

Parliament and Democracy in the 21st Century: Parliamentarians and the International Trade Agenda

Parliamentarians are an essential link between citizens and their government and play a special role in bridging domestic and international concerns through information exchange. This role requires MPs to be in constant contact with their constituents in order to understand their needs and effectively speak on their behalf.

In addition parliamentarians are in a good position to explain to citizens the importance of looking at the world as a global marketplace where the free flow of goods and services is key to sustaining Canada's prosperity in the 21st Century. This pedagogical role is essential because international trade is not at the top of the public's concerns, except for the brief surge of interest during prominent cases and disputes or high-level meetings, which are at the centre of media attention. Hence, by encouraging public awareness and understanding of international trade, as well as citizen participation in public consultations, parliamentarians are critical to the development of trade strategies and policies that reflect the priorities and interests of Canadians.

While there are many avenues for MPs to scrutinize the government's actions and policies in regards to trade, I view the work of parliamentary committees as a key instrument for MPs to not only increase their knowledge and understanding with respect to Canada's trade strategy, but also to contribute to the development and refinement of this strategy by seeking clarifications or issuing recommendations on a particular policy area. The studies and reports of parliamentary committees are prepared through extensive hearings with all interested and concerned parties. These hearings provide a common space for government representatives, parliamentarians and citizens to have an open and informed exchange of views on specific trade policies, proposals or programs. As such, they complement the government's commitment to seek the views of Canadians on Canada's trade agenda by involving MPs at the heart of this consultative process.

As Minister for International Trade, I have personally asked the House of Commons Standing Committee on For-

ign Affairs and International Trade (SCFAIT) and the Standing Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs to conduct studies on Canada's trading relationship with key partners in a bilateral, regional and global context. In each instance, their reports consistently provided a fair, balanced and exhaustive examination of key trade policy issues, and they have received serious consideration. Government responses to many of the reports, coupled with testimonies and briefings from Ministers and senior government officials during parliamentary hearings, provide another opportunity for the Government of Canada to keep its citizens and parliamentarians fully informed about the strategic orientation and policy direction of Canada's trade agenda.



Increasingly, parliamentarians are not only engaging with their domestic constituents, they are also engaging with their foreign counterparts (and by extension, either directly or indirectly, with foreign governments) either by forming a common national front on an ad-hoc basis to address specific issues or through their involvement in inter-parliamentary networks and associations. The creation of these supra-national parliamentary fora reflects the growing recognition among MPs that global issues, such as the strengthening of a rules-based multilateral trading system, need to be addressed at the international level. These fora provide a privileged avenue for our MPs to foster trusting and candid relations with parliamentarians from Canada's trading partners, and to enhance their understanding of a particular Canadian trade policy, position or proposal. The constructive and effective advocacy work of these networks can thus complement the more traditional diplomatic relations and negotiations between countries, which are the exclusive responsibility of Heads of States, Ministers and officials from the Executive Branch of government.

These fora also provide a formal mechanism for parliamentarians to engage with inter-governmental organizations like the World Trade Organization or processes such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) negotiations to ensure that trade-related rule-making at the global

and regional levels follow the same democratic requirements of transparency and accountability that exist at home, and by the same token promote these long-standing and deep-seated Canadian values and principles abroad.

Canada has always been a strong proponent of parliamentary diplomacy in international trade. At the 4th WTO Ministerial Conference in Doha, Canada actively supported the resolution adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the European Parliament that proposed the establishment of a steering committee that would prepare options for the engagement of parliamentarians in the WTO. We further supported adding a reference in the Doha Declaration with respect to the role of parliamentarians in this regard. Unfortunately, due to a lack of consensus, no such reference was made in the declaration.

In Cancun, twelve Canadian parliamentarians were part of the Canadian delegation. This was the largest representation of parliamentarians ever to join our delegation to a WTO Ministerial meeting and reflects not only our commitment to transparency and openness in trade negotiations, but also demonstrates the value we place on the contribution of parliamentarians in this regard.

The Canadian Government has always encouraged inter-parliamentary relations in the Americas and has supported in particular our Parliament's leadership and commitment to the development of the Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the Americas (FIPA). Indeed at its creation in 2001, FIPA was first headed by my colleague, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bill Graham. Canadians continue to hold key positions in this organization and they have been the driving force behind FIPA's efforts to engage with Trade Ministers and other key government officials on the margins of the upcoming FTAA Ministerial Meeting in Miami. I have welcomed this initiative and have personally written to my counterparts in the United States and Brazil, who are co-chairing the FTAA process, in support of FIPA's proposal. As an elected official and member of Cabinet, I am convinced that involving parliamentarians at this crucial stage of our talks will increase their awareness and knowledge base about the FTAA negotiations and lend momentum to the successful ratification of the proposed Agreement.

In addition to their increased presence on the multilateral and regional fronts, Canadian parliamentarians are also working to strengthen bilateral legislative relations with the U.S. by better engaging their American counterparts on key areas of concern between the world's two largest trading partners. There are ongoing efforts to bring legislators together. For example last February 19 of my parliamentary colleagues and I attended an event organized by the Canadian Embassy in Washington D.C. to welcome the 108th Congress and become better acquainted with its members. The event was a great success, allowing us to interact with

more than 1,200 congressional staffers and more than 45 members of Congress.

Moreover, last May, the Canada-U.S. Inter-Parliamentary Group met in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario to discuss a range of trade and economic issues. The group identified specific items requiring special attention, such as meetings between Canadian and American livestock producers; developing guiding negotiating principles for the current WTO round of negotiations; and moving towards a permanent solution regarding the bilateral softwood lumber dispute, to name only a few. This is another clear example of the positive and constructive role parliamentarians can play beyond our borders by articulating our differences with our partners candidly and respectfully with a view to negotiate and find compromises that will further contribute to the flourishing relations that Canada entertains with the world.

Parliamentary associations are not alone in demanding an increased role in inter-governmental institutions or processes related to trade. Indeed other entities, and most notably NGOs, are often circumventing governmental and parliamentary structures to demand direct access and participation at the international level. Yet these organizations, despite of valuable expertise in their respective policy field and their useful role in bringing the concerns of the grassroots at the international level, do not have the democratic basis or mandate to represent citizens that Ministers and MPs enjoy through the holding of regular, free and fair elections. Hence, the presence of NGOs in international affairs needs to be reconciled with the traditional notion that elected officials are the main channel and the official voice for aggregate citizens' views to be legitimately represented in the political arena.

I see these phenomena, namely the emergence of inter-parliamentary associations and the rise of international NGOs as significant actors in trade diplomacy, as the symptoms and manifestations of a growing concern among citizens regarding the perceived "democratic deficit" in global governance. In other words, some constituents feel either absent or excluded from the conduct of multilateral trade talks, especially as negotiations are nowadays moving away from tariff issues and into more sensitive areas that may intersect with public policies such as in education, health, the environment, labour, human rights, consumer protection, etc. Addressing this "democratic deficit" is of paramount importance because citizens are the foundation of democracy, and their support is essential to have democratic legitimacy in trade policy. This is a multifaceted issue that affects us all, governments, parliamentarians, and NGOs, because far from being adversaries, we are partners in pursuit of a common cause: that is, to fashion a world trading system, and indeed a global economy, that is faithful to the interests and priorities of Canadians.

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