

---

# The World Trade Organisation and Parliamentarians

---

by Paddy Torsney, MP

*In its Final Declaration, at the Parliamentary Conference on the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in February 2003, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) stated, it was determined to push for an inter-parliamentary process with the WTO which would evolve around regular parliamentary meetings held on the occasion of WTO Ministerial Conferences. It proposed these events be called Parliamentary Conferences on the WTO and their objective would be to oversee and promote the effectiveness of WTO activities; maintain dialogue with governmental negotiators and civil society; and facilitate information exchange, sharing of experiences and capacity-building for national parliaments in matters of international trade. This article looks at the role parliamentarians can play in international trade discussions and agreements.*



The Final Declaration of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO<sup>1</sup> set out a structure for continuing work that has been taking place over the past few years amongst IPU members. It is an important undertaking for each of us elected to represent our constituents and our nations. If the World Trade Organization is going to achieve all it intends to, in terms of bringing order to

trade relationships and offering opportunities for less developed nations, we must ensure that the voices of the citizens of the world are represented.

With 145 members and more than 27 countries waiting accession, the World Trade Organization is truly a global forum for international trade issues. WTO agreements

bind nations to common objectives. Enforcement of the rules is done through a binding dispute settlement mechanism. These decisions made by the WTO can and do have a huge impact on domestic economies and policies.

The negotiators of the WTO agreements receive instructions from the executive branch of our governments. Some nations have negotiators who are in touch with legislators, government and opposition, and with non-governmental organization representatives. Others are not so fortunate.

International trade policy is increasingly intersecting with domestic social and economic policy. While individual nations used to have complete sovereignty over policies related to intellectual property, services and telecommunications, for example, international agreements are setting new boundaries for those nations that sign trade agreements. Legislators and voters are frequently frustrated when options for solutions to domestic challenges are met with lawsuits based on these international agreements. This is especially so in cases where they feel they have had little input or choice in developing the international agreement.

---

*Paddy Torsney represents the constituency of Burlington in the House of Commons. Ms. Torsney has served as the President of the Canadian Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union since 2001.*

---

The success of WTO agreements depends on governments working to implement the agreements with the support of their citizens. It seems obvious, therefore, that voters need to understand the process of the negotiations and agree with the substance of the agreements. This can only take place if the process is open, if information is made available to the public and if elected representatives have input into the agreements.

Globalization has an impact on all our constituents. For this reason, parliamentarians have a responsibility and an opportunity to become more involved in the international trade area.

Created in 1889, the Inter-Parliamentary Union is the oldest and largest organization of sovereign states. It is a centre for dialogue and parliamentary diplomacy. The IPU offers parliamentarians a unique platform from which to observe political trends and opinions, and a forum for interaction on issues of global significance. The IPU recognizes the challenges presented by globalization and the increasing influence and scope of the WTO specifically, and has sought ways in which parliamentarians can become more actively involved with international trade negotiations and arrangements.

At its September 2000 meeting, a call to action was voiced to "ensure that our parliaments contribute more substantively to international cooperation by making the voice of the peoples heard, thereby introducing a more manifestly democratic dimension into international decision-making and cooperation."<sup>2</sup>

Since then, much work has been done to create a network of parliamentarians and a process for input. As a parliamentarian who believes in an orderly trading system, I think that this relationship between the IPU and the WTO will ensure WTO agreements will be better written with input from the peoples' representatives.

Furthermore, at a time when some people question whether Members of Parliament are able to reflect the aspirations of their citizens and increasingly we see people supporting NGOs to achieve their goals, this dialogue is needed. I support a healthy role for NGOs and work closely with several, but I believe the parliamentary process is absolutely imperative. We have seen success on banning landmines, for instance, when NGOs and parliamentarians worked closely with bureaucrats and government ministers to achieve an agreement to eradicate the use of landmines. Success resulted from the close working relationship, each actor playing her part, to lobby, to negotiate, to legislate and to implement. These trade agreements present similar opportunities.

Members of Parliament have a constitutional obligation to represent the interest of our citizens: we give voice to the interests, concerns and aspirations of our electors. We pass laws that govern our nation and we will be called upon to adopt legislation implementing WTO agreements.

Members of Parliament are also overseers of our governments. We have an obligation to ensure that the laws and international agreements our nations enter into are fair, equitable and in the best interest of our citizens and the global community.

Parliamentary involvement in the WTO process is necessary to ensure the best agreements are achieved, especially as these agreements enter into areas traditionally sovereign and subject only to domestic policy. Negotiators must be given the right guidelines and voters must support the negotiated agreements if they are to be implemented.

At the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Cancun in September, there will be two days of discussion hosted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. It will be an important forum for Members of Parliament to discuss objectives of the WTO and to ensure negotiators understand our citizens' goals. Members of Parliament will also have an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the process of the debate and the resolution of disputes, ensuring they have a realistic understanding of their opportunities for influence.

Many people disagree with the concept of the WTO. For me, the most important thing is to ensure that since we are going to have a WTO, we must have agreements that are the best agreements and that reflect Canadians' needs and desires. The IPU-WTO process is critical.

I look forward to working with my international colleagues within the IPU, and with the Minister of International Trade and our negotiators. I also look forward to discussing ideas with the NGO's that will attend the meeting. Dialogue fosters understanding and identifies opportunities for creative solutions.

#### Notes

1. Final Declaration – Parliamentary Conference on the WTO, Geneva, February 17-18, 2003.
2. The parliamentary vision for international cooperation at the dawn of the third millennium – Declaration by consensus – Conference of Presiding Officers of National Parliaments, August 30 – September, 2000.