

A REINVIGORATED COMMONWEALTH

DIPLOMAT MAGAZINE | The Commonwealth Issue, April 2018

High Commissioner for the Republic of Cyprus Euripides L. Evriviades writes from his country's perspective as both an EU and Commonwealth island state

It is a bit of an oxymoron that because of Brexit, the Commonwealth might be reenergised thus acquiring more relevance and visibility. Brexit or no Brexit, the association must keep on reinventing itself in order to meet the ever-increasing challenges of its member states and maintain its relevance on the world stage.

The Commonwealth stopped being the 'British Commonwealth' in 1949. It may be considered an instrument of UK foreign policy, but that is not exclusive to the UK. All its members, including some of the largest countries in the world and some of the smallest, have an equal voice at the table and participate on equal terms. Decisions are taken by consensus. The Commonwealth is as weak or as strong as all its member states allow it to be.

The Commonwealth offers a niche capability on account of its unique membership of 53 countries in six continents; a common language; shared business practices and familiar legal regimes. Lord Howell rightly refers to the Commonwealth as the "Mother of All Networks." It is especially so for small island countries like my own. And small island states are big ocean states. And in our global village where everything is connected to everything else, no island is an island any more. We all face an inescapable interdependence of destiny. We are as strong as the weakest link.

The Commonwealth can be an ideal network for cooperation and coordination for small states in multilateral fora such as the UN, or the IMO here in London. Taking Lord Howell's argument a bit further, Cyprus would like to see the Commonwealth becoming an enabling network for all its member states to achieve their full potential.

It should also have more direct relevance to the Commonwealth citizen. This should be the heart of its activities. This is where Commonwealth civil society is so important. For example, look at the wonderful work done by the Diamond Jubilee Trust in a number of Commonwealth countries to end avoidable blindness and empower young leaders. This, sadly, is coming to an end.

The Commonwealth's soft power is proven by the fact that The Gambia decided to rejoin in February and that other states want to join or be associated with it.

We need to focus on concrete areas of cooperation, capacity building, infrastructure development, access to international finance, diversification of economies and tackling climate change. The perennial question is, of course, how to move from theory to praxis, especially with dwindling budgets.

The initiative for a Commonwealth Blue Charter is something that will give impetus to advance the blue economy and blue growth, areas which are so vital for the majority of the Commonwealth countries, especially islands like my own.

The Commonwealth should seriously examine establishing a bespoke Commonwealth Development Bank. Other organisations, such as the Council of Europe or more recently the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, are good models to study. There is a real need to address financial challenges for vulnerable member states, especially in the aftermath of horrific natural disasters.

Cyprus is in a distinctive position to be one of the two Commonwealth countries, together with Malta, which will remain EU members after Brexit. Our then Foreign Minister, Ioannis Kasoulides, who also Chaired the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) for over two years, floated the idea that was presented within the EU, advocating the need for a closer, structured and institutionalised EU-Commonwealth cooperation. We firmly believe that both organisations should work in complementarity, exploit synergies and avoid duplication.

Taking into account existing partnership arrangements that the EU has with other multilateral organisations and best practices already in place, we believe that there is scope to foster a structured cooperation between the two organisations.

We anticipate that this year's CHOGM will be a watershed one. It behoves us to produce actionable deliverables on the CHOGM theme: 'Towards a Common Future,' and the four priority areas identified in that contest: a fairer future; a prosperous future; a sustainable future and a secure future. Only thus can the Commonwealth reassert its global relevance and appeal.