

Address given by Denis MacShane on the situation in Cyprus (London, 22 January 2004)

Caption: On 22 January 2004, Denis MacShane, British Minister of State for Europe, delivers an address to the National Federation of Cypriots in London in which he emphasises the need for a rapid solution to the Cypriot crisis.

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Denis MacShane, *Cyprus - the prize is there for the taking* (22 January 2004)

Not for the first time, Cyprus stands at a crossroads. For someone who has not had to live through the pain of ethnic conflict, dispossession and division, it may seem all too easy to tell those who have, which way to turn. I presume to do so now because Britain wants Cyprus to succeed - not in a paternalistic or condescending way, but because we have always thought it would be in our interests to have a strong, self-confident Cyprus inside the EU.

It is a pleasure to be here this evening and pay tribute to the work of Harris Sophiclidis and thank him for his consistent work with British parliamentarians and the measured but determined way he has defended the causes so dear to him and everyone in this room.

I want Cyprus to succeed because I first went to the island in the 1970s and no-one visits Cyprus without leaving a bit of their heart behind. As a political activist I know how important Cyprus has been to all who want a future of peace, prosperity and progressive politics in the world. My friends Joan Ryan MP, Andy Love MP, Stephen Twigg MP, Andrew Dismore MP and Barbara Roche MP have been tireless in defending the needs and rights of the Cypriot community in London. Both communities as the commonality of interests in Green Lane at times seems more in the true spirit of Cyprus than the differences on both sides of the Green Line that runs through Nicosia.

High on the Trodos Mountains, there can be no more wonderful place in the world to those of us who love mountains and the high air that allow the vision of eagles in place of the blindness of moles.

We want the leaders of Cyprus to have the vision of eagles – seeing a 21st century Cyprus in which the present stops being the prisoner of the past and together a new future, a European future is built.

THE OPPORTUNITY OF ACCESSION

What is at stake now is not, of course, the accession of Cyprus itself. That long-standing goal of British foreign policy will be achieved this May. And a very good thing too. No, what is at stake is whether the Cyprus which accedes is going to be strong, self-confident, reunited, healed – the kind of partner we and our fellow Member States really want.

These weeks before accession offer Cyprus an opportunity like none other – which, if squandered, will not quickly repeat itself. I passionately believe that, in Cyprus as elsewhere, the path to reconciliation and peace lies through looking forward to what the future offers, not dwelling on past injustices. In Turkey last week, I was asked why there appeared to be opposition in Austria to Turkey's desire to begin talks on EU accession. I muttered something about '1571 and Jan Sobiewski' – when the Sultan's troops were stopped at the gates of Vienna by the bravery of the Polish soldiers. 'But, minister, that was four centuries ago,' I was told. 'Yes, but all I hear from you on Cyprus is what happened four decades ago,' I said just as often I hear from friends that the whole point of politics is to avenge what happened in Cyprus in 1974. Four centuries, four decades, thirty years. If we live in the past, we cannot come to terms with the present. But it is the future I want us tonight to think about.

And the future, in Europe, offers a united, prosperous Cyprus playing its destined, influential role within a stable eastern Mediterranean region.

THE GOAL OF RAPPROCHMENT

There is another goal we should keep in mind. For too long the region has suffered because of suspicion between Greece and Turkey – and between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Rapprochement between Athens and Ankara has made great strides. Cyprus – and all Cypriots – now have the chance to pursue their own rapprochement. And in time – as I also passionately believe – a stable, secular, democratic Turkey will join the European Union – with all the benefits that will bring to the Union, to the region and to the whole Islamic world.

But if we are to realise either of these objectives we need to put the Cyprus problem behind us. The partial opening of the Green Line in April last year sowed seeds of hope. The confidence building measures of the Cypriot government were an important step forward. The magnanimity and plain common sense showed by ordinary Cypriots was a lesson to us all. And it demolished the xenophobic arguments some have used to criticise the Annan plan. I am utterly convinced that the common ground identified by the UN Secretary General is the only way forward for Cyprus, towards that future in which Greek and Turkish Cypriots can get on with business, and unlock their island's true potential as a prosperous, normal EU member state. Europe has worked at 15 – and will work at 25. How much better, at 25 than at 24 and a half! I know Cyprus desperately wants to shed its image as always the 'special case', the weakest link in Europe's chain.

THE ANNAN PLAN

Kofi Annan has produced detailed proposals, carefully balanced to address the fundamental concerns of both communities. His proposals may seem complex – but so are the issues they reconcile. It can be done. Today's Europe has other examples of states uniting differing peoples, and of elaborate systems of institutional checks and balances. Although it already reflects many hours of negotiation, and decades of expertise on the part of the United Nations, the Annan Plan is not a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. The final balance is a matter for the parties themselves, and for the people of Cyprus in two referendums.

From Cypriot friends in London I have heard criticisms – often loud and condemnatory – of the Annan Plan. Last week, I heard in Turkey equally angry opposition from some quarters to Annan. One might be tempted to say that if both sides think Annan is wrong, it must be right. All I can say is that I do not think there is a better alternative. Demand that Annan be changed to suit each and every demand put by people who remember how they were treated in the 1960s or how they were dispossessed in the 1970s and we will live in the past not build a future.

Europe stands ready to help. The European Union has undertaken to accommodate the terms of a Cyprus settlement by which we mean that the unique aspects of the new Cyprus envisaged by the UN Secretary General, including guarantees for both communities, will not fall foul of some rigid EU template. Indeed, members of the European Commission were closely involved in drafting the EU elements of the Annan plan, and both they and the Member States took the unanimous view that the Annan plan provided for a workable and viable settlement for an EU-member reunited Cyprus. Europe's willingness to back a Cypriot answer to the Cyprus question is an important contribution to the search for peace. And I have to say that Europe will have little patience with attempts to argue that the Annan Plan is insufficiently European, when the plan has the backing of all the member states! For its part, the European Commission has frequently repeated its commitment to hold a pledging conference, to galvanise the economic support which a politically successful settlement would be bound to attract from the donor community and International Financial Institutions. Everybody loves a winner. If Cyprus can get the politics right, public and private sector investors will regard it as a one-way bet. In such propitious circumstances, the Annan Plan's emphasis on financial compensation for those who have suffered in the past can be fully appreciated. It is a viable, forward-thinking philosophy, which has been pioneered successfully by peacemakers in other parts of the world.

There are signs from Ankara that Turkey too realises that the clock is ticking loudly now, and how much is at stake – for Cyprus and for Turkey itself. Prime Minister Erdogan will take his ideas to the UN Secretary General this weekend and then to Washington next week. I have urged Turkey to be imaginative and generous. If Ataturk could switch the Ottoman Arab alphabet to European letters in one month, it should not be impossible for the Turkish government, army and parliament to move forward to a Cyprus settlement between now and 1 May. Make no mistake. A divided Cyprus with barbed wire manned by soldiers of a non-EU member state will not send out a good signal for Turkey's bid to see EU accession talks start this December. Equally, a Turkey that showed it had removed all obstacles to a united Cyprus entering the EU on May 1st would be given an immeasurable boost in its European aspirations. I have spelt out this message in public and in private to all levels of Turkey.

THE PRIZE OF SUCCESS

Tonight I want to send the same message to our friends and partners in the Cypriot government. The British Government is urging all sides to meet the UN Secretary General's requirements for a resumption of negotiations. The prize is there for the taking. History will not look kindly on those too timid or too bitter to reach out and grab it.

For Turkey, there is an important resonance with its own EU candidature. Turkey's approach to the Cyprus issue is a golden opportunity to refute the allegation that it sees Cyprus as a bargaining chip; and, instead, to be judged on the basis of the AKP government's impressive domestic reforms. Much remains to be done on the implementation front. But the campaigners for human rights and the lawyers defending freedom of expression I met in Turkey told me that despite their criticisms they were united in wanting to see the EU give the green light to the beginning of the long process of Turkish accession to the EU. A Cyprus settlement would be good for Turkey on its own merits, of course. But it would also transform the European politics surrounding its accession bid. At last, Turkey would be seen, as it deserves to be seen, as a source of solutions instead of problems.

For the Republic of Cyprus it is equally clear. No one can or should stand in the way of her accession to the EU on 1 May. But would it not be a Pyrrhic victory, for Cyprus to join divided and incomplete? Cypriots are all too familiar with a feeling of insecurity. Membership of the EU will undoubtedly help address those fears. For a start, membership of the EU will underpin, in new and significant ways, the unshakeable friendship between Britain and Cyprus. But the prospects of a divided Cyprus, even within the EU, are far less certain, and almost certainly worse, than the prospects of a re-united Cyprus. Moreover, stability in the wider middle East is too important a prize for Europe to allow it – indefinitely – to be held hostage by those who are themselves prisoners of the past.

The Eastern Mediterranean and its littoral are home to many of the world's problems. For Turkey and Greece, for the two communities of Cyprus to find their way to peace would send out a powerful message that Europe works – that Europe can create peace in place of conflict. Today, one million British people visit Izmir and the resorts of its Aegean coastline and thousands settle there. The tourist and business and cultural connections with Cyprus do not need spelling out. Cyprus is part of our history, the Cypriots of London and our other cities have contributed so much to Britain's prosperity, culture and, sense of community. I urge all to seize the chance of peace and show that the United Nations and the European Union can work together to bring to an end an conflict that has caused so much hurt, distress and dispossession. I hope the message from Green Lane in London is that we do not need a green line in Cyprus anymore. Whether your alphabet ends with Zed or Omega it begins with A for Annan, A for Ankara and A for Athens working in partnership, A for aspirations and ambitions from all of us to shape a united Cyprus in tomorrow's Europe.

I want and the British government wants a new Cyprus, united, free and European, to become a reality. Time is running out. I urge all of my friends here tonight to help build that new Cyprus, for a new Europe, in a new century.

Thank you.