

Parliamentarians are not Puppets

by Stéphane Bergeron, MP

Only a handful of legislators were present in Seattle and just under a hundred in Doha, but there were several hundred parliamentarians from the world in Cancun, Mexico, from September 10 to 14, for the 5th WTO Ministerial Conference. This number is an eminently clear indication of the increased role parliamentarians intend to play in defining the parameters governing the trade liberalization process. This article by one of the members of the federal delegation, argues that the role of parliamentarians at these meetings is still very limited.



Canada can pride itself on having assembled one of the largest parliamentary delegations in Cancun: a dozen parliamentarians in total, not including the federal ministers themselves and the few provincial ministers attending. That said, it is one thing to trot out a line of parliamentarians to impress the gallery; quite another to closely involve them with the negotiation process itself. Physically

distanced from the hermetic alcoves where these negotiations were taking place, parliamentarians had practically no say in Cancun and little opportunity to have much impact on the progress of these negotiations or on the government's positions. The federal parliamentarians and provincial ministers were essentially extras and as such, forced to hang around outside the doors of federal senior officials and ministers, who had been given the authority to negotiate on behalf of all of Canada, in an effort to extract a few snippets of information or to whisper their expectations furtively.

We had to depend on the daily public information sessions (broadcast in part on the webcam), in which we could participate on equal footing with representatives of various lobby groups and NGOs if we wished to give ourselves the illusion that we had made a constructive contribution to the Cancun conference. Oh, we certainly could have held our own information sessions (not broadcast on the webcam) and we did organize a few, extremely interesting, meetings with foreign parliamentarians where we could discuss issues of common interest, but nothing, committing the government.

It is perhaps not very gratifying to admit, but the idea that parliamentarians should be more closely involved in the process of negotiating international treaties and agreements, particularly in trade matters, is not part of Canada's philosophy or its traditional practices. The Minister for International Trade, Pierre Pettigrew, said that the "more traditional" negotiations between countries "are the exclusive responsibility of Heads of States, Ministers and Officials from the executive branch of government."¹ As a result of this extremely narrow and, I feel, backward-looking point of view, Canada is today one of the few democracies in the world where Parliament is not called on, as the final authority, to ratify international treaties and agreements concluded by the government.

This point of view completely ignores the interesting experiments in Europe and Australia, for example. If there is one positive aspect to parliamentarians' partici-

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pation in international conferences, such as that of Cancun's, it is that we can learn from our respective experiences. Indeed, we learned a few things from our meetings in Cancun with European parliamentarians.

The European Union's trade policy is, in large part, influenced by a certain parliamentary framework. The entire negotiating strategy for trade agreements follows from directives given by the European Commission and the Council of the European Union, the legislative body with jurisdiction over foreign affairs. The European Commissioner for Trade, Pascal Lamy, has to appear before parliamentarians several times throughout the year, not only to answer their questions, but also to learn of their opinions and expectations, which end up inevitably reflected in the Council's directives. These appearances can number as many as 15 a year. In Canada, we count ourselves lucky if the Minister for International Trade appears more than twice a year before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade. There is no doubt that this narrow and backwards-looking point of view often has the effect of causing, if not justifying, thinly veiled paternalistic and condescending treatment of parliamentarians. According to Mr. Pettigrew, "parliamentary committees [are] a key instrument for MPs to [...] increase their knowledge and understanding with respect to Canada's trade strategy" and the "supra-national parliamentary fora [...] enhance their understanding of a particular Canadian trade policy, position or proposal."²

These statements are rather surprising, coming from a Minister who has never sat on a parliamentary committee. If he had the skills and experience that allowed him to accede directly to a ministerial portfolio, how can he then immediately assume that the parliamentarians not also fast-tracked to Cabinet must necessarily take part in committees and international parliamentary forums in the hope of attaining the level of "knowledge" and "undertanding" that allows "ministers", including Mr. Pettigrew, to assume the "exclusive responsibility" of conducting "more traditional negotiations between countries"? I suggest that the skills and experience of certain parliamentarians, gained through previous work experi-

ence and training along with years of hard work in committees or within these supra-national parliamentary forums, are no doubt on a par with those of the Minister.

The purpose here is not to present a narrow and partisan opinion of an Opposition MP, who takes great delight in going tooth and nail at a particular minister or government practice, but to present an opinion widely held among parliamentarians on both sides of the House. In fact, this point of view was the focus of a specific recommendation in the most recent report of the Subcommittee on International Trade, Trade Disputes and Investment entitled *Reinvigorating Economic Relations Between Canada and Asia-Pacific*.

Globalization and its effects, whether economic, political, social or cultural, pose serious challenges to democratic institutions. The gradual yet apparently irreversible transformation of the role of national governments requires that new lines of thought and action be explored and not the mechanical recitation of well-worn dogma serving only the interests of those who want to keep their prerogatives to themselves at all cost.

Negotiations leading to trade agreements must be carried out in a more transparent manner and under tighter democratic and parliamentary control. In this respect, it goes without saying that the documents on which these negotiations are based must be made public periodically. Invoking the "democratic deficit" as a mere ritualistic incantation will not make it disappear; we must have the courage and the clear-mindedness to tackle this issue head on by making sure the public's elected representatives – parliamentarians – are more involved in the globalization process, thereby ensuring it takes place within the most appropriate democratic framework possible.

Notes

1. Pierre Pettigrew, "Parliamentarians and the International Trade Agenda", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, vol. 26, number 3 (autumn, 2003) p. 2.
2. *Ibid.*