SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR EUROPE, PETER HAIN, TO THE SLOVENIAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS SOCIETY, LJUBLJANA, SLOVENIA, WEDNESDAY 9 JANUARY 2002

I am delighted to be in Ljubljana today. And I am very grateful to the Slovenian International Relations Society for the opportunity to speak to you at the beginning of an historic year, with decisions on the next wave of enlargement of both the European Union and NATO. We hope that Slovenia, which has prepared so well, will be ready to join with the first group of countries.

However, the close friendship between our two countries could be severely tested if we meet in the World Cup! Slovenia’s qualification is a splendid achievement and I extend my congratulations to the country and its team!

Let me start by saying how much I enjoyed the very productive discussions this morning with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister. It was also a great pleasure to see Mr Bavec again over lunch. I take this opportunity of wishing him well in his future career. He has been an excellent and wise advocate of Slovenia’s interests in Brussels and elsewhere.

It was also a special privilege to renew my acquaintance with President Kucan, who visited London last month, where I had the honour to host a lunch for him. This was the first time a Slovenian President has visited the UK and it did much to strengthen the close ties between our two countries and to point the way to future co-operation and partnership, including of course within the EU.

These ties are deepening. We bought almost 500 million euros of each others’ goods in 2000. Major British companies operate in Slovenia. And increasing numbers of Britons are discovering that this is a beautiful country. 152,000 British tourists visited in 2000. My only regret is that I can afford to spend barely a day here – such is the lot of ministers!

There are two great tasks facing the European Union. The first is to make a success of enlargement. The second is to re-connect the Union with its citizens – and connect with its future citizens – by fashioning a language and an agenda, which is understandable and relevant to them.

ENLARGEMENT

You have put yourselves at the top of the list of applicant countries with the closure of 26 of the 29 chapters of the ‘acquis’ – the EU’s main body of law. By setting the pace of the negotiations, you have helped ensure that the timetable, agreed by Member States in Nice, has been followed. Without this, I would be far less confident today of achieving our shared goal that Slovenian citizens should become citizens of the EU in 2004, at the latest.

Britain is a champion of enlargement. Negotiations began under the UK Presidency in 1998. It was Tony Blair, in a speech in October 2000, who called for the first group of new Member States to join the EU in time to participate in the 2004 European Parliament elections. He helped the Swedish Presidency turn this into a clear EU objective at the Gothenburg Council in June last year, confirmed at the Laeken Council last December.

Enlargement is vital for all of us, new and old members alike:

- it will cement the coming together of our continent and provide a lasting basis for peace and prosperity;
- it will boost the economies of new and old Member States, creating 300,000 new jobs in the current Member States and up to 2million in the candidate countries;
- it will give consumers access to a wider range of products at competitive prices in the largest single market in the world with a population of nearly 500million;
- it will allow new and old Member States to work together to tackle a wide range of common problems such as pollution, drug-smuggling, and terrorism.

Some of the reforms required for EU membership are painful, but many would be necessary with or without EU enlargement. Reform will not stop with membership. It affects all Member States as they try to keep pace with a changing world.

There is still much to do. The ‘road map’ to enlargement requires negotiations to be concluded with candidates by the end of this year, if the new members are to join in 2004. Some of the most difficult issues lie ahead of us, namely: Agriculture, Regional Policy and the Budget. Both the EU and the candidate countries will have to remain firmly focused and committed.

The candidates will have to keep up their reforms, not only introducing the new laws and systems required for membership, but making them work on the ground.

There is also much to do to strengthen administrative and judicial systems across the board in order to apply the ‘acquis’ effectively. This is not an abstract point. Upon enlargement, UK citizens will depend on your civil servants, judges and customs officials to uphold their rights as EU citizens, ensure the safety of products within the Single Market and control the common external frontiers. And the same applies in reverse.

This is a massive practical task and Britain is determined to help. We are the only EU Member State to have agreed ‘Action Plans’ with each candidate country. These finance a range of bilateral projects designed to support the accession process. With Mr Bavcar, I today launched the second stage of our Action Plan with Slovenia: you will find details on the British Embassy’s website.

The next wave of enlargement is planned for 2004. But we envisage further waves, and not just for those of the current candidate countries that do not enter in 2004.

The EU has already set up Stabilisation and Association Agreements with countries in the West Balkans, which provide a direct path to membership in the long term.

As the Prime Minister told President Kucan on 10 December, Slovenia’s story is one of tangible success that should serve as a beacon and an example to neighbouring countries in South-East Europe. Slovenia can help with the Europeanisation of these countries, promoting respect for the rights and well-being of minorities. As a leading economic power within the region, Slovenia can help develop functioning market economies.