

## Opinion

# CHOGM Returns to Malta: EU and Commonwealth Membership in the Mediterranean

GODFREY BALDACCHINO

The venue and timing of each Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) is bound to shape its character. CHOGM 2015 in Malta presents many unique opportunities for the Commonwealth. The obvious one is to elect a new Secretary-General to lead the organisation for the next four years. Another is for a CHOGM to take place (again) within the European Union (EU). (The Commonwealth heads of government met in Limassol, Cyprus, in 1993, but that country was not an EU member state at that time; and in Edinburgh in 1997.) The previous CHOGM within an EU member state was also in Malta, back in November 2005, with the island state having acceded to EU membership barely 18 months before.

Much has changed in Malta since hosting the previous CHOGM in 2005. The country has clearly usurped its former status as a post-colonial developing state and established itself as a thriving cosmopolitan jurisdiction. Having weathered the 2008 financial crisis fairly well, the country has been a refuge, and a new home, for various expatriates, including many from both EU and non-EU countries. The instability in North Africa, and particularly in Libya, 300 km away, is, however, of particular concern. A growing and more affluent population has generated worryingly high levels of private consumption (e.g. of private motor vehicles); but there are some notable initiatives in alternative energy use (photovoltaic solar panels in particular).

There is an interesting corollary between Malta's experience of Europeanisation and the opportunities presented by a CHOGM event on its shores. A tense national debate about the pros and cons of EU membership had preceded the country's eventual EU accession in 2004; after 11 years of membership, the concerns have shifted dramatically to specific policies, and particularly to how to manage the geopolitics associated with being very much at the edge of the EU. Malta is a small island state, with a land area of just over 315 km<sup>2</sup>, located right at the fault line between the world's most populous and richest trading bloc to the north and a patchily unsettled region, with many potential emigrants looking for a better life, to the south. A humanitarian disaster has unfolded in that stretch of the Mediterranean sea where Malta is located, as human

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*Correspondence Address:* Godfrey Baldacchino, Faculty of Arts, Old Humanities Building, University of Malta, Msida MSD 2080, Malta. Email: [godfrey.baldacchino@um.edu.mt](mailto:godfrey.baldacchino@um.edu.mt)

smugglers rake in profit from dispatching hopeful immigrants to Europe on vessels that may be unseaworthy: for so many hundreds of these, their journey of hope is a fatal one. Although not the main sources of European migration transiting via Malta, I would expect that the representatives of the 17 African countries members of the Commonwealth will be especially interested in reviewing the migration conundrum from the Malta and EU vantage points. This also goes for the candidate tipped to take over as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth in 2016: Botswana's Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba.

Another of Malta's key aspirations within the Commonwealth is to enrich the debate about the socio-economic and political challenges facing small (and often island) states. It is to the Commonwealth's credit that the very idea of a 'small state' as a focus of comparative research and policy analysis exists. Malta has a distinguished record in this field: so successful that, ironically, it (along with Cyprus, and outside the Commonwealth, Iceland) is not considered to be a small island developing state. Malta has pioneered some notable scholarship in a diverse range of issues that affect small states: such as climate change management, examination systems, adult education and economic vulnerability. Moreover, the University of Malta, my employer, is an institution of high repute: it is the oldest university in the Commonwealth outside Britain; it is firmly committed to support such ventures; and it boasts the necessary infrastructural and human resource capacity to ensure their success. In this vein, at the last CHOGM held in Sri Lanka, Malta's Prime Minister, Joseph Muscat, had announced his government's commitment to support the setting up of a Small States Centre of Excellence in Malta, also in acknowledgement of this leadership role. I would expect tangible progress on the setting up of this centre, and an agreement on its terms of reference, at the 2015 CHOGM.

The Malta 2015 CHOGM will also be the first to host a Women's Forum. This will raise awareness of women's issues in Commonwealth countries and show how women's contributions can have a positive impact politically, economically and socially. With the upbeat theme 'Women Ahead Be All that You Can Be', the forum will align with various other local, national and European initiatives that encourage gender mainstreaming and stronger participation by women in the formal labour market. Malta's participation rate among women aged between 25 and 30 years currently stands at around 75%, a rate that surpasses the EU average rate of 66%. Two out of every three students in university education in Malta is female.

The theme chosen for this year's CHOGM—Adding Global Value—speaks to the fundamental challenge facing the organisation. The Commonwealth's soft power, when and if properly applied and administered, can promote change, shame miscreants, embarrass misdemeanour and reward model behaviour. Such an unruffled diplomacy can affect the lives of 2.2 billion Commonwealth citizens, and more beyond, for the better. Proactive on the international stage, well-represented in most global institutions and an acknowledged leader in developing educational programmes around the world, the Commonwealth is an ideal channel, with the necessary resources, to *add global value*. Performing such a role is the very *raison d'être* of the Commonwealth: the regular soul-searching exercises about whether there is yet life in this august organisation in the 21st century would not materialise with such stridency, or would not be contemplated at all, were such an agenda rigorously and scrupulously pursued. CHOGM in Malta in 2015 should provide a timely opportunity for sober reflection, and apposite action.