

# Futuristic concepts; water vs land transport systems



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Today, I was about to write an article on the ex-post process of no parking permits connected to LESA's repeatedly quoted elusive court case.

However, I decided to park the topic for another time. This week, I heard the Prime Minister replying to journalists, and he explained that the introduction of higher licenses or fees in relation to the usage of motor vehicles is not on the government's agenda. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister explicitly stated that given the current context of road accidents and fatalities, government will be revising the penalties attached to those caught using their mobile phones and texting while driving. Indeed, the idea is to prevent and deter motorists from using their mobile phones while they are behind the wheel, which in my opinion is highly commendable.

Recently, I was following the national Budget debate, with several opinions veering from one subject to another, with prominence given to the traffic congestion on the Maltese islands rather than the positive economic measures, per se. Certainly, if I state that there is no traffic in Malta, those reading this opinion piece, rightly so, would simply conclude that I am not credible in my analysis. Indeed, in Malta we do have traffic problems just like

in other EU cities. The Maltese territory is what it is, and the economic growth evidently increased the acceleration of business activities and obviously the number of private vehicles.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic fuelled the market of online shopping, and a new market for delivery services became the norm. Additionally, the liberalisation of taxi services increased the number of vehicles and their frequency on our roads. The rate of passengers using private taxis seems to have increased given that the cost has also become relatively cheaper. This is further contributing to the increase in traffic because we need additional workers on the road for private passengers' services, and to deliver groceries, food and other related retail products.

In the past weeks, when I was commenting about the national Budget for 2023, I compared Malta's traffic problem with that of Brussels, and Belgium in general, as this is the only country where I lived long enough to understand its underlying problems. Brussels capital does have an underground and a tram system. However, traffic is more congested and the problem is denser, relative to that of Malta, especially when schools open in September. Obviously, between 2020 and 2021, people got used to drive when Malta's economic sectors were not fully operational due to Covid-19 restrictions. For this reason, the roads were almost empty and it was easier to travel from one place to another, especially when schools and most of the lessons were held online or in hybrid mode. Undoubtedly, this is not the reality anymore.

On Friday the Credit Agency Fitch Ratings affirmed Malta's long-term foreign currency issuer default rating at A+ complemented by a stable economic outlook. Indeed, the Maltese economy seems to have gained momentum. An economic growth rate of over 4.2% is projected for 2022 and an accompanying inflation rate



of over 4.1% is also expected. The low rate of inflation is attributed to the fact that the Maltese government is totally absorbing the energy and fuel inflation and partially subsidising limited local food and dairy produce.

However, the reason why I decided to write about the economic success is to gently remind readers that there isn't no such thing as a free lunch; that's the first lesson in rudimentary economics. As much as economic success can bring additional wealth that can be redistributed to middle and lower income earners, we should either accustom ourselves to adjust to this reality or else we must completely change our lifestyles. Changing our lifestyles would mean less materialism, as well as slower economic activity and lower economic growth. Perhaps, changing our lifestyles is attached to the sustainability zeitgeist of the current decade which is being pushed at EU level. Last week I wrote about sustainability and my upbringing within the ambit of COPS27 which is still ongoing.

Obviously, an underground or a tram system cannot solve Malta's traffic problems, just like it did not solve other European cities' traffic congestions. A few days ago, I read in the local media a suggestion for government's consideration to introduce fees and charge non-residents for parking spaces in the village core zones akin to the practices abroad. Certainly, I tried to understand whether the concept is a recommenda-

tion for a quasi-environmental tax to deter private car usage. However, I failed to understand how the notion could alleviate the traffic problems bar generating cash. Surely, we must provide our citizens with an alternative efficient transportation system before introducing additional fees. Also, adding other financial burdens on families in times of crisis, irrespective of positive economic growth, especially after the compensation of the cost-of-living adjustment that was announced as part of the 2023 Budget measures, would certainly prove inopportune.

Unless we consider concentrating the bulk of our traffic in one area and provide an alternative mass transportation system, the problem cannot be alleviated. And by a mass transportation system I am not referring to an underground or a tram system, but a port mass water transportation system. When I was a teenager, growing older, I used to roam around the Cottonera Lines and crossing from one war shelter to another. I learnt the topography of the area just like I recognise my own home. Certainly, I have various ideas of how a mass water transportation system can be infrastructurally built and cost-effectively use different elevated zones in the port area. Surely, the zone is a perfect host for rows of visually hidden renewable energy structures, that can easily power huge underground car parks directly connected to a transporting vessel. For instance, in major European cities, we eas-

ily exchange from an underground system to a train system. The concept would be similar, changing from an underground carpark to a connected mass water transport system within the port area.

Surely, our green ideas must steer away from just imposing a charging fee for parking spaces. We must think futuristically by aiming to construct our own sustainability towns as part of various massive regeneration capital projects. The paradigm shift in sustainability is not just the construction of net zero buildings or renewable energy albeit a necessary foundation. We must reflect on proposing massive capital projects that can rope in the private sector to primarily leverage private capital towards compelling profitable green ventures and perhaps, where possible, blend EU funds. Evidently, even at EU level, we are racing against time. To crowd in private investment, amid the low yields in the green financial markets, we must consider other viable profitable green infrastructure projects for investors to risk their capital.

Confidently, we can explore further ideas at a later stage. Meanwhile, we must carry on using our private vehicles, public transport or other means of land transportation to commute from one place to another until we build our own alternative futuristic mass transportation system. Else, public transport is now free!

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