

Canada-EU trade talks at 'danger point,' Charest says

Former Quebec premier urges PM to step in and finalize European deal

By Nick Gamache, [CBC News](#) Posted: Aug 9, 2013

Canada has reached a "danger point" in its free-trade negotiations with the European Union and it is time for Prime Minister Stephen Harper to step in and get a deal done, says former Quebec premier Jean Charest.

In an interview with CBC Radio's *The House* airing Saturday, Charest, who was instrumental in getting Canada-EU talks off the ground, warns "there's a danger point for us right now because Europe and the U.S. [have launched their negotiations](#)."

Charest fears that could sidetrack Canada's negotiations with the EU and he's sounding the alarm over the Conservative government's inability to seal a deal.

"[The U.S.-EU talks are] a danger because the real politics of this is now the Americans are in our room. It's very simple to understand, every time a decision pops up, the Europeans will say, 'You know what, we'll have to address this with the Americans, we can't do this with you, because if we do it with you, we have to do it with them,' and that's the danger," Charest said.

Charest said he's concerned that despite four years of talks, there's still no agreement between Canada and the EU.

"When you have a partner 10 times bigger than you are, securing their attention for a long period of time is a risk, and the sooner you get it done, the better, and the more chances of succeeding," Charest said.

Now a partner at the law firm McCarthy Tetrault, Charest questioned whether Canada has made the negotiations enough of a priority.

"If there's one question, I think, in the mind of people who have

watched this unfold over the last few years, is whether or not the Government of Canada is putting enough resources into this."

Charest said it's key that Harper step in to finalize the agreement, much like Brian Mulroney did with the 1988 free-trade negotiations with the United States.

"At this point, it does require the highest level of attention to land the deal, to make it happen."

Remaining issues 'solvable'

John Manley, the president of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives and a former cabinet minister in the Jean Chrétien Liberal government, recently suggested the prime minister [send a delegation of senior cabinet ministers](#) to Europe to bring a speedy conclusion to the talks.

[Several issues remain on the table](#), including counter-balancing Europe's need to win greater access for cheese producers, with Canada's demand that Europeans open the gate to Canadian beef and pork exports. As well, Canada is being asked to accept stricter European standards on patent protection for pharmaceutical drugs, which provinces have resisted because it could hike drug prices by as much \$2 billion annually.

Charest acknowledged there are a number of issues left to resolve, but "all of them are solvable."

He said the deal is about much more than improving access to Europe's 500 million customers.

"A lot of this, frankly, is about China," Charest said.

"The world of trade is changing very rapidly, and there's a broader issue in the world of who is going to be able to set the rules. If we get this done, get it right, we will be able to live in a trading environment where we will have rules that we can live by, and compete by, as opposed to having rules imposed upon us by emerging economies."

With negotiations stalled over the summer months, Charest said the

deal could hinge on what happens in the fall.

"In the first few weeks of September, I think we have to watch for some real movement to get this done," he said.