

Debate & Analysis



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On a day in November, a dozen 50-year-old trees in Mosta Square were stripped bare of all their branches and transformed into naked trunks to be pulled out of the soil.

It was the latest in a long series of tree massacres that our islands have witnessed over the past few years. Until a last-minute change of heart prompted by public outcry, the plan was to relocate these ficus trees elsewhere, this being a big gamble that would not have guaranteed their survival. While ficus are hardier, hundreds of trees that experienced such traumatic uprooting as part of the Kappara and Central Link projects eventually died. The same will

probably happen to the trees that are being uprooted during the widening of a stretch of the Pembroke-Swieqi main road.

The relocation of trees is symptomatic of a disturbing attitude exhibited by those who seem to see mature trees as an inconvenience and come up with all kinds of excuses to get them out of the way. Sometimes they even try to convince us that new trees will be planted instead of the cut or uprooted ones. Ian Borg – a tree cutter par excellence when he was the minister responsible for upgrading Malta's road infrastructure – even bragged that for every tree his underlings cut down, they planted many others. As if trees grow to a majestic size overnight. Pull the other one!

The mutilation of the ficus in Mosta was part of yet another embellishment project, one of the many that seem to be causing havoc in most towns in Malta in the name of some misguided sense of progress. Just consider what happened to the large trees in Rahal Gdid Square. As inhabitants of a warm and arid country, the last thing we should be doing is chopping down trees. And yet, we seem to prefer pouring asphalt over the soil and paving

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every speck of green. Our idea of open spaces seems to be consistent with a barren landscape on which the sun beats down mercilessly.

One of the most poignant sights that accompanied the butchering of the trees in Mosta was that of hundreds of sparrows and other birds returning to their nests to roost in the evening only to find their homes gone. Videos of these birds circling around the bare trunks in distress were shared by many on social media. When one considers that this happened in a country where the majority of people voted to preserve spring hunting in a national referendum,



it was ironic to come across loads of comments expressing outrage at the fate of the poor homeless birds.

What is it about trees that makes us see them as inconvenient? Why have we become a nation obsessed with clearing all traces of the natural environment to make space for our hideous buildings, piles of cars, and concrete-loving throngs. Those dimwits responsible for such depredation seem not to give a damn about Franklin D. Roosevelt's prescient words: "A nation that destroys its soil destroys itself... Forests are the 'lungs' of our land, purifying the air and giving fresh strength to our people." And why would they? The only time that matters is the present. The only thing that gives them strength is the cash in their

pockets.

Rather romantically Herman Hesse said that "Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth." As a nation governed by opportunistic tree cutters whose dream is to turn this country into some kind of kitschy Dubai wannabe, we are not only being deprived of the ability to interact with the environment but we are also being sold the false narrative that this is all for our own good and that our country will turn out better in the long run. The loss of our trees is allegorical for the loss of the sanctuary that once was the country in which we felt at home.

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