary is referring to a private case to which he is one of the parties. It would be pertinent to note what the Chamber of Architects had publicly stated with regard to this case:

"...the Chamber has always maintained that the presence of architects on these boards is essential to ensure technical competence, just as much as the presence of other persons, skilled and experienced in other areas, is required. More balance in the composition of the Development Control Commission was achieved when the number of architects on the various boards was reduced to the current levels but it is inevitable that the minister's choice often falls on architects in private practice."

Readers should also be aware that all architects, including those who are not members of the Chamber, are already subject to its code of professional conduct that could lead to the suspension or withdrawal of their warrant to practice.

Does the system work? Well, Mr Pullicino referred to the case of an architect who was a board member and who advertised his services by means of a mail-shot and whose term of office was terminated. This case was originally investigated by the Chamber's Board of Professional Conduct. Other cases, even those indicated by Mr Scicluna, are also currently under the same board's consideration.

Reference was also made to the previous deputy chairman of the Mepa board, architect Catherine Galea and how she was "forced to resign in disgrace". Mr Scicluna could have also referred to her as having resigned gracefully, in a country where the art of assuming one's responsibilities and resigning from public office when one's position becomes untenable, is a rarity.

Ms Galea is a past president of the Chamber of Architects, an office she held with professionalism, enthusiasm and fairness.

Of course, she is subject to the same regulations and code of conduct. But to state, in this particular case which led to her resignation, that the current decision making process has been undermined is a misrepresentation of the reasons given for her resignation. This does little to encourage the right people to come forward or to accept to perform the task of board members.

The point is, of course, that the Chamber of Architects will support any improvement in the selection process. We would also have a lot to say on the way board sessions are conducted but we would also point out that these sessions, where decisions are taken, are open to the public - not a common occurrence in other sectors. But would we not rather that this discussion turned

to other issues like the need for Mepa to work on improving the way it interacts with the public and society in general? Don't we believe that there is the real need for more clarity in policies and a more qualitative, rather than quantitative, approach, with a degree of flexibility being granted to these boards to enable better decision taking? Should we not implement improved procedures in board sittings, like, yes, the ludicrous situation of having board members shift from one side of the room to another when their cases are being decided upon?

This is why the real confraternity of architects in Malta has been asking all political parties to endorse their Position Paper, The Urban Challenge. This document, launched in November of last year, was well received by all the different players in the industry, NGOs, the government, developers, civil society and politicians (you can download it from ).

The challenges raised by our built environment can be overcome through a commitment to the development of a vision to work for better quality places. The definition of a National Policy for Architecture, championed by the government, will be a critical step in this regard, presenting a clear national commitment to quality in architecture and the built environment.

The Chamber of Architects is working to promote the establishment of a National Centre for the Built Environment, which would support research, education, heritage promotion, advisory and design review services to assist in the delivery of places that respect society's needs for an architecture and an urban and rural environment that truly meet our aspirations.

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