

Reviving Valletta

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Miriam Cremona made a number of worrying statements in her article Valletta Choking On CVA Fumes (January 3).

It seems that Ms Cremona is not well-informed about a number of points and let her misconceptions and negative perceptions prevail.

While Ms Cremona is entitled to her opinion, facts are sacred and cannot be messed about. In this article I would like to clarify a number of points which, evidently, Ms Cremona is not well-informed about.

The Valletta Strategy published and approved by the government in 2006 had a number of objectives, namely to increase accessibility of the capital city and enhance the commercial function of the oldest and most established central business district in Malta but also to reduce the congestion and parking problems of the city. In doing so it also aimed at reducing pollution.

The Valletta Strategy looked at a number of measures that would strike the balance required between the stakeholders using and residing in Valletta. Strategically, priority was therefore given to residents and shoppers over commuters in an attempt to redistribute the share of parking and improve the living environment for residents, visitors and employees spending a number of hours a day within Valletta. The strategy listed the Park and Ride project in Blata l-Bajda, the Controlled Vehicular Access system in Valletta, the introduction of electric minicabs in Valletta, the introduction of sea ferries between coastal towns and Valletta, the Vertical Connections project and, finally, the creation of a child-friendly pedestrian environment in the centre of Valletta.

It was evident from the strategy that one project alone would not work and an integrated approach would be necessary. It is therefore unfair to point at the Controlled Vehicular Access system as the only project to have such a "massive" impact on Valletta.

The V-licence had a number of disadvantages. Mainly that: i) it did not serve the purpose of penalising the worst polluters; ii) it inhibited visitors from accessing shops and services in Valletta because of lack of parking; iii) it penalised restaurants, conference centres, hotels and entertainment venues from attracting visitors because



of lack of access (mostly after office hours); and iv) it penalised any visitor from accessing Valletta on an irregular basis unless s/he paid the annual fee.

In conclusion, the V-licence was very cheap for the daily commuter but very expensive for the one-time visitor requiring a quick errand in Valletta. Apart from this, the V-licence provided also an opportunity for abuse from non-resident licences to register an address in Valletta to avoid paying €46.58 (LM20). In 2005, there were 4,968 vehicles exempt from paying the V-licence, however, a night survey conducted by the Field Services Branch of the Department of Local Councils revealed that there were only about 1,700 vehicles parked on Valletta streets.

The V-licence was also affecting negatively Valletta since the 33,000 vehicles that had access flocked to the city and, in an attempt to find parking, would cruise around the city's narrow streets and increase not only the congestion but also the pollution. Parking surveys carried out by the Malta Transport Authority in September 2006 and September 2007 show that the average length of stay of a parked vehicle during the week dropped from four to three hours and the number of vehicles driving through the streets went down from 6,166 to 5,583 for the period between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.

These initial figures already point towards a more accessible Valletta and a reduced vehicle population, thanks to the overall effect of all the projects together.

Morning traffic data for St Anne Street, in Floriana shows a decline in traffic towards Valletta, going by traffic surveys carried out in 2003, 2004 and 2007.

As for public transport, Ms Cremona will be pleased to hear that overall patronage of buses for the period 2006/2007 grew by a healthy six per cent, increasing bus commuters to just over 32 million last year.

Ms Cremona pointed several times to the increased pollution, despite not having any evidence. The recently-updated Mepa website includes the availability of air quality data. From this, it is possible to download the daily levels of pollutants in the air. For the Msida fixed monitoring station, values for NO, CO, NOX, benzene and SO₂ were downloaded. All except for SO₂ reported a decline between the period March 2007 and July 2007.

Having said that, it is always very difficult to attribute changes in pollution levels to one particular cause, such as traffic, since the Inner Harbour region hosts other major sources of pollution and is affected by sea and wind. In order to establish what Ms Cremona seems to know so well, a thorough study would be necessary on individuals themselves and the indoor/outdoor pollution values of and around the households or offices in which they reside or spend considerable amounts of time. A study which, as far as I am aware, has never been carried out in Malta.

Another piece of misinformation is about the ministry responsible for the projects. Despite being a strategy put forward by the Cabinet Committee for National Projects, all the projects indicated earlier have been handled by the ADT and the Ministry for Urban Development and Roads. The Ministry for Resources and Infrastructure obviously took charge of paving Merchant Street.

May I remind Ms Cremona that the Cabinet Committee for National Projects consisted of four ministers, including both the ministers for land transport and the environment. I am sure that there was never the intention to implement "schemes that increase emissions and which impact negatively on both citizens' health as well as global warming," as Ms Cremona implied.

In another sweeping statement, Ms Cremona attacks the resident's parking. The breakdown of parking spaces in Valletta is as follows: Within the CVA Zone - Residents' green parking bays (141); blue (493); non-Valletta residents' white parking bays (2,009).

Therefore within the CVA zone, the parking reserved for residents (blue and green parking bays) amount to almost 25 per cent. This area includes the commercial, non-residential streets and pedestrian areas in Valletta.

Outside the CVA Zone, residents' green parking bays on ring road amount to 90 whereas non-Valletta residents' white parking bays amount to 634.

The Valletta local council supported the project as it primarily accommodated residents. Since the extension of the pedestrian area and the introduction of the CVA, the council increased enforcement, particularly in evenings and weekends, while continuously monitoring the situation and fine-tuning the residential parking scheme.

Most reserved parking within the CVA zone has also been removed. Most ministries in Valletta, including the Ministry for Urban Development and Roads, the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Health, the Elderly and Community Care, the Ministry of Finance and the , do not have reserved parking in front of their doors anymore. Some due to pedestrianisation and others due to the effort of the implementing agencies. Care was taken in order to maintain the existing disabled parking and efforts were made to increase the availability of motorcycle parking such as in Freedom Square.

In conclusion, the use of road user charges and other demand management tools (such as pedestrianisation and Park and Ride) have been tried and tested successfully in many countries. Singapore introduced a road user charge called the Area Licensing Scheme in 1975, switching to the Electronic Road Pricing Scheme in 1998. Congestion charging was introduced in London in 2003 with the boundary extended west in 2007. Stockholm also introduced a congestion charge in 2007 and the mayor of Milan has just imposed a charge of up to €10 on vehicles entering the city on January 2!

Each city faced a number of challenges while introducing such schemes. What is important for these schemes to, not only be successful but also be sustainable, is that they are constantly monitored and fine tuned. Each city mentioned has its own version of a road user charge or of a park and ride.

This is obviously due to specific socio-economic and geographic characteristics.

There is no magic formula, to ensure that the schemes, once introduced, would work 100 per cent. It is a question of studying, learning and changing as time goes by. Early

indications of the overall projects implemented in Valletta are positive. And it is for these reasons that the CVA project was selected by an international expert body for the case study of the year alongside other projects in Europe.

It is about time that we put aside our prejudices and look at the wider view of reality aiming at reaching a balance between the environment and socio-economic development.

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