



Greener credentials

George M. Mangion

Our politicians are all very hunky dory in exclaiming their heartfelt intentions to reposition sufficient funds for a cleaner air and better environment, but then successive budget deficits have obliterated their noble intentions.

With Lm1,480 million in debt there is little left in the kitty to embark on mega R&E projects. On the positive side we notice that IMF has commented that the economy has manifested "a healthy traction" of late. Dr Gonzi was reported by the media that the government had already taken the decision to connect to the EU electricity grid, through a new submarine cable between Malta and Sicily.

Critics lament that since the building of Delimara power station in the late eighties almost nothing has been invested in alternative energy sources albeit University studies were commissioned on evaluating the occurrence of renewable energy. This is partly

due to the fact that the energy market is still nationalised. The phasing out of Marsa power station will not happen before 2015. Our total dependence on burning fossil fuel is palpable particularly in case of the older Marsa power station which was once touted to be closed down but is still seen belching obnoxious fumes in a densely populated location.

It is true to say that Marsa power station was a worse offender when it was run on coal but converting it to run on lower sulphur fuel oil still carries its dangers. Asthma and respiratory diseases proliferate under such conditions. But are we the only offenders in the EU?

Not really, but it is no consolation that the ex-communist countries still rely on their energy by burning coal fired power plants. Here we note that Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary are among new EU member states resisting binding targets forcing them to invest heavily in renewable energy sources such as wind and solar power. Poland, the Czech Republic and other eastern European nations argue that they cannot afford to invest in costly alternative sources such as wind, solar or hydroelectric power, and prefer to stay with cheaper, but more polluting options such as coal. Coal remains a vital source of power in many eastern European countries and is cheaper than the alternative energy sources being promoted by the EU council of ministers at last week's meeting.

Proverbially it is the EU council of ministers that prods members into aiming for a target reduction in energy switching to greener sources such as wind, solar and biomass. Germany, the previous holder of the rotating EU presidency, desires to persuade the world that Europe is willing to provide a global lead in tackling climate change and lowering CO2 emissions. Ms Merkel, the German chancellor, believes that Europe will not be taken seriously unless it agrees a binding target for the use of renewables - set at 20 per cent of all energy use by 2020 - which could in theory be enforced in the Court of Justice. She faced the risk that Europe's drive to fight climate change could provoke an east-west split at a European Union summit in Brussels during her presidency.

It is a fact that renewables are currently expensive and some

central and eastern European countries including Malta believe that the 20 per cent target could be onerous. EU diplomats said some of the new members also disliked being set mandatory targets by Brussels. France and Finland are also expressing concern about the binding target set at 20 per cent since both countries produce low-carbon nuclear energy and obviously resist the need to switch to alternative energy which is currently more expensive. As a reconciliatory measure, officials from nuclear powered countries suggested that the EU should commit to a separate 40-45 per cent target for "low carbon energy" by 2020, which takes into account both nuclear and renewables and a new generation of cleaner coal-fired stations equipped with scrubbers.

For Malta nuclear energy is out of the question due to space constraints. For this and other reasons Enemalta plans to invest about EUR250 million to expand its Delimara carbon burning plant. Whether this can be partially alleviated by the alternative supply of clean electricity downloaded from a submarine cable link to Sicily is not yet decided.

Collectively we agree about the need to shrink dirty energy produced out of burning fossil fuel and other oils but the tax concessions to home owners and industrial users have not been sufficiently attractive for the latter to invest in expensive solar and/or photovoltaic panels. Could words turn into action by building wind farms on reclaimed land such as the legendary shallow waters around the offshore Hurd bank? It is never too late to start and a lot has been written on the idea of building reclaimed islands where apart from locating wind farms, one can also create marinas and other tourist attractions such as those developed in Sentosa an analogous small island off Singapore.

Another alternative is the higher use of biodiesel fuel which is less harmful to the environment and can be processed locally from re-cycled edible oils or refining maize into ethanol. Our farmers do not produce corn and rape seed in sufficient quantities to be processed into ethanol. Naturally this is because there is no market and no tax incentives for this type of cash crop while the land parcels are handkerchief size. Of late, we

note that virtually all the ethanol produced in the United States comes from maize that is fermented and then distilled to produce pure grain alcohol.

Farmers in the Midwest are sending tons of corn to refineries that turn it into billions of gallons of fuel. Price of corn is on the increase. Brazil is also efficiently distilling acres of sugar cane into the miracle alcohol syrup. Automakers in Detroit have already built millions of cars, trucks and offroaders that can run on it and are committed to making millions more. In Washington, politicians have approved generous subsidies for companies that make ethanol. It comes as no surprise that its production in America has doubled in the past three years, reaching nearly 5 billion gallons in 2006.

As an alternative fuel, when mixed with petrol and diesel it emits negligible carbon dioxide fumes and is fast becoming popular with motorists. Scientific studies show that when blended into petrol in small amounts, ethanol causes the fuel to generate less smog-producing carbon monoxide. Any car fitted with minor modifications will burn petrol or diesel mixed with a small amount of ethanol. But cars must be equipped with special equipment to burn fuel that contains a higher dosage of 10 percent ethanol.

There is also a snag that because ethanol is more corrosive than petrol, and engines have to be fitted with anti corrosive piping and valve seating. Another disadvantage is that because of its corrosive ingredient it cannot be pumped through relatively efficient pipelines, but has to be transported by rail or tanker truck which makes it more expensive to distribute to petrol stations. It is criticised by ecologists that it relies on large scale harvesting of corn, sugar cane and similar crops. To put it into perspective sources say that in US the accelerated demand for ethanol used 12 per cent of the US corn harvest, but so far it replaced only 2.8 per cent of the nation's petrol consumption. Certainly ethanol may only be a partial solution to the problem and wind power combined with solar and wave energy must be used in a supporting role.

The US federal government incentives to the motor industry is encouraging them that half the cars

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they produce will run on biodiesel by 2012. Can our ADT do the same and reduce its registration tax intake on such hybrid cars? Perhaps this can be one of the 2008 budget promises encompassing that all taxis, buses and heavy trucks run on subsidised biodiesel.

Can we afford to ignore the perils of global warming any longer? Subconsciously this may become a hot election issue. Which of the two main political parties carry the greener credentials? No prizes for guessing who wins the next election. To his credit, Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi admitted that the binding targets set by the EU will not be easy to meet, but he added that Malta was determined to give its fair share in the fight against global warming.

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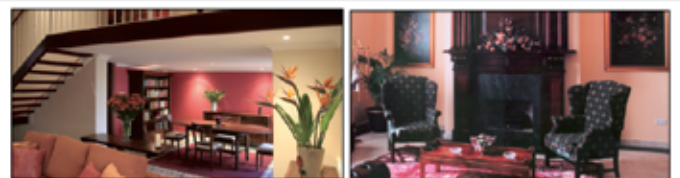
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