

A Commonwealth history of Malta

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The islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino (or Malta for short) are a nation-state situated in the basin of the Mediterranean Sea between the three continents of Africa, Asia and Europe. Malta is endowed with harbours and creeks of great strategic importance. From ancient times, it was an outpost at which the earliest settlers had developed an indigenous feeling for safeguarding a sea-girt territory. A common need also developed for appertaining to a larger main or dominion, whether an empire or any other conglomerated or individual power, for purposes of defence. All along, the Maltese struggled to cultivate an identity on the one hand, and to ensure survival on the other. They were invariably caught in an autochthonous insula-imperium connection. Succeeding generations of inhabitants held together and secured autonomy yet were ready to accept a limited form of freedom by subjugating themselves to external collaboration. They were tiny, exposed across a vulnerable frontier, and hence required assistance from abroad. They adopted laws, traditions, values, and beliefs under a series of outstanding rulers and dynasties, but they did so as it pleased and befitted them, according to their own predispositions and likings.

The Maltese and Gozitans speak a native vernacular – Maltese – that is rooted in Semitic, one of the oldest

sub-branches of the Caucasoid family of languages. They emerged from an area where their ancestors did inscribe and bequeath the Phoenician alphabet for posterity. Malta was the situ of some of the primordial megalithic temples of religious worship and astronomical observation. It was a prime municipium in the hub of the Mare Nostrum under the Romans. Its population under varied suzerains along the Late Middle Age testified to acts of innate aspirations within a wider context of belonging to the continental terra firma. Malta is high up in the list that historically contributed to the groves of academe by founding a University of Learning as early as 1592. Malta, under the Order of Saint John (1530-1798), or Knights Hospitallers, was the home of one of the leading surgical hospitals and schools of botany and medicine. Indeed, the Maltese tongue is the legacy of a cultural cross-fertilisation that evolved out of a society's urge for liberty within a bigger sphere of help and protection, thus, a time-honoured heritage and eclectic patrimony.

The Maltese established their relationship with the British Crown by voluntary cession in 1802. They agreed to draw a balance between Melitensium Amor within a fortress-colony province. The remainder of their story oscillated between gubernatorial autocracy and a germ of representation. In 1921, they were finally granted self-government inside a condominium



Mdina is one of Europe's finest examples of an ancient walled city

Photograph: Clive Vella

in compliance with the vision and wish of Viscount Milner and Colonel Leo Amery, Secretary and Undersecretary of State for the Colonies respectively, both deeply involved in the contemporary process to build up some sort of an “Imperial Federation” with the aim of defining the position and co-operation of ex-demesnes. Two years before, Colonel Amery had already trusted that the new Maltese Letters Patent setting up responsible government would strengthen in the Maltese “their being members of the world-wide British Commonwealth”.

Anglo-Maltese relations from 1921 onwards continued to be characterised by local deputies or representatives, in addition to politicians in general, swinging the pendulum between closer (even integrated), ties with their monarch, and further (if not total), dismemberment from the realm. When Prime Minister Dr Giorgio Borg Olivier asked for the bestowal of independence within the Commonwealth that took place in 1964, the United Kingdom acted as godmother as far as Malta’s inclusion was concerned. Duncan Sandys, Secretary of State for the Colonies, told Dr Giorgio Borg Olivier and his delegation in the opening statement at the Independence Conference in London, that if he wanted to affiliate with the Commonwealth, he would certainly be embraced as a free and equal partner in “this great world-wide association of sovereign nations”. Duncan Sandys not only reverberated but reiterated Leo Amery’s declaration.

Malta and the Commonwealth had already achieved a remarkable harmony, as a dependency within a royal domain, in between the two breakthrough, epoch-making, constitutional advents of 1921 and 1964. In 1955, the Government of Malta generously provided a location outside the Renaissance-cum-Baroque capital city of Valletta, on which a memorial was erected to commemorate the deceased of all the air forces of the Commonwealth who had gallantly fallen in raid and sortie in the course of World War Two. Malta’s intimate bond with the Commonwealth was so perpetuated immediately after the voluntary association’s formal creation in 1949. Now, Malta as an independent society with a seat and a voice within the Council of Europe and the United Nations recognised from the outset the urgent necessity to be an integral part of the Commonwealth as much as the Commonwealth affirmed the overall significance of Malta within its fold. Malta was a natural and quintessential bridge of co-ordination guided by principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law pursuant to international treaties and municipal charters.

In other words, Malta was unavoidably a formidable and ideal rendezvous for the convening of fora that would bring together extremely diverse peoples with

different levels of resources and capacities within the Commonwealth. No doubt, Malta was set to excel as an attraction and model for unity of groups and persons. In 1970, the Secretariat identified and praised Malta in a study which it published on tourism within the Commonwealth because it considered that its preference had many an invaluable asset such as an advantageous location; easy accessibility by air or sea from a vast regional market; very equable climate; multifarious maritime activities; wealth of archaeological remains; and last but not least a well-known, chequered and eventful, past. The Commonwealth opted forthwith for Malta to welcome the first proceedings ever held on human ecology and the environment.

In 1974, Malta became a Republic with a President as Head of State. The political movements of the time made unprecedented history because they joined forces in Parliament not only to elevate their motherland to a higher status but also to express unanimity in favour of keeping their country of the Eight-Pointed and George Crosses, buttressed and entrenched within the Commonwealth. A Malta-Commonwealth continuum was enshrined in another veritable milestone. The two sides had reached a comity without parallels that was ultimately the Maltese’s own choice reflecting an inborn self-determination within a broader whole, rather than the outcome of an exterior cultural cringe implemented by way of imperial policy and approach to decolonisation. In fact, Malta was soon to sponsor, under the auspices of the Commonwealth, a symposium that discussed ways and means to combat subservience to overseas standards by advocating new literature in English within a Commonwealth framework.

Malta is hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) for the second time in the last ten years. In 2005, it held the meeting after it had fixed another landmark by becoming a full member of the European Union two years previously. Malta is among the smallest and youngest mouthpieces within the four corners of the world, yet it is vociferous and renowned for the promotion of peace and stability. It boasts the necessary infrastructure and technological facilities to host any summit of a cosmic standing. In 2013, therefore, it gained an overwhelming support to be, twice in a decade, the venue and pillar for the organisation of the principal biennial meeting of one of the fellowships. CHOGM has grown increasingly relevant to actual and future generations as well as to economic and geopolitical realities in a globalised planet. Malta has, time and again, consolidated and crystallised the universal respect and credit that it enjoys by virtue of its physical and spiritual omnipresence within the Commonwealth.

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