

Commonwealth Conversation

*Strengthening Ties between the Commonwealth and the EU
in Agriculture, the Blue Economy and Maritime Security – An
Exchange of Views*

Meeting of UK-based High Commissioners

Report: November 2017



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

About this Report

The Royal Commonwealth Society convened the latest in its series of Brexit Roundtables on the 7th November 2017. The event was kindly hosted at the Cyprus High Commission and chaired by H.E. Euripides Evriviades, High Commissioner of Cyprus. The guest speaker was Mr. Nicos Kouyialis, Cypriot Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment.

The full opening remarks made by Mr. Kouyialis can be found as an annex to this report.

Mr. Nicos Kouyialis

Brexit offers an opportunity to jointly address issues and has made the space for a timely debate about the future of the Commonwealth. We must establish formal cooperation between the EU and the Commonwealth, and avoid the duplication of work. Cyprus will be a messenger and strong voice for the Commonwealth in the EU.

Cyprus has always supported free trade agreements among the EU and third countries, especially when these countries are members of the Commonwealth, with which there is a special link. Cyprus will support the EU Commissions proposals for opening up talks for the free trade agreement with Australia and New Zealand.

Agriculture is crucial for job creation and economic growth. The Commonwealth could be a key stakeholder in the post-2022 review on the Africa-Caribbean-Pacific states (ACP) agreement. The blue economy is a key area for potential partnership between the EU and the Commonwealth. The EU could do more to support Commonwealth countries, particularly in terms of infrastructure and logistical assistance.

There should be a greater focus on small island states. Ocean protection is a high EU priority, and they have convened an upcoming international conference on this topic in Malta. Science and technology, particularly agricultural research, has a high potential for partnership. We must urgently move from the COP21 Paris Climate Agreement to concrete action.

EU-Commonwealth cooperation must not be about quick fixes, but instead long-term structured cooperation that can be expanded also in multilateral fora like the UN in both New York and Geneva. The Commonwealth Secretary General could be invited to attend EU council meetings such as on the Development of Agriculture, to promote their interests.

Question and Answer Session

One Pacific High Commissioner suggests the EU Common Agricultural Policy (EU-CAP) is the biggest barrier to EU free trade with the world. They ask whether it will be possible to wind back some tariff quotas on products like fresh beef. They note that when the EU expanded it did not enlarge quotas to accommodate this change; now that it is shrinking again there is no reason these quotas should be reduced. Mr Kouyialis responds that Cyprus is confident trade barriers can be overcome, however it must be noted that internally the EU has a huge variety of competing national and regional interests regarding agriculture and agricultural trade policy.

An African High Commissioner states there is a problem of market access that needs resolution. A Caribbean High Commissioner adds that trade is not just about Free Trade Agreements. EU policies like the dumping of subsidised surplus sugar crops damages the trade of developing nations. There must be structured communication with the EU on this. On this point, a further Caribbean High Commissioner adds that the differing levels of development in countries must be acknowledged in trade policy, so developing countries are not crowded out. Mr Kouyialis cannot state what measures the EU may be planning, but there needs to be action that leads to tangible results. The sugar issue is of the utmost importance.

A Caribbean High Commissioner also questions EU policy regarding forestry, and asks if current varying national rules and standards for timber could be unified. Mr Kouyialis states the rules must have flexibility, but this is something that could be examined by the European Commission.

An African High Commissioner welcomes the EU provision of capacity-building resources available for capacity building and climate resilience in small states. However there should be more collaboration on technology and research innovation. The Commonwealth is in a unique position to provide technical resources. There is a need to identify new trade products and cut red tape for trade with the EU, particularly reducing transport costs.

A Caribbean High Commissioner says that sustainably harnessing the blue economy is crucial; for Caribbean nations the size of their ocean territories is many times larger than that on land. Sustainable ocean resources can drive economic growth. A Pacific High Commissioner adds that they are pleased the EU has organised a conference on sustainable oceans. They are concerned about the increasing amount of plastic in the ocean, and also note that having overfished their surrounding ocean territories, the EU now imports significant amounts of fish from Pacific nations. Mr Kouyialis agrees, noting that island state economies are dependent on a healthy marine environment. Protection must be the first priority, followed by how to utilise these resources. The EU could provide joint-funding for Commonwealth projects in this area. The EU is to spend half a billion euros on protecting oceans, particularly ending plastic contamination and dumping; many Commonwealth countries may have access to these funds.

A Pacific island High Commissioner expresses concern about the potential for post-Brexit difficulties in marketing products separately to the UK and the EU. There is a concern that existing agreements on agricultural products will expire, with quota restrictions for ACP countries lower than current concessions. Mr Kouyialis suggests challenges can be

overcome, and that the EU-CAP is not exhaustive. The EU cannot produce everything and relies on imports; resource scarcities like water in Southern Europe will only increase the need for imported agricultural goods.

An African High Commissioner expresses concern about future humanitarian assistance from the EU, and suggests that EU should collaborate with the Commonwealth more closely on this to create effective relief systems. Mr Kouyialis says this is extremely important for Cyprus, noting that the EU Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management Commissioner is Cypriot.

“Strengthening Ties between the Commonwealth and the EU in Agriculture, the Blue Economy and Maritime Security: An Exchange of Views”
7 November 2017, 02:30pm-04:00pm

Opening Remarks by the Minister of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environment of the Republic of Cyprus, Mr Nicos Kouyialis

Dear High Commissioner of Cyprus,
Dear Representatives of the RCS,
Your Excellencies, dear friends,

It is my pleasure to be here today and to take part in this informal roundtable discussion. Today’s meeting aims at an exchange of views about agriculture, blue economy and maritime security, and how we can reinforce collaboration among the Commonwealth and EU states.

I would like to thank my good friend the High Commissioner of Cyprus, Euripides Evriviades, and the Royal Commonwealth Society for this much promising initiative.

I acknowledge the important role of RCS in the organisation of this kind of informal discussions; these are significant opportunities for establishing communication among our countries and addressing issues of mutual interest and high significance.

Now as the title of the event stipulates, the focus of today’s discussion will be in the areas of agriculture, blue economy and maritime security. Of course, all the above mentioned areas are extremely wide and cannot be confined into a day’s agenda.

However, I will try to provide some very brief points, as opening remarks, and then we can exchange ideas and views.

From the outset, please allow me to state this: Cyprus argues that is high time to promote a long term strategic institutional and structured cooperation between the EU and the Commonwealth. We believe that it is time to address the fact that the EU has not still established an institutional, organisation-to-organisation, working relationship with the Commonwealth.

It is now, more than ever before, that an effective cooperation between the Commonwealth and the EU is a necessity. UK’s withdrawal from the EU creates a new status-quo, which needs to be addressed attentively and cautiously. Brexit should not be the driving force, but rather the willingness between states to find new ways (and platforms) to cooperate and jointly address issues of environmental, financial and sociocultural significance.

We need to acknowledge the fact that this development generates a timely debate on the future and renewal of the Commonwealth. In this sense, I would like to add that we need to streamline EU-Commonwealth cooperation for working together, avoiding duplication and creating a close working and result-oriented collaboration platform. The EU and the Commonwealth already work in parallel in a number of areas. Decisions and policies made

by the EU affect directly or indirectly the Commonwealth nations for a large number of issues related to the domains of agriculture, blue economy, maritime, fisheries, trade etc.

For example, when the EU makes decisions about its trade partnerships, export and import policies, phytosanitary standards, environmental policies, fisheries quotas, policies for climate financing and climate change, or policies for supporting the protection of Oceans, the provision of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance after natural disasters etc, all these policies have a direct or indirect impact on Commonwealth countries. As the vast majority of the Commonwealth nations are island states and countries that, for example, hugely rely on their agricultural and farming exports to Europe, or via Europe, there is scope for examining tangible ideas for promoting and implementing the exchange of ideas.

Cyprus has always supported free trade agreements among the EU and third countries, especially when these countries are members of the Commonwealth, with which there is a special link.

Recently, on the 13th of September, the European Commission tabled its ideas and negotiating directives regarding the opening of negotiations on trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand. We had a presentation- actually yesterday- at the AGRIFISH Council and now the Commission waits for detailed discussions in the competent working groups. Cyprus, has a positive view on the Commission's initiative and will support this idea within the EU's preparatory bodies, aiming at commencing negotiations at the beginning of 2018. These Agreements will benefit Agriculture in general and will have a positive social impact on job creation and wages, in addition to the increase of respective GDPs. According to the European Commission, the real GDP of the EU is estimated to grow 0.02% (€4.9 billion), for Australia 0,2% (€4.2 billion) and for New Zealand 0.52% (€1.3 billion).

Another example, well-known to all of you, is the Cotonou Agreement or Africa Caribbean Pacific (ACP) Economic Partnership Agreement, which includes a significant number of Commonwealth countries. The Commonwealth, as an organisation, should be in a position to be a key stakeholder in order to influence and advance the interest of its member states directly to Brussels, to European Commissioners and to the European Council.

The ACP Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) that give free access to the European market are indeed an important legal and political framework; but the EU could do much more to assist the Commonwealth countries, especially in terms of infrastructure and logistical assistance.

It was only a couple of weeks ago that the EU organised in Brussels a high level meeting titled 'Partnership in practice: making EU trade work for ACP countries'. I would like to point out the EU's Trade Commissioner, Cecilia Malmstrom's call for the importance of dialogue with stakeholders in order to reach outcomes that are sustainable.

The Commonwealth could be one key critical stakeholder and interlocutor to the EU to this end especially with the prospect of the discussions for the ACP's review post 2020.

Blue economy and maritime affairs are areas, in which both the EU and the Commonwealth can demonstrate significant work. These two niche areas are critical for the economies, prosperity and development of the majority of the European and Commonwealth nations, and it is high time for interoperability and cooperation.

The issue of Oceans' protection and conservation is very high on the EU's agenda. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy, Federica Mogherini, announced at the Oceans Conference in Malta, last October, the decision of the EU to channel €560 million Euro, with more than 30 concrete actions for Our Oceans. These actions call for global cooperation, among international organisations and countries worldwide.

In addition, there is a huge scope for cooperation in the domain of maritime affairs. The EU has developed best management practices and policies that enhance such cooperative capabilities. For example, the "Limassol Declaration", signed by the EU states during the Cyprus Presidency of the EU, in 2012, promoted an Integrated Maritime Policy on a Marine and Maritime Agenda for growth and jobs; the EU can exchange best practices and promote dialogue with international, regional organisations, as well as third countries.

Another key area, in my opinion, is the cooperation in the fields of science, technology, research and development. Our two organisations could work closely for the exchange of technological knowhow, and more importantly, for promoting agricultural research, aquaculture, the use of new technologies etc.

Recent extreme weather events that have devastated the lives of millions in Asia, the Americas and Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean, have highlighted anew that we must move with urgency from the agreement in Paris, to action on the ground. But there is also scope for EU-Commonwealth cooperation namely for disaster relief, crisis management, delivery of aid and tackling the aftermath of natural disasters. Both organisations should be able to work hand in hand for avoiding duplication, and for the expedite delivery of humanitarian aid. The Commonwealth should be in a position to get in touch in real time with the Emergency Response Coordination Centre of the EU for coordination and information exchange after cataclysmic natural disasters.

So how can we foster and strengthen the ties between the EU and the Commonwealth?

It is not about quick fixes. It is about long term structured cooperation that can be expanded also in multilateral fora such as the UN in New York and in Geneva.

Commonwealth countries should have a way of having their voice and interests heard in Brussels. For example, other Organisations with which the EU has close collaboration, like the UN, NATO, OSCE, African Union, League of Arab States, meet on a regular basis for political consultations, and their respective Secretaries General are invited to attend EU Ministerial meetings.

The Commonwealth's SG could be invited to attend EU Council meetings such as the Development of Agriculture for promoting issues of critical importance.

My suggestion is to aim at the promotion of this cooperation as a necessity within the EU structures; for our part as Cyprus we will definitely do so.

The forthcoming Commonwealth Summit is an important milestone that could be used for promoting the Commonwealth's partnerships with other organisations such as the EU and the International Maritime Organisation, which is based here in London.

We should aim at establishing the Commonwealth, our family of 52 countries, as a single key and important interlocutor with the EU, capable to influence discussions and decisions.

I am sure that today's meeting will be productive in the exchange of views and ideas on how to strengthen the ties between the EU and the Commonwealth. Personally, I intend to follow up and discuss ideas with my European colleagues and the EU Commissioner for Agriculture, Environment and Maritime Affairs.

I would be very much interested in hearing your ideas, or specific issues in relation to my area of competence that you would like me to convey to Brussels.

I thank you all for your attention.