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'AT EASE WITH EUROPE; INFLUENTIAL IN EUROPE' (07/11/02)

Event: Visit to Estonia

Location: Estonian Foreign Policy Institute

Speech Date: 07/11/02

Speaker: Denis MacShane

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It's a real pleasure for me to be visiting Estonia on my first overseas visit as the (new) British Minister for Europe. And in this year of all years: 2002 - the year of enlargement.

I hope that my visit today - after just one week in the job - shows the paramount importance I place on EU enlargement. As Jack Straw has said, delivering enlargement is the UK's top priority for the Danish presidency. Throughout the Cold War, Estonia experienced (first-hand) what the Iron Curtain did to Europe. Now, with EU membership around the corner and on the threshold of an invitation to join NATO, it stands in a prime position to reap the benefits of a reunited Europe.

EU and Nato membership are equally important. (As I travel in central Europe I am struck by the number of people who value the Atlantic alliance) I am pro-European and pro-American. As Minister for Europe I will make the case for the Euro-Atlantic community of nations. For me, enlargement has a particularly personal appeal. Born to a Polish father and a Irish mother, I could not only trace my lineage to the two sides of the continent, I felt at first hand the divisions that had kept them apart for over forty years.

Twenty years ago, I was arrested and briefly imprisoned by the (Communist) secret police in Poland while organising support for the Polish Union after it was repressed by General Jaruzelski. What a leap of faith it would have taken for me back then, to believe that we would be where we are today. Europe reunited is, for me, a family reunited.

And for Estonia and Britain, enlargement is the happy ending to a process which began in 1918, when 117 British servicemen from the Royal Navy and Royal Airforce died fighting for Estonian independence. We've staunchly supported that goal ever since. And now, at last, you will take your rightful place at the top table of democratic, European nations. No longer a candidate, but an equal partner.

I'm passionate about Europe. The literature I read. The languages I speak. The places I have visited. And the many friendships I have developed. This diversity of Europe's nations is the strength of the European Union. It should be celebrated. You know that better than most: your own commitment to the Estonian language and culture kept alive the dream of independence during the dark days of your history.

My own varied European background means I feel at ease with Europe. But I know some people in my own country do not. Many British people, for example, may travel as easily to Brussels and Paris as they do to London. They may get by with the languages. And they may know the vast array of European footballers playing in the English leagues - including your own Mart Poom. But ask

them about the Council, the Commission or the Parliament and they <sup>must believe in the EU</sup> don't want to know. Somehow there is a swathe of British people who visit Europe regularly, know it well, and love much of what it has to offer. Yet they don't feel at ease with Britain's role in the European Union. ]

Those of us who believe passionately about Britain's place in Europe, as I do, need to stand up and make the case. Those of us who believe profoundly, as I do, that our peace and prosperity depend heavily on our role in the EU, need to take our share of responsibility for winning over the doubters. We need both to take the argument to the vocal minority who oppose membership outright. And we need to win over the many who are not necessarily outright hostile, just disengaged.

So my first priority as Minister for Europe is to play my role in building a Britain at ease with Europe. And to show that a Britain at ease with Europe can make the most of itself and the opportunities out there, to create the kind of Europe we want to see.

This is not just a challenge for Britain. Estonia will soon complete its accession negotiations and begin planning for a referendum next year on EU membership. I am pleased that support for EU membership in Estonia has improved over this year. But, as in Britain, there are doubters. We have found that those doubts are often greatest where knowledge and understanding are lowest. So we share the task of explaining to our people the real, hard benefits of EU enlargement, and the opportunities of EU membership:

- Opportunities for peace. The EU's helped establish two generations without war, on a continent that saw more bloodshed than any other before.
- Opportunities for security: much of the organised crime that plagues our streets has international roots: we need to work together to beat the criminals.
- And opportunities for prosperity: enlargement will increase trade and consumer choice, and will create up to 300,000 jobs in the current members states, 2 million in the candidates.