

Five steps forward for the environment minister

by Chibli Mallat

Like many others, I eagerly anticipated the launch of environment minister Akram Chehayyeb's 'Big Blue' campaign. For one, Chehayyeb has already left a mark of his courage by standing up to the quarry owners and their backers in the government.

He has also distinguished himself from his predecessors by a keen interest in his ministry: previous to his holding the job, there was not a single environmental initiative carried out by the ministry of environment which can be remembered by the Lebanese people.

Chehayyeb seems devoted, and tries to communicate his enthusiasm. Tuesday's press conference was a good illustration. Communication is crucial, since an environmental minister needs to be a master communicator in these times where the media are decisive for disseminating awareness of positive undertakings as well as resistance to environmental violations.

The minister does not seem to be hampered, as were his predecessors, by private interests. This is important for credibility, and one hopes that he is the first of a long series of holders of the environmental portfolio who are not fettered with selfish financial concerns.

Last and not least, Chehayyeb comes to the ministry which is burdened least with regional political interference. This means that he should be able to do much more than his colleagues, but that it also means that he bears a much more severe responsibility. Environment concerns are now central to many Lebanese, who will be judge the chief person in charge for both his vision, and, more importantly, an on how well he implements his plans.

The Arab poet al-Mutanabbi has nice lines about the equivalence of achievements and risks: *ala qadri ahli al-'azm ta'it al-ma'azimu*.

So what do we expect the minister to do? We expect coherence. Coherence involves structure and means. Structure entails a clear, comprehensive vision, a plan, a timetable, priorities, and coordination. Means entail the tools of implementation.

For the ordinary Lebanese citizen, the structure entails the most pressing environmental items, which an environmental minis-

ter must assign a priority rate considering the obvious limitation on resources: five seem particularly acute: the quarries, the sea, the urban and rural building threats to the landscape, air pollution caused by the traffic, and industrial pollution generally.

Quarries

This is not necessarily the most dramatic item, although our green hills look increasingly like a rotten Swiss cheese. The minister has started on that, and he must carry on. Most quarries must be closed down, and those which are not should be regulated. It is now common knowledge that Lebanon has good regulations, but that these regulations are not being respected in spirit.

A few weeks ago minister Chehayyeb vented out his ire at seeing his orders – remember: legal orders, embodied in decrees – not carried out. We want to know more about this story, and if a private person is guilty, we want to see the judiciary move against him or her.

If, in the quarry scandal, a politician is guilty of typical third world filibuster – *taswif* in Arabic, meaning sitting on an issue until it dies down by oblivion or boredom – then this politician must go. My own view is that minister Chehayyeb should resign if he cannot get his orders over delinquent quarries implemented. It is a matter for the survival of the credibility of a central ministry. If the minister cannot have his way over the quarries, he will not have his ways with anything else.

The sea

An environmental minister should start with an issue he can be glaringly and rapidly successful in tackling, and quarries stand for too many industrial and political powerful interests for a quick victory. The minister should be looking for a success which will make his popularity soar, and the people follow him in his subsequent ventures.

The least resisting piece of environmental improvement is a clean sea, and the rivers and brooks that flow into it. So the most adequate field for the minister's involvement may be the Mediterranean shore, which is the country's last lung and one of its most beautiful assets.

New rumblings last week disclosed the minister's interest in cleaning up the sea, as the swimming season lurks round the corner. This is fine, minister, go for it.

The sea can be cleaned up with little effort. It is filthy, but the filth is not overwhelmingly industrial. Clean up the sea, and more than half the population will see it daily, and will be grateful to be given back their most precious natural resource. It should not be too expensive: the returns, in terms of tourism, swimming and well-being are priceless.

Buildings

What can be done with the concrete which is eating up our daily world? Not much, I am afraid. Partly, it touches upon the demographic explosion and individual economics: who would want to build a villa and a garden if a ten-storey building can be raised on the same surface?

As much respect as possible should be given to the existing regulations – which the ministry could try to explain to the lay person in order to raise his awareness. New avenues could be used to enhance the aesthetic look. The new building of Bank al-Mahjar opposite the Concorde is a case in point: our architects rise to the highest international standards.

Some of the achievements of Solidere are another illustration. So it can be done, even if resistance to doing away with the traditional Lebanese houses, à la Beshara Nammur, is alas a seemingly lost battle. We need your best imagination, Mr Minister, in this field, and a lot of work.

Car pollution

Beirut is not the only third world city with that

nasty haze of pollution hovering over it. New Delhi, Djakarta and Cairo have seemingly an even more severe problem.

The ministry should be able to do things here, but it needs the fullest support of other entities: the ministry of transport, for instance, to develop public alternatives: say, the electric tram in Beirut, or a revived coastal railway?

Most importantly, other regulators must move in: it should be increasingly difficult to keep an old car in circulation, and the 1993 law on the eight-year limitation for the importation of second-hand cars is an excellent start.

The tax people must also move in: it is true this would hit the poorest sector, but the benefits to the more economically disadvantaged children, who are the ones who suffer most from air pollution and benefit least from protected clean spaces, would gain in the long run. Considering the relatively cheap petrol the country still benefits from, leaded petrol should be twice as expensive as the unleaded type. And so on.

Industrial pollution

We get here to the more difficult dilemmas. Environmental zealots will naturally want every factory dismantled. Fortunately, they are not in the majority, and Lebanon was able to develop its industry up to perhaps 40 per cent of the GNP before the war, according to some estimates.

The question is: how to get industry back to its pre-war dynamism without further ruining the environment. The answer can only be the route taken by the United States and some European countries: 'factoring in' the environmental cost in a way which industries recognize. This is very hard, but worth the effort.

So five central issues, which need to be confronted with a mix of determination and political opportunism, starting perhaps with cleaning the sea. A minister, however, is not Hercules, and he needs to be attentive to the means of tackling the issues. These I will examine in the next part.

Chibli Mallat, attorney and professor of law at St Joseph, contributed this piece to The Daily Star from Washington. A second part will follow shortly

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