

TRANSPARENCY AND DERESTRICTION

Communication from Canada

The following communication, dated 16 September 1998, received from the delegation of Canada is circulated to Members.

As Canada's Minister for International Trade, Sergio Marchi, made clear in his statement at the May Ministerial Conference, greater transparency of WTO activities is central to building and reinforcing public support for the multilateral trading system.

As part of the preparatory process for the Third Ministerial Conference, WTO Members will all, as national governments, have the responsibility to develop national positions in close consultation with our national stakeholders. Members thus need to have the necessary tools at our disposal to facilitate this task of developing national positions. Greater transparency, while preserving the contractual intergovernmental nature of the WTO, is one.

Public concerns in many of our countries can reflect a lack of understanding of the nature of the WTO. As a way of rebuilding confidence in the objectives of the preamble of the Marrakesh Agreement establishing the World Trade Organization, Members need to demonstrate that we, working within the context of the WTO, have no secrets to hide. As governments, Members increasingly need to engage in open and well-informed public debates at the national level as a means of rebuilding such confidence.

Canada thinks it helpful to distinguish among three separate elements to transparency as a way to taking immediate, practical steps towards the shared goal of greater public support for trade liberalization in general and the WTO in particular. The three elements are: document derestriction policy, outreach to civil society, and transparency issues related to the Dispute Settlement Understanding. In Canada's view, the WTO should move quickly on both document derestriction policy and outreach. Issues related to the Dispute Settlement Understanding are different and should thus be considered in the context of the DSU review, with the exception of circulation of Panel reports which is a document circulation issue only. Canada supports the circulation of panel reports to the Parties once the "Finding and Conclusions" portion has been translated into all three official WTO languages, the factual portion being in any one of the three official WTO languages.

With respect to document policy, Canada is of the view that, once available in all three official WTO languages, the following WTO documents should be issued as unrestricted:

- (a) Draft agendas (airgrams);
- (b) Official minutes ("M" series);
- (c) Secretariat working documents ("W" series);

- (d) Member's formal contributions or working documents ("W" series) unless the Member in question specifies otherwise.

With respect to Secretariat outreach to civil society, Canada would welcome further Secretariat efforts. Canada takes for granted that outreach should be aimed at the full range of public interests rather than only those groups which have expressed particular concerns. Canada would support more regular outreach in the form of symposia and workshops as a means to improve understanding regarding the WTO and trade liberalization. However, these cost money. While Canada has been pleased to provide some funds in this regard, and there may well be a role for grant funding for special outreach activities by the Secretariat, it would be preferable for the Secretariat to concentrate its efforts on the substance of symposia rather than being tasked with fundraising. Regular budget funded outreach would not only ensure best use of Secretariat resources, but more importantly, would preclude undue influence by donors, or perceptions thereof, in terms of the specific activity or event funded. Regular budget funding would provide the confidence among all Members that the Secretariat's outreach program reflects the views of the full spectrum of Members. The outreach program should not, of course, be developed at the expense of ongoing work but should be funded either from the current WTO budget or through an increase in the WTO' budget. In the medium-term, Members will need to consider building funding of outreach into the regular WTO budget.

Canada would stress that it is the very success of the GATT and WTO over the past 50 years that has led to the public awareness of the linkages between trade policy and domestic interests. As Members prepare for the Third Ministerial Conference and further negotiations, informed debate is central. Enhanced transparency through more liberal document policy and outreach are key elements in informed debate and are essential to the development and reflection of public policy.
