

Canada-Europe free trade is a win-win idea: Charest

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PARIS -- A Canada-Europe free trade agreement is a win-win proposition, Quebec Premier Jean Charest said Friday while dismissing a former senior Canadian trade negotiator's assertion that a transatlantic accord is "silly" and potentially destructive.

Mr. Charest, after a meeting with French Prime Minister Francois Fillon, said he wants to get the Canada-Europe free trade ball rolling by striking a Quebec-France labour mobility agreement.

The accord, which Mr. Charest wants signed no later than the end of this year, would mutually recognize professional qualifications for French and Quebecois doctors, nurses, engineers and other professionals.

He named former Liberal cabinet minister Gil Remillard his chief negotiator on Friday. Fillon, in turn, picked negotiator Jean-Marie Bockel, his government's secretary of state responsible for La Francophonie, the international organization of French-speaking countries that holds its summit in Quebec in October.

Mr. Charest is expected to continue to push the idea of a broader Canada-EU deal at a meeting of premiers in Vancouver later this month.

"I believe we're all going to gain by going forward," Mr. Charest told reporters.

He dismissed the argument advanced Friday by Michael Hart, a former senior Canadian trade official and one of the North America Free Trade Agreement negotiators, that a Canada-EU deal is folly because Canada would have to adapt its regulatory standards to suit Europe's more strict approach.

In an interview with Canwest News, Mr. Hart said that would result in little improvement in Canada-U.S. trade and would worsen business with American customers because of the inevitable conflict over regulations.

Mr. Charest, when confronted with Mr. Hart's criticism, acknowledged there are many differences in how the North American and European economies operate.

"But why not address them, why not make a relationship that's good even better?"

Mr. Hart ridiculed Mr. Charest's prediction that a transatlantic trade deal would result in \$2.4-billion annual trade windfall for Canada.

"It's silly," Hart, who teaches trade policy at the Centre for Trade Policy and Law at Carleton University in Ottawa, said in a telephone interview.

"This is something that sounds only good on the surface. It's political."

He noted that any economic gain from a Canadian trade deal would be insignificant for the 27-nation EU.

"The Europeans aren't interested, they've indicated that for years."

He said Canada-EU trade talks wouldn't likely break the logjam over the touchy issue of agriculture sector subsidies, and he added that any substantial deal would certainly result in major changes to Canada's regulatory approach.

"The Europeans have adopted the German approach, unfortunately, which is that nothing is allowed unless it is. Whereas we have adopted the Anglo-American approach, which is that everything is allowed unless it's not," Mr. Hart said.

"That's a huge difference. So the Europeans have far more regulations than we do."

Mr. Hart cited the clashing approach to regulating genetically modified foods. In North America, where GM foods are far more widespread, the regulatory standard is that a product will be approved unless there is compelling proof of a risk to public health and safety.

Europe's "precautionary" approach, which requires compelling proof that a product isn't a risk before it goes to market, has resulted in drastic limits on acceptance of GM products.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government, which is studying the issue, shouldn't and probably won't take up Mr. Charest's proposal, Mr. Hart said.