“MALTA AND THE EU – A MEDITERRANEAN PERSPECTIVE”

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It is difficult to speak of relations between Malta and Australia without emphasising the strong personal contact that exists between our two peoples. Most Australians know people living in Australia who were born in Malta, or who have Maltese-born parents. Most Maltese have one or more of their relatives living in Australia.

This reality has ensured that, despite the great physical distance between our two countries, relations between Malta and Australia have always been characterised by warmth and familiarity.

On the more formal level, Malta and Australia have enjoyed full diplomatic relations since Malta’s independence on 21 September 1964. They have both appointed resident High Commissioners for many years and Malta (also) has a network of career and honorary consular officers in Australia, including career Consuls-General in Melbourne and Sydney. I have no hesitation in describing the political relations between our two countries as excellent.

Our shared belief in democratic values and a market economy, our active participation in the Commonwealth, and a shared official language also contribute significantly to the healthy relations between our two countries.

I have no doubt that these close ties will be further enhanced by Malta’s membership in the European Union. It is my Government’s intention that, by the end of this year, Malta would have successfully concluded its accession negotiations. The outcome of these negotiations will then be the subject of a national referendum and I am confident that the Maltese people will endorse Malta’s membership of the Union. Malta would then be expected to join the present fifteen Member States in the Union, with up to nine other countries.

I would like to highlight the fact that, on accession, Malta and Maltese citizens will participate with full rights in all the institutions of the Union, including its decision-making bodies.

In this context, we are aware that there are some issues on which differences occasionally arise between Australia and the European Union. On accession, Malta
will work with the other Member States of the Union to ensure that, when such issues do arise, these are addressed to the satisfaction of all parties involved. Let me assure you that, after Malta’s accession to the EU, Australia will continue to find in Malta a sympathetic and supportive friend.

I now wish to focus on the main theme of today’s discussion that of the Mediterranean dimension of Europe’s next enlargement.

With the days of Europe’s East-West confrontation well and truly behind us, there is now an increasing realisation of the need for all European states to address, in a structured and comprehensive manner, the potential threats posed by a gaping North-South divide.

As it prepares to take in new members, Europe is finally paying greater attention to its southern flank. The Euro-Med Process is on the move, having recently received an invigorating shot in the arm through the Action Plan drawn up at the Foreign Ministers’ Conference held in Spain, earlier this year. The need for a deeper European engagement in the Mediterranean was also clearly signalled by the latest explosion of the conflict in the Middle East, as well as the long unresolved problems in the Aegean and the Balkans. We see the pursuit of peace and stability in this area of turmoil as a noble challenge. We also believe that we have a shared responsibility to achieve it.

Europe’s evolving relations with the nations bordering the Mediterranean finds Malta in a unique position to make a meaningful contribution. Conscious of this, Malta actively participates in several on-going regional dialogues. In the Western Mediterranean Forum, given that the Western Mediterranean is free from political strife, Malta actively supports the development of tangible forms of cooperation. This Forum (serves) as a catalyst of ideas and reflection on regional issues that are debated within the context of the larger regional body - The EuroMediterranean Conference.

Malta is also active within the Conference on Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean process of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Malta considers that Parliamentarians have a unique role to play in the harmonisation of ideas and the
furtherance of co-operation among states in the region and, for this reason, it has been advocating the establishment of a regional assembly.

Earlier this year, in Marrakech, this Conference adopted the text of an instrument proposed by Malta, entitled, “Fundamental Characteristics of the future Parliamentary Assembly of Mediterranean States”. In carrying forward this initiative, Malta believes that the future Assembly should provide a unique political setting that would bring together, on an equal footing, all the littoral states of the Mediterranean in a regional forum of their own.

Malta’s role in the Mediterranean (affairs) is not only based on these new developments, but stems from the long history of active participation in the evolution of civilisation within the Mediterranean basin. Straddling the crossroads of prehistory and modern history, Malta was located in the mainstream of the cross-fertilisation of ideas and cultures between the ancient East and the ascendant West.

Inevitably, we were embroiled in the titanic struggles for mastery of this great sea. We experienced hard times and deprivation, and endured siege and sacrifice. Malta was not only exposed to the greater glories and achievements of man in the Mediterranean, but also to his vain struggles, conflicts and attendant miseries.

The key to this role lies in Malta’s geographic position. From the mysterious days of prehistory, which left us with the oldest free-standing monuments in the world, Malta has shared in the Mediterranean experiences of the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, those pioneers of pan-Europeanism – the Knights of St. John - the Italians, Spanish, Portuguese, French and finally, the British.

All these influences have come together to make us partners for Europe in the Mediterranean, and for the Mediterranean within Europe. Particularly because of our language, ours would be a voice of Europe easily received by the peoples of the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. It is that voice that we would like to place at the service of Europe, in the gradual build up of a multi-functional, cross-cultural network along the length and breadth of the Mediterranean, which is itself a
prerequisite for a viable, peaceful Euro-Mediterranean economic space. We bring with us a Mediterranean viewpoint, but one that is also essentially European, rooted as it is in a Christian and Latin culture.

However, it has to be said that we who live and work in the middle of this busy waterway are acutely aware of the disparity that exists between the northern and southern shores, and we are indeed dismayed at the number of disturbing events that we often witness at first hand. Many of these have arisen from the somewhat contradictory nature of the Mediterranean. At first glance, it may appear unified due to the ever-present sea and common topography. On closer scrutiny, however, the Mediterranean can also be seen to be disparate due to the fact that it is home to a plethora of social inequalities, economic imbalances, religious differences, demographic pressure, environmental degradation and, at times, outright conflict and conflagration.

Fortunately, we have so far managed to forge our own identity by maintaining some distance from the very real threats faced by others in the region. As a nation, we are also fortunate in that we are united culturally and politically, with a long tradition of democracy. We have no racial, religious or border problems, and we are happily at peace with ourselves and with the rest of the world. However, we are still not immune from the present day challenges and risks that are brought to bear on all partners through the illegal trafficking of arms, drugs and persons, as well as organised crime and clandestine migration. Nor are we immune to their spill-over effects.

This is the background that defines one of our key objectives in joining the European Union at the next enlargement. We are firmly convinced that the EU is an indispensable factor in the transformation of a historically troubled and divided continent into an area of co-operation, security and prosperity. We are equally convinced of the role that every European nation, large or small, can and should play in this process.

Our accession negotiations have now entered their last and most sensitive phase, and Malta is well poised, subject to the will of the people to be expressed through a
referendum, to join the Union in time to participate in the elections to the European Parliament which are due to be held in June of 2004. These negotiations have not been easy, but all sides have shown flexibility and a real desire to conclude the process successfully. The results obtained so far are tangible proof of the significant progress we have achieved, and further strengthen our resolve to conclude the negotiations within the current year.

Our push towards membership of the Union has not, and does not, impinge negatively on our relations with countries on the Mediterranean littoral. On the contrary, the warm relations we have enjoyed over the years with our Mediterranean neighbours will not only continue but should develop further with Malta in the Union.

As early as 1972, Malta espoused the concept that the security of Europe was inextricably tied to security in the Mediterranean, and vice versa. It was clear to us that the very proximity of the two areas, along with the consequent impact of trans-boundary phenomena such as migration, environmental degradation, and international crime and terrorism, made this interdependence all the more vital and persuasive. It would be fair to say that most international organisations now agree with this position. The Mediterranean dimension is now an integral part of several European security organisations, such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation, and NATO’s Partnership for Peace.

Possibly, the breakthrough came in 1995, when the European Union set up its Euro-Mediterranean Partnership as a means of developing integrated co-operation with twelve Mediterranean partners in the political, economic and social spheres. This was, without a shadow of a doubt, the most comprehensive and tangible initiative of all, largely due to its holistic approach to the issues concerned. The most developed of the three pillars of the Euro-Med initiative is probably the economic one, which envisages the conclusion of a free trade area between Europe and the Mediterranean by 2010.

The Ministerial meeting in Valencia I referred to earlier underlined the need for greater depth to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership by adopting a Plan of Action.
This Plan includes a number of initiatives that will give the required political impetus to the Barcelona Process and to the objectives of the Barcelona Declaration. More importantly, there was condemnation of the recent terrorism and violence in the Middle East, backed by an urgent call for the reaffirmation of various UN resolutions for a political solution.

Additionally, the conclusion of eleven of the twelve Association Agreements between the EU and Mediterranean states opened a new stage in the creation of the region’s proposed free trade area. The Arab world, in a similar vein, is also working to conclude its own internal free trade area by the year 2007. On a bilateral level, Malta is working to conclude bilateral free trade agreements with countries along the North African and Middle Eastern shores.

This drive towards greater economic integration can also be seen in the measures taken by Mediterranean countries towards increasing their capacity to compete in today’s shrinking world. Malta too is not lagging behind, and now pursues a policy geared at extending its current role as a major tourism destination and manufacturing location to services in general, particularly related to the financial sector and IT.

This will serve to enhance the country’s potential as a convenient and cost-effective launching pad for businesses interested in penetrating the North African, Middle Eastern and Southern European markets.

However, while more countries around the southern Mediterranean shores are acknowledging the driving force of commercial partnerships, and are building the necessary infrastructure to attract inward investment, instability in the region remains a large concern. The linkage between trade and stability further reinforces the logic behind Malta’s simple equation that security in Europe and the Mediterranean are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

The deterioration of the situation in the Middle East is, however, particularly worrying. Malta strongly urges the cessation of fighting and violence in order to pave the way for meaningful negotiations. Malta believes that lasting peace in the region can only come about with the early establishment of a democratic and independent
Palestinian state existing alongside Israel, both living within safe and secure boundaries.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to reiterate that it is our desire to combine our European vocation with the realities of our own Mediterranean location. My Government believes that the best means of achieving this goal is through membership of the European Union.

On accession, all countries bring to the Union their own particular viewpoints and their own particular contributions, enriching the EU’s diversity in the process. We believe that Malta will enhance the Mediterranean dimension of the Union and contribute to the building of ever stronger and more reliable links with our Mediterranean partners. We are convinced of the role Malta can play in bringing to this area of five hundred million people a greater cohesion at the political, commercial and cultural level. Thank you.