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Can the NDP find its way in a new free-trade world?

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If trade represents a major priority for the Harper government in the year ahead, it also represents a major challenge, and opportunity, for the official opposition.

Thomas Mulcair is trying to rebrand the New Democratic Party as a responsible alternative to the governing Conservatives, one that could be safely entrusted with protecting and growing the Canadian economy.

Yet the NDP has traditionally been suspicious of trade agreements, seeing them as threats to Canadian workers and Canadian sovereignty. So how will the government-in-waiting respond to the raft of free-trade negotiations underway?

"We support open, progressive trade," said International Trade critic Don Davies. "We support breaking down harmful trade barriers. We support lowering tariffs that are harmful and reducing protectionism. But not at any cost."

The NDP, breaking with tradition, supported the recent free-trade agreement with Jordan. On the other hand, it opposed the acquisition of Canadian oil firm Nexen by the Chinese state-owned firm CNOOC, and has deep reservations about the foreign investment protection agreement the Harper government signed with China.

These mixed signals reflect conflicting constituencies. While Quebec, where so many NDP MPs now hail from, is generally pro-free trade, the party's labour wing is suspicious of foreign deals and environmentalists loathe them. The West is mostly open for business; Ontario workers split between globalists in the office towers and protectionists on the assembly line.

The first, and perhaps biggest, decision will be whether to support the

comprehensive free-trade agreement with the European Union that should be announced in March or thereabouts.

In principle, the NDP is ready to endorse the deal. "We fully support pursuing a new trade agreement with Europe," said Mr. Davies. "The European Union is exactly the kind of high-standards, modern, dynamic economy that we should be broadening and deepening our trade with."

You just know there's another "but" coming.

"But does that mean that we necessarily have to sign a deal on intellectual property that expands patent protection for pharmaceuticals if the effect of that is to increase the cost of generic drugs?" Mr. Davies asks.

"... Can you sign an agreement between Europe and Canada and still preserve the ability of Canadian governments ... to make policy decisions to stimulate or spur local economic growth or to make decisions that protect the environment?"

These are hardly rhetorical questions: Stricter protections for drug patents and open access to government contracts are two key European demands.

The NDP is willing to support a Canada-EU trade agreement (and, presumably, a Trans Pacific Partnership agreement with Asia-Pacific nations and agreements with India and Japan et al – all of which are underway) provided they are modestly limited to simply reducing tariffs.

But bringing in the service sector, intellectual property, government procurement – these are beyond the scope of what the NDP thinks governments should be negotiating with other governments.

"Trade agreements have gone from being about tariffs and trade to being much larger, about economic integration and harmonization of standards and taking what used to be considered purely domestic policy items and making them part of an integrated trade agreement," Mr. Davies observed.

Yes. They have.

Mr. Davies says the NDP will need to read any proposed agreement with the EU before carefully deciding whether to support it. That will be a crucial decision.

Vote yes, and the core of the core – social activists, environmentalists, labour leaders – will cry betrayal. Vote no, and it will appear to critics that the NDP is once again looking for an excuse to pull up the drawbridge.

It will be some caucus meeting, when that call gets made.