

The Participation of Parliamentarians in Trade Negotiations

by Michel Bissonnet

Now more than ever international trade agreement negotiations and more specifically negotiations leading to the creation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas require the participation and input of parliamentarians. This article looks at how the Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas is working toward enabling all parliamentarians on the American continents to work in concert on the process of hemispheric integration.



The Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas (COPA) was created in response to the first Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Americas, held in Miami in 1994, during which the project of creating a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) for 2005 and rebuilding inter-American cooperation on a new

foundation was first introduced.

The prospect of establishing the FTAA and carrying out the Summit action plans initiated an integration process with economic, political, social, environmental and cultural ramifications, and one that directly concerns parliamentarians in their role as legislators and representatives of the people.

COPA was officially founded in September 1997 when 400 parliamentarians from 28 countries of the Americas convened in Québec. Among their number were several representatives from the two houses of the Parliament of

Canada, as well as from the provinces and two of the territories. Parliamentarians agreed on the need to create a representative, independent and pluralistic forum in which they could express their points of view and discuss available means of action to face the new hemispheric realities. COPA has since held four other General Assemblies and set up permanent thematic working committees and the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas.

In order to give a voice to all the parliamentarians of the Americas, COPA, like the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie, brings together parliaments from unitary, federal and federated States. COPA also allows the participation of regional parliaments such as the Andean Parliament, and interparliamentary organizations of the Americas such as the National Conference of State Legislatures of the United States.

The Significance of the FTAA for Parliamentarians

Parliamentarians must definitely become more involved in the FTAA negotiation process. Parliamentarians' association with the economic integration process gives it increased transparency and legitimacy, thus mitigating the "democratic deficit" often experienced in connection with international trade negotiations. Furthermore, many parliamentarians from all parts of the

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Americas are qualified for such responsibilities through their previous training and professional duties as well as years of work on parliamentary committees and within international interparliamentary organizations.

Since free-trade agreements have an impact in the areas of jurisdiction belonging to federated States, the reasons brought forward for promoting participation in trade negotiations do not apply only to parliamentarians on the national or federal level. COPA is thus a most suitable forum allowing parliamentarians from the federated States to present their perspectives on international trade negotiations.

The potential impact of the FTAA on the populations of the Americas and on the ability of parliamentarians to legislate in their respective areas of jurisdiction has been a concern of the members of COPA since it was founded. Over the years, they have been taking on a more constructive role in the negotiations involved in creating this trade agreement.

Consequently, during a meeting of COPA's Executive Committee in Quebec coinciding with the Third Summit of the Americas in April 2001, the parliamentarians committed themselves to playing a more active role in the Summit process, specifically in the FTAA negotiations, and to taking the necessary measures to inform and consult their populations about the stakes involved.

In November 2001, COPA created a framework to study the various aspects of the economic integration project by setting up six permanent thematic working committees, including the Committee on the economy, trade, labour and trading blocks. The latter met in August 2003 in Quito, Ecuador, and the participants adopted a recommendation calling on COPA to prepare an attendance and active participation strategy for parliaments with respect to international FTAA negotiation forums.

During the fifth General Assembly, held in Caracas in November 2003, the form such participation would take was more specifically defined. Thus, by means of a resolution, the parliamentarians of COPA expressed their will to be directly associated with the FTAA negotiation process and their desire to participate in the proceedings of the Tripartite Committee, the consultation body composed of the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

As early as February 4, 2004, at a COPA meeting at Puebla, Mexico, the parliamentarians were able to establish contacts with the FTAA Trade Negotiations Committee, which was meeting at the same time, by meeting negotiators and sharing their concerns with them.

Other steps in the same direction have included discussions on FTAA-related themes during each of the General Assemblies and the proceedings of the permanent thematic working committees. For example, during the proceedings of the last General Assembly of COPA at Caracas in November 2003, the parliamentarians studied the impact of the FTAA on public education and healthcare systems, peace and public security as well as the environment. Proceedings of the Network of Women Parliamentarians of the Americas led to the adoption of a recommendation with respect to the impact of the future Free Trade Area of the Americas on women. In the recommendation, the participants agreed in particular to promote the active participation of women in the political and economic spheres of influence in order to guarantee greater consideration of their concerns in the FTAA negotiation process.

The FTAA question has thus been a central focus of COPA's activities since its inception. Parliamentarians have a role to play in the integration process, and governments stand to benefit from their opinions and their legitimate desire to participate. Other economic integration processes have already demonstrated the importance of the involvement of parliamentarians. For instance, in the European context, which stands out in particular, the European Trade Commissioner is required to appear several times during the year before the members of the European Parliament to answer questions and take note of their opinions and expectations. There is also the example of the Mercosur Joint Parliamentary Commission, which is one of the consultation bodies provided for in the constitutive treaty of the South American integration process. Mention should also be made of the steps taken by the European Parliament and the Inter-Parliamentary Union since 2001 to give the World Trade Organization a "parliamentary dimension".

I invite Canadian parliamentarians to widely participate, with our parliamentary colleagues from all of the Americas, in the work of COPA to continue building on the foundation already in place and to claim our role as guardians of the interests of our fellow citizens in the context of the hemispheric economic integration process.

Notes

1. The Common Market of the South (known under the Spanish acronym MERCOSUR) groups together Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Chile and Bolivia have been associate members since 1996.