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BC-DENMARK-RASMUSSEN (MAN IN THE NEWS, SCHEDULED)
NEW DANISH LEADER IS UNASSUMING "MR CONSENSUS"

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By Christopher Follett

COPENHAGEN, Jan 25, Reuter - Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, Denmark's first Social Democratic Prime Minister since 1982, is a former trade union economist with a reputation as "Mr Consensus."

A man with working class roots and a love for Elvis Presley music, Rasmussen, 49, gained leadership of the Social Democrats from Svend Auken in a bitter internal battle in April 1992.

He was widely tipped as a future prime minister and seized his chance in the political vacuum after Conservative Prime Minister Poul Schlueter resigned on January 15.

Rasmussen convinced three small centrist parties to abandon the Schlueter government and support his Social Democrats.

The bespectacled Rasmussen, known simply as Nyrup by many Danes, comes across on television as a confidence-inspiring and fatherly figure.

He gives little away when he speaks and is never provocative. Journalists describe Rasmussen's long, guarded statements as woolly at best and say he has invented a new language, "Nyrupish."

But while bland and serious in public, friends describe him as entertaining in private -- a man who likes to sing Elvis Presley hits while accompanying himself on the guitar.

Son of a Jutland labourer and a cleaner, Rasmussen stresses a blend of individual and government responsibility in society -- a subtle departure from his party's time-honoured belief that politics could solve all problems.

"For somebody with my background this new concept of solidarity is rather natural," he told Reuters last December.

"Individuals must make demands on themselves as well as on society. There are no rights without duties, no duties without rights," said Rasmussen.

His main economic goal will be to cut record unemployment of 11.5 per cent of the workforce.

Rasmussen has also vowed to continue Schlueter's tight economic policies which have brought down inflation to below two per cent.

The Social Democrat leader is sometimes criticised for bending too far to secure compromise -- a skill usually highly prized in Denmark where no party has a majority in the ideologically fractured eight-party parliament.

In late 1992, he brokered a "national compromise" aimed at getting Danes to accept the European Community Maastricht treaty on political, economic and monetary union.

Sidelining Schlueter, he won broad government approval for his plan after hammering out details with the opposition Radical Liberals and Socialist Peoples' Party.

Danes touched off one of the deepest EC crises by voting "no" to Maastricht in a referendum in June 1992. A new referendum on a deal allowing Danes to opt out of plans for a common currency and joint defence policy is due in April or May.

Born on June 15, 1943 in Esbjerg on the west coast of the Jutland peninsula, he graduated from Copenhagen University with a degree in political science.

He joined the Danish Trade Union Congress (LO) as an economist in 1971.

From 1980-86 he was the LO's chief economist, first becoming a member of parliament in 1988.

Twice divorced, he became engaged in 1992 to Lone Dybkjaer, a former environment minister and a leading light in the Radical Liberal Party.

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BELGIUM TO CHAIR COUNCIL MEETING ON TANKER SPILLS

BRUSSELS, Jan 25, Reuter - Due to the announcement of a new Danish government on Monday, Belgium has been asked to chair the joint EC Environment and Transport Council called in response to the recent spate of oil tanker accidents.

The Belgian minister for transport and communications, Guy Coeme, will chair a lunch starting at three p.m., where the ministers will discuss the EC's role in international shipping safety.

He is then due to chair the full meeting, which starts at five p.m., unless a Danish minister can be released from Copenhagen in time to get to Brussels to take over.

The new Danish environment minister is Svend Auken and the transport ministry is now in the hands of Helga Mortensen.

Belgium said in a statement there would be a news conference at seven p.m. but some EC officials said it was still impossible to say whether the meeting would be finished by that time.

During COREPER preparations on Friday, Greece resisted a draft Council declaration calling on the Commission to issue a Community action programme which would seek "strict convergent implementation for the whole Community of international rules."

EC officials said the Netherlands and others were in favour of tough measures on maritime security but that Greece was not keen on hefty EC-level intervention, partly because Greece had a huge and ageing shipping fleet.

Britain was opposed to tough EC-level measures on the grounds of subsidiarity, they added.

The Greek shipping fleet -- those carrying the Greek flag -- comprises 2,079 ships of which 389 are tankers. Their average age is about 19 years, the Greek merchant marine ministry said.

EC diplomats and officials said after the COREPER meeting that the statement issued by Monday's meeting would stress the need to speed up work on maritime safety, focusing on a paper to be produced by the Commission in February.

The paper, A Common Policy on Safe Seas, was already being prepared in the Commission but the officials say it would be beefed up since the recent spillages from the Aegean Sea off La Coruna in Spain and the Braer in the Shetland Islands.

Among other things, the paper -- a "communication" in Commission jargon -- will address the possibility of refusing ships access to EC ports when it is proved that they do not meet international safety standards, officials said.

It will also assess the possibility of revising port and transit dues which penalise modern vessels, they said.

Identification of ecologically sensitive zones, which would have to be avoided by tankers or subject to special piloting arrangements, would also be looked into by the Commission, they said.

Diplomats said Britain was arguing strongly that maritime safety should be dealt with under the auspices of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and that EC-level action should be kept to a minimum.

The European Parliament adopted a resolution last week which calls for ageing or unsafe vessels to be banned from EC ports and waters and for the

creation of a European shipping register.

During a debate many members of the parliament said the EC should forge ahead and not wait for improved safety rules under the IMO, whose regulations are not universally applied or respected.

The parliament resolution also called for the establishment of "environmentally sensitive" zones from which ships would be barred or have mandatory piloting.

Some diplomats said the Monday meeting could run later than Belgium was predicting because several ministers were being sent by each country and all of them were keen to make statements.

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