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SPEECH BY FCO MINISTER OF STATE, KEITH VAZ, TO THE
BRITISH-GERMAN FORUM

WEDNESDAY 14 JUNE 2000

Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am delighted to welcome you to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the occasion of the fifteenth annual gathering of the British-German Forum. Since its foundation in 1986 this forum has become a firm fixture in our bilateral calendar of events, and a key discussion body for young opinion formers from both countries.

The British German relationship is developing into a closer bond than ever before. And I hope that all of you will help to maintain those links by keeping in touch with each other after the Forum. It is informal networks and friendships like these which can make such a huge contribution to better understanding between countries, and enable us to get beyond the lingering and often negative stereotypes which are unfortunately still around.

Let me turn straightaway to an issue of the greatest importance for this government: the domestic debate on Europe.

Since coming to power in 1997 this government has pursued a policy of positive engagement in the European Union. For too many years Britain had tended to regard itself as some sort of outsider in the EU - as if we had not been members already for some 24 years. I think it is true to say that in Tony Blair we have the first Prime Minister in a generation or more who believes instinctively in Europe as our future.

We believe that Britain has a significant and constructive part to play in the future of Europe. And we believe that to advance our interests in Europe, we must play an active and positive role within the EU. This is what our major partners have always done, and none of us needs to make apologies for vigorously representing the interests of our own people in European negotiations.

This includes forging alliances with other Member States to meet shared objectives and to tackle the shared agenda we have set ourselves. And it is a big agenda, aimed at ensuring that a Union embracing, say, up to 30 members in the medium term is able to play its full political and economic part in the world.

As Tony Blair and the Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar noted in their joint article in the *Financial Times* yesterday - which I commend to you wholeheartedly - 'Europe is about more than economics. It is based on shared values of liberty, democracy, tolerance and social justice. Europe has never had such a wide-ranging agenda as now, starting with enlargement'.

As they go on to say, 'the question is: how do we open Europe to new members while maintaining and increasing its capacity to act effectively?' That is the challenge that faces us in the current, intergovernmental conference set to culminate in Nice later this year.

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This government's policy of engagement has already met with considerable success. In particular:

- we have played a leading role in discussions to create a common European defence capability to complement the role of NATO.
- we have driven forward EU discussions on economic reform and secured an EU-wide commitment to creating the world's leading knowledge-based economy by 2010; this was given particular focus at the Lisbon Special European Council meeting earlier this year. Lisbon was a turning point for Europe: the EU is now committed to economic reform and modernisation – to working with the grain of globalisation to promote economic dynamism and job creation
- we have also been successful in areas of particular interest to the British citizen, for example we secured the best ever deal for the UK on regional funding for our poorest areas.

Yet despite all this, public support for both our EU membership and for the Single Currency continues to fall; and polls reveal that the government has a huge task on its hands to raise public awareness about – and support for – the EU.

So on the one hand, we have increased the UK's influence in the EU decision making process; on the other, public support for our membership is worryingly low. I am determined to meet this problem head-on.

A lot of the difficulties actually result from perceptions about our history. One of its great strengths is that the British public ~~is~~ ^{is} difficult to convince – ~~they~~ ^{people} ask searching, difficult questions of governments and when something new comes along they want to know where the benefits lie. They won't be won over by easy words.

This can be frustrating for a politician! But it does challenge us to get a practical and realistic message across. And it underlines the importance of European governments developing, together, policies which are – and importantly are seen to be – of direct relevance to the citizen, whether they are to do with economic, social, security or environmental issues, or with the fight against crime.

So, in an effort to address the British public's questions over our future in Europe, I launched in November last year a 'Your Britain, Your Europe' campaign to raise public awareness about Europe and publicise the benefits of EU membership. The first element of the campaign was a regional roadshow which took me to ten English cities in five days. It gave me the opportunity to meet people from all walks of life and explain the benefits of membership in straightforward economic terms: regional jobs and prosperity depend on our trading links with the Single Market.

I have followed this up with one-day city visits to other British cities – last week was Norwich. We can now add, for example, that a recent independent survey suggested that up to 3.5 million jobs depend on trading links with EU Member States. It is stark figures like this which should bring home the importance of Europe to every city and region in the UK.