

# CHOGM chairwoman's answers in short supply

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), which is scheduled for November, has so far been remarkable for the lack of details surrounding it. In a rare interview, the chairwoman of the CHOGM task force, **PHYLLIS MUSCAT**, talks to **Caroline Muscat**.

Her appointment was controversial. Lacking diplomatic and political experience, many questioned whether she would be able to meet the challenge of heading the organisation of the two-yearly summit meeting of 53 Commonwealth heads of government.

Ms Muscat hails from the cosmetics industry, through which she set up several businesses. Before that, she worked as a theatre nurse at St Luke's Hospital.

She prefers to describe herself as an entrepreneur and says she is confident Malta will be ready to host CHOGM between November 27 and 29 and meet "the highest standards".

Yet during an interview with *The Sunday Times of Malta* last Thursday, she had difficulty answering some of the questions.

Most had to be put three or four times because she could not articulate her message on camera. At 4.30pm she apologised and said she was tired, having "been on the go since 7am".

By contrast, Salv Stellini, who occupied the role when CHOGM was last held in Malta in 2005, was no stranger to the international scene.

A career diplomat, he had also been an ambassador to the US and Ireland, as well as High Commissioner in London and permanent secretary at the Foreign Ministry during the most crucial phase of Malta's membership negotiations with the EU.

Thousands of people from all continents will meet in Malta in just over eight months' time. Preparing for an event that will host 53 heads of government and their delegations is a logistical nightmare. Ms Muscat says some 4,000 to 5,000 people are expected in Malta.

There are also four forums that will be held in the week leading to the main meeting, each hosting hundreds of people arriving in Malta to attend these debates. Add to that around 1,000 international media representatives arriving to report the event.

With a budget of €8 million, Ms Muscat has €2 million more than her predecessor to ensure things run smoothly. Yet preparations for the event seem to be nowhere near as advanced as they were at this stage 10 years ago.

The website for the event lacks essential details such as venues and meeting themes. This emerged during the interview when Ms Muscat asked her assistant to refer to the site to review details she could not recall.

During the interview, the CHOGM chairwoman's assistant



CHOGM task force chairwoman Phyllis Muscat. Photo: Paul Spiteri Lucas

leadership, health, the media, entrepreneurship and gender issues related to inequality and opportunity for women.

"We're expecting some 500 delegates."

The themes for the rest of the forums are not yet decided, but a list of ideas exists for discussion, such as entrepreneurship, sustainability, leadership, and education. The full list of topics is yet to be revealed, as Ms Muscat had some difficulty outlining them.

"We will have some very high profile speakers," she adds, before admitting that only two have confirmed so far. One of them is British Conservative MP Zac Goldsmith.

The most popular is the business forum - some 1,300 delegates are expected - which Ms Muscat describes as "a forum for business people to convene and to do business, and discuss different matters relating to the business world".

Issues to be debated include finance, tourism, sustainability and health. Ms Muscat could not remember the rest. However, Ms Muscat had difficulty recalling the official roles of the ministerial representatives on the steering committee - whom she referred to only by first name - and seemed confused about whether there are five or six members.

She did answer a question the Prime Minister failed to address in Parliament when asked by the Opposition, confirming that Qormi mayor Rosianne Cutajar had been put on the CHOGM payroll to perform administrative tasks.

Ms Cutajar was appointed in a so-called position of trust - a direct appointment without a public call - as were at least another six people working for the CHOGM office, according to Ms Muscat.

She could not specify exactly how many people were appointed on that basis, but did say that direct appointments were made "due to the sensitivity of the project". The office employs 10 full-timers and six part-timers.

Several questions remained but the interview had to be cut short, as Ms Muscat was evidently not feeling in the right frame of mind to continue.

regularly prompted her boss, feeding her key details.

From time to time, she had to also prop up Ms Muscat with words of encouragement, such as "Come on, you know this; we prepared for this."

However, over the course of an hour, some details did emerge. The opening ceremony will be held at the Mediterranean Conference Centre on November 27. The heads of government will then hold their executive sessions at the Radisson Golden Sands, where they will be staying. On Saturday, an event called 'the retreat' will be held, where heads of government meet in an informal manner at Fort St Angelo.

The theme of the meeting is 'Adding Global Value', which Ms Muscat says represents a vision:

“  
The  
Commonwealth  
needs to  
look forward  
to ensure  
it survives  
”

"The Commonwealth needs to look forward to ensure it survives." In the week before the main event, the four CHOGM forums

will be launched. The first, a youth forum, will be held at "a hotel in Buġibba", while the women's forum will take place at the Intercontinental Hotel and the people's forum at the Corinthia Hotel. Ms Muscat did not specify the location of the business forum.

Each forum has an overriding theme, but the only one determined at the moment relates to women, a subject to be introduced on the CHOGM agenda for the first time.

Ms Muscat had difficulty remembering the title initially. Once again turning to her assistant, she then repeated after her, "Women Ahead: Be All That You Can Be", and punched the air.

She added: "The women's forum was launched last Friday. We're looking at themes such as

**WATCH OF THE**

**TIMESOF MALTA.COM**