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CPA Address

What does the work of a High Commissioner involve?

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Firstly I would like to thank CPA for inviting me to address you on this special day at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Allow me to tell you a little bit about myself. I am here, in my capacity as High Commissioner of Malta to the Court of St James.

However, I am also a chartered accountant by profession, a businessman by choice and a diplomat by chance.

One morning in November 2008 I received a call from the Office of the Prime Minister requesting a meeting with him. We met a few days later and he personally offered me the post of High Commissioner in London. It was a completely different world he was asking me to enter, but his demonstrated faith in me and my perpetual bias in favour of the UK, my second favourite country (after Malta of course!) made me accept his proposal gladly and without hesitation embark on this extraordinary journey.

I retired from the accountancy profession in March 2000 and over the past 10 years I had already been entrusted with chairmanships of large government agencies seeking to promote Malta, such as Malta Enterprise, FinanceMalta, the Accountancy Board at the Ministry of Finance and the Malta Stock Exchange. I also held numerous chairmanships in the private sector. However nothing came close or could prepare me enough for the diplomatic world.

I arrived in London accompanied by my wife Susan and straight away we got stuck in, fulfilling the mandate of High Commissioner and spouse, determined to serve with distinction. To be honest with you, I had a bit of extra pressure put on me, since I was handpicked by the Prime Minister and knew that with interest he was closely following my work here. Well the fact that I am still in this position, nearly two years on, must mean that he has at least been satisfied with my performance so far.

The highlight of my posting has definitely been on 10 June 2009, when I presented my Letters of Credence to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace. Nothing has given me more pleasure than hearing the Queen remark on the excellent relations that exist between Malta and the United Kingdom and her trust that my posting will further strengthen this. It was definitely one proud moment! From her time residing in Malta as a newly married Princess, Her Majesty also fondly recalled her love for Maltese oranges,

particularly the ones from the garden at the Presidential Palace. Since then, at Christmas I have made it a point to send to Her Majesty a box of oranges from the President's garden.

But there's more to being a High Commissioner than sending oranges...

So let's have a look at what being a High Commissioner is all about.

To begin with, is a High Commissioner any different from an Ambassador? We know that an ambassador is a diplomatic official accredited to a foreign sovereign or government, to serve as the official representative of his or her own country.

Because members of the Commonwealth have or had a common head of state, they do not exchange ambassadors, but instead have High Commissioners, who represent the government, rather than the head of state. In diplomatic usage, High Commissioner is considered an equivalent rank and role to an Ambassador.

Despite the differences in terminology, since 1948 Commonwealth High Commissioners have enjoyed the same diplomatic rank and precedence as ambassadors of foreign Heads of State, and in some countries are accorded privileges not enjoyed by foreign Ambassadors. For example, here in the UK, the British Sovereign receives High Commissioners before Ambassadors, and sends a coach and four horses to fetch new High Commissioners to Buckingham Palace, whereas new Ambassadors only get two horses. Speaking personally, it was quite an experience for me and my wife on this four horse drawn carriage. High Commissioners also play a part in important ceremonies of state, such as the annual Remembrance Sunday Service at the cenotaph in Whitehall (commemorating Commonwealth war dead), Trooping the Colour and royal weddings – as you will realise in the forthcoming wedding of Prince William to Catherine Middleton.

You might be at a stage in your life when you are considering different career paths. Perhaps, and it might be why you were selected to be here today, you are giving the diplomatic route its due consideration. So let me tell you what the requirements are to become a High Commissioner. There is no number of GCSEs, A levels or degrees which are a requisite - though of course certain subjects might prove to be more relevant at times. What about languages? While having an aptitude for languages is an advantage, I strongly believe that the most important thing is to have a wider set of aptitudes. The key thing is to have an interest in international politics, a personal resilience and the flexibility to do a job that involves so much travelling around.

In his book, Sir Christopher Meyer, former British Ambassador in Washington, lists the qualities an ambassador or high commissioner needs: insatiable curiosity about other countries, an abiding interest in foreign policy, willingness to spend half your working life outside your country, and profound knowledge and understanding of some foreign countries.

He further says that “you must be able to negotiate, to win the confidence of the powerful and influence them, to understand what makes a foreign society tick, to analyse information and report it accurately and quickly, including what your own government does not want to hear”.

Sir Christopher Meyer summarises this in the most apt of ways when he says that you need "a quick mind, a hard head, a strong stomach, a warm smile and a cold eye".

I'm sure you've heard of the term career or non-career ambassador or high commissioner. The role of a career or a non-career high commissioner is identical, only perhaps performed in a slightly different manner. Career high commissioners would have joined the diplomatic service and enjoyed a long career of postings abroad and/or at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the capital. Non-career high commissioners, just like me, are political appointees, very often directly appointed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs if not the Prime Minister. It is argued that it is very useful to involve 'civilians' in these posts. Nowadays certain countries have as little as 30% of their ambassadors and high commissioners as career diplomats. Non-career high commissioners bring to the job, certain experiences one gains in the private sector or non-governmental organisations. These high commissioners prove to be very effective in their decision-making. They make decisions on what really needs to be done and not on what affects their careers down the line. Very often you will find that they have a direct link to the Prime Minister, avoid certain bureaucratic hurdles and get a job done quicker.

In summarising my work as the personal envoy of the Government of Malta to the Court of St. James, this is the best I could come up with: The High Commissioner informs the government of what is going on in the UK, negotiates on Malta's behalf, watches over the development of bilateral relations in all fields, and ensures the protection of the interests of Malta and her nationals in the UK.

But really my work varies greatly all the time. No one day is similar to the next. There is no typical day but if there was I could be signing a bilateral agreement on double taxation, reviewing Commonwealth Foundation scales of contribution, drafting a Malta visit programme for a potential investor, assisting Maltese in distress in the UK and on the phone with the Prime Minister to address major issues such as the latest Libyan crisis.

Some might say a posting in London is easy because Malta already enjoys excellent relations with the UK...and that it would be more difficult to run a post in a country where these relations are not so good. I beg to differ. It is more challenging to constantly keep the high standards than if there was a lot of room for improvement. All the time I am having to wreck my brains to come up with initiatives which distinguish my mission in London from Maltese missions in other countries. To be frank there is also a bit of healthy competition between us in London and other Malta missions such as the ones in Paris, Brussels, Rome and Berlin. Modestly I can tell you London is leading the way in many areas.

To reflect the mandate given to me by the Prime Minister I have prioritised and focus on business initiatives. As a flag bearer for Maltese business, I constantly strive to attract business to Malta - in whatever I do and wherever I am. Business networking is done strategically but sometimes a business contact is initiated just sitting next to some entrepreneur at a function. My intention is to bring awareness of Malta's opportunities to UK business people who may have operations outside the UK and to get them to relocate to Malta – as was successfully achieved with easyJet and SRTechnics. On a monthly basis, I organise short trips and invite potential investors to Malta. In a few days they can witness for themselves what Malta has to offer whilst meeting key government people.

Although business initiatives take up a lot of time, I make sure to carry out important political work with the same commitment. Bilaterally, meetings with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are given utmost importance. The FCO regularly briefs me on matters of mutual significance. Just a couple of months ago I accompanied my Foreign Minister to a meeting with UK Foreign Secretary William Hague at the FCO, where they discussed bilateral relations, migration, the Middle East and the EU-Libya framework agreement. In the next few months we expect our Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi to come to London on an official visit to meet UK Prime Minister David Cameron. I will be making all the preparatory arrangements and will be accompanying him throughout his visit.

Malta is both a member of the EU as well as the Commonwealth. From all the Commonwealth countries, only the UK and Cyprus wear these two hats. In essence, this means that my Malta High Commission, needs to cover everything larger embassies like France, Italy and Germany as well as High Commissions such as Canada and South Africa deal with. It is no easy feat. On a regular basis I have to juggle between EU Heads of Mission meetings and Commonwealth Secretariat Executive Committee meetings, Commonwealth Foundation and Board of Governors meetings.

Another area of significance I give priority to is that of promoting Malta's image in the UK, not only in the strict business sense as mentioned earlier. The High Commission organises a multitude of cultural and social events throughout the year to showcase and promote Malta and its people. We also participate in international events such as fairs to promote Malta as well as its products and services. The media is a great tool which I use to achieve this promotion. Conversely I also have to monitor what is said and written about Malta, correcting misconceptions if they arise and explaining Malta's position. I know that some large embassies and high commissions employ whole teams of PR professionals to deal with the media. In our case everything is done in-house. We simply don't have the resources for it.

Networking is something I strongly believe in. Possibly it is because of my background in the private sector, or because it arises out of a basic human need to communicate with others. Apart from the obvious networking with other Heads of Missions and diplomats, I organise various networking events with the sole purpose of exchanging ideas as well as placing

Maltese government agencies, businesses and companies in good stead within the various sectors in the UK. Just a few days ago I held a networking event for Maltese business professionals working in the City. I repeatedly keep in touch with Honorary Consuls of Malta all over Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I am aware of the set time allocated for my speech so I won't go into the multitude of other areas my UK brief delves into. On top of all this I am also accredited as non-resident Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland. But that's a completely different matter as I'm not High Commissioner but Ambassador there and the embassy is run remotely, bar a few quarterly visits.

No successful High Commissioner is a one man band. As in the case of Malta, the smaller the mission it is, the more precious human resources are. I rely heavily on a small number of people, around a dozen, to assist me in completely running the mission, from the day to day consular work to effecting changes to reflect Maltese foreign policy.

As the Rt Hon Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago has just very eloquently highlighted, this year's Commonwealth Day theme is 'Women as Agents of Change'. It cannot be better reflected at the Malta High Commission where the staff are predominantly women. I have a small team of highly educated and motivated personnel who are responsible for political, consular, medical, communications, accounts and administration matters at the mission and although I oversee their work, they have proved time and time again to be reliable and professional.

Finally, the successful role of High Commissioner has got to be supported by a spouse who understands the exigencies of this diplomatic post. I am very lucky to have had my wife Susan by my side during my posting in London. From her first day in the UK, she took it upon herself to make improvements to the Official Residence and got it up to her exacting standards. She says this is very important as 'it's a little bit of Malta in the UK' and it showcases Maltese hospitality when we host receptions or dinner parties at home. She has taken protocol in her stride and no seating plan is too daunting for her nowadays. My wife is also invited with myself to many of the state functions. She does her best to attend and prioritises this over her busy social calendar.

I better stop here as I understand that you must be looking forward to lunch...and some networking of your own.

I hope you have enjoyed an insight into the life of a High Commissioner as much as I have enjoyed sharing it with you all this morning.

Thank you.