

Press conference held by Tony Blair following the Copenhagen European Council (16 December 2002)

Caption: On 16 December 2002, on the margins of the Copenhagen European Council, Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, holds a press conference in which he emphasises the historic significance of the decisions adopted by the Fifteen concerning the enlargement of the European Union.

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Prime Minister's press conference following the EU Council in Copenhagen (16 December 2002)

Prime Minister:

Thank you all very much indeed for coming to this press conference as the summit draws to a conclusion. I am sorry I am not here with the Foreign Secretary, but there are still certain talks under way, but the main decisions are now very, very clear. And so if you will forgive me, I will do the press conference now, but I may have to go back into the meeting at a later stage.

First of all I would like to express my thanks, and indeed admiration, for the Danish Presidency. It has been a quite remarkable piece of negotiation and my heartfelt thanks and respect to the Prime Minister, Anders Poul Rasmussen (phon), who has conducted these negotiations with such skill.

I think it is fair and it is right to say that this is a summit that redefines Europe for the future. This is an extraordinary moment in Europe's history. There are decisions of enormous importance that we have taken which expand and extend the boundaries of Europe, make Europe into a different institution, make it into indeed a different union altogether for the future, and when we look back at the history of Europe over many hundreds of years, and in particular the history of the 20th century, and we reflect on all the war, and devastation, and disaster, and conflict, and then we realise that today we are reuniting Europe, I think it is truly a moment that we can be very proud of and offers us huge hope for the future.

And essentially there have been three very important decisions that we have taken. First of all, we have welcomed into the European Union the 10 countries with whom we have been conducting the accession negotiations, and those negotiations are now completed, and those 10 countries will come in on the timetable that has been set out. I think it was 2 years ago in a speech in Warsaw where I said that I hoped that we would manage to complete the accession negotiations by the end of 2002 with a view to Poland and other countries coming in in 2004.

I think it was considered somewhat forward and optimistic at the time, but I am delighted that that has indeed come about. And this issue of enlargement has long been one that we have championed within the European Union, and for that reason and for many others we are particularly pleased with it. And I congratulate too all those countries that are part of this enlargement process, for the sacrifices and changes that they have made. It is incredible to think how much they have been able to change and reform their countries, drawn by the magnet of European Union membership. And those countries that used to be under the domination of the old Soviet Union, and who are now members of NATO and people who are being welcomed into the European Union. So that is the first thing.

The second thing is again a truly historic moment in our relationship with Turkey. For 40 years Turkey has wanted to have a date set for the opening of true accession negotiations to the European Union. Today we have done that. The date is December 2004, if the criteria are met. Then, as the amended text says, those negotiations will be opened without delay. I believe that is again of huge importance for Turkey, for Europe and indeed for Britain. Turkey is a country with a long and proud history and it is also a country that is a Muslim country too. And to all those people who thought that the European Union couldn't reach out in this way, I think we have shown that we can. And I would also congratulate the new Turkish leadership in the changes that they have made to enable us to give this firm date for the opening of accession negotiations. Again I think a few years ago people would have thought that very difficult to do, indeed a few weeks ago people might well have doubted whether we would be able to give such a firm date to Turkey. But we can and it is a huge demonstration of our confidence in the new Turkey that is taking shape and will eventually take its place in the family of the European Union.

And then thirdly, after quite some delay, the European Defence Initiative has finally come about properly, because there has been the agreement between the European Union and NATO, concluded earlier today, and as a result of that we can now have the European Defence up and running, able to conduct operations in circumstances where NATO doesn't want to be engaged, and this is, so far from conflicting from NATO,

now it is very, very clear and specific, that it is complementary to NATO, that it runs alongside our NATO obligations and opportunities, and it allows us in circumstances where for whatever reason NATO doesn't want to be engaged, to undertake crucial tasks on behalf of the European Union. And that again is something that we in Britain have long wanted to see. This was an initiative on European defence, started by myself and President Chirac at St Malo some years ago, it has been very, very difficult for all the reasons that we know, but it is yet another indication incidentally of the changing Europe that is taking shape before our eyes, because many of the disagreements between Turkey and Greece over the issues here were resolved in the course of the negotiation. And I think that again gives us tremendous hope for the future.

And finally I should say a word of congratulation too to Bulgaria and Romania that have been given the date set out in our text, and they are obviously well on the way, as a result of the changes that they are making, to be members of the European Union. So these summits can be often, and need often to be, painstaking and detailed negotiations about financial matters in the European Union, and of course financial matters played a significant part in this, of course they did, but I think the fact that we have today closed the accession negotiations with 10 countries coming into the European Union, expanding the European Union to 25, the fact that we have given a date for the opening of accession negotiations to the European Union for Turkey something we have waited 40 years to achieve and the fact that we have a European Defence Initiative that is now able to be up and running and functioning in the way that we want, I think these three achievements are enormous and have well repaid all the effort.

Question:

Prime Minister, did you never reflect in the course of these negotiations that in expanding Europe quite so far, you may be collectively creating something that is simply ungovernable? And if I may secondly, to what extent do you regard Turkey really as a European country? It may have a long and proud history, but it is not European.

Prime Minister:

Well those are two interesting questions. The first thing is that Europe is expanding. Instead of being 15 countries, we are going to be 25. That will mean fundamental changes in the way that Europe works. This will be from now on in a fundamentally different Europe, it has to be, because of the 10 that are joining, because Bulgaria and Romania will join them, and because of course of Turkey joining the European Union. And in answer to the second point, I think that it is of profound importance for Europe, for this region, for the wider global stability, that Turkey is welcomed into the European Union. The reason why we in Britain have championed Turkey's membership, on exactly the same criteria as everyone else, Turkey is not seeking special privileges, it is not seeking special rules, it will come into the club on the same rules as everyone else, the reason why I think it is so important is that in a world where increasingly the issue is to do with whether it is international terrorism, global security, the international economy, in a world where increasingly those issues can only be dealt with by nations moving together, then the very fact that we are extending the borders of the European Union is a demonstration that Europe has the capability of reaching out into parts of the world that, yes, form a different part of the world from the notions of Europe that we have had up until now, and that is precisely why I say this is such a historic moment.

Question:

You said twice at this summit, for reasons that we all understand, that you think it is time to move on. But as you know, people will read, and hear, and watch more stories about you and your family in the days to come. You have never actually said what lessons you and your government have learnt from this whole fortnight, your wife has, but I wonder if you could briefly dwell on what you think you have learnt from this?

Prime Minister:

I am afraid I can't really, briefly or otherwise, Nick, if you don't mind. As I say, I totally understand why

some of you guys will want to concentrate on this, and that is for you, but it is for me to run the government and this is really what I am trying to do here. If you would like to ask me a question on the Europe business, I would be very happy to take you again.

Question:

We can try. I would say I think a lot of people would like to know what you have made of that, but I hear what you say. There is a concern that some will have about a Europe of 25 nations, that you are now embracing many poorer nations here, and there will be people at home who fear that that means more cost for them and also, as you will well know after your announcement on work permits for the new accession countries, that it also means competition for their jobs at home. What do you say to reassure people about that?

Prime Minister:

That again is a very good point. People worry, if you are bringing poorer countries into the European Union, doesn't that impose a huge burden? Now in fact what we know of the history of the European Union is that every time we expand and enlarge, because the membership of the European Union actually increases the prosperity of it, that very quickly those nations become nations that are bringing prosperity not just to their own people, but to every part of the European Union. You take a country with which we are very familiar the Republic of Ireland. Ten years ago it wasn't the economy that it is today. If you look at Spain and the amazing changes it has made as a result of its membership of the European Union, Spain is now a country that offers a chance for trade and prosperity for all European countries. So yes there is a short term cost, and we are prepared to meet that, but the long term benefits of enlargement of the European Union in terms of trade, and prosperity, and living standards, as well as security, I think are those that far outweigh any of the short term costs.

Question:

One of your now world famous spokesmen said in the course of this meeting that the Scottish fishermen were a unique and special case within the European Union. Now in the context of more and more people joining, how can you argue that, and specifically in next week's talks how should that be reflected?

Prime Minister:

Well in respect of fishing in the Common Fisheries Policy, I have raised this in discussion with Romano Prodi, the Commission President today. We will do everything we can to secure as good a deal as we can for Scottish fishermen and their families, and in fact for the whole of the UK. But it is a difficult situation, for reasons everybody knows. And in fact this is not a situation that is going to be made worse by enlargement, but it is a situation that arises as a result of the depletion of fish stocks. And as I keep saying to people, about the problem there is no dispute, the question is what is the solution? Now we have engaged in making representations to the European Union at the moment because we believe the present proposals make life very, very difficult for us indeed, but I think it is best that I conduct those negotiations at the moment behind the scenes as it were.

Question:

What kind of grade would you give the Danish Presidency at this summit?

Prime Minister:

As I said earlier, I think they have done remarkably well. It has been an extremely difficult Presidency to have because of the huge nature of the negotiations, but I think the Danish Presidency has really been superb and my special congratulations to the Prime Minister, who has conducted a meeting that could have gone on frankly for a very long time, with very good humour and a lot of intelligence.

Question:

You have talked about the Union being fundamentally changed, do you think that inevitably means it will be to use Mrs Thatcher's words wider but shallower? And on the specific question of the euro, can you really imagine these countries which have signed up today joining the euro, or do you think there will always be an outer rim which will keep their own currencies?

Prime Minister:

Well I am sure in time those countries want to join the single currency and obviously they have got to fulfil the criteria for membership there. But I think that the argument about wider versus deeper has gone in the European Union, it may be an argument for parts of the Eurosceptic right in Britain, but it is not an argument that is happening elsewhere in Europe. I don't think there is any doubt at all, two things are very, very important about the accession countries, and I have noticed this talking to all of them: one, they have fought long and hard to get into the European Union and they have done so understanding entirely that the European Union will cooperate more in the areas that it needs to cooperate, and they are perfectly happy with that; but secondly, and this I think is the real difference, they are also all of them countries that have had to fight hard for their nationhood, and they share very much I think the British perspective about Europe, which is that Europe should be a union of nations where we come together and cooperate as sovereign nation states in our common interest, and that cooperation will be deep, but it will also be wide. And I just think the argument about wider versus deeper really is not an argument that most of those new countries really recognise.

Question:

We are told that on 28 November, No 10 was informed about a blackmail plot, which is a very serious matter. What did you know about that?

Prime Minister:

I am sorry, John, and honestly I don't want to be difficult about it, but all those questions can be dealt with back home. I really want to concentrate on these issues which as you know are very, very important.

Question:

Has this been what you would call a dramatic day?

Prime Minister:

It has been dramatic, dramatic and historic, and those are over used words, we could probably say that about lots of summits, but in this case they are definitely justified. This has been an extraordinary summit, for all the reasons that I give. Turkey, on its way to being a member of the European Union, 10 new countries in the European Union and European defence up and running. Those are three huge and important decisions.

Question:

I would like to ask you what is the right procedure to be followed for the problem regarding Cyprus, between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots?

Prime Minister:

Well I hope very much that the work of the UN Secretary General's representative, and the parties, continues. I believe that it is still possible to reach an agreement. I think that the UN proposals are the basis for doing that, and obviously there are still difficulties that have to be dealt with, but I hope that they will be

dealt with, because in the end that settlement that allows the two communities to live together side by side, and allows them both to engage in the benefits of the European Union, is extremely important, and I am sure that those talks will continue in that vein.

Question:

According to the last Europe ... survey, just one quarter of British people has ever heard of the Czech Republic. How do you want to sell the enlargement to your people?

Prime Minister:

Well I am not aware of that survey and thank you very much for pointing it out. It is very helpful in my press conference on enlargement. But I suspect actually, I suspect probably, if you don't mind me saying so, that if you had used the old historical terms before the Czech Republic and Slovakia separated, you might have found it rather different. You are about to tell me that you surveyed them on that as well. OK. Whatever. But actually I think most people do know the importance of the European Union in Britain and of the enlargement process. But I can assure you that in the months to come these things will be debated in Britain and I am sure that there will be a very good and healthy debate about it, which will involve our relations with Poland, the Czech Republic and many other countries. And so far as I am concerned, we want to be a very good partner of the Czech Republic in the new Europe. So maybe survey them again in a couple of years time.