

III TRADE

# Charest offers European ray of sunshine



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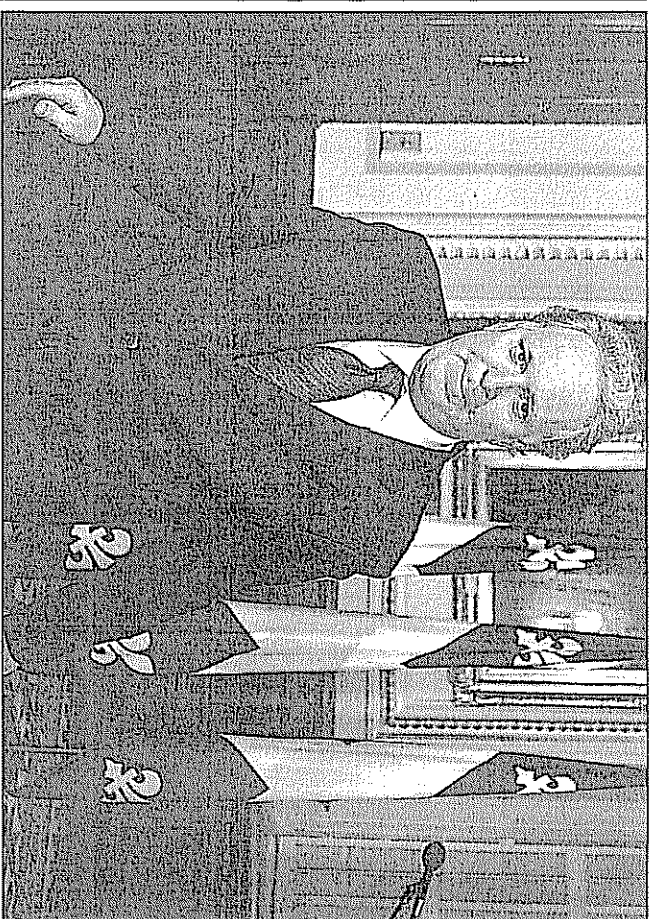
OTTAWA

**W**e must thank Quebec Premier Jean Charest. With his support, we are now more apt to get a Canada-EU free-trade agreement — for the simple reason that the federal government must take any particular Quebec proposal more seriously than it must take any merely national proposal. Now, perhaps, we'll get some action.

For more than a decade, Canada has cast its lot with bleak and barren global trade negotiations. These have proven to be much like Narma — always winter, never Christmas. With Mr. Charest's comments at the World Economic Forum in Davos, we are serendipitously talking of spring.

Mr. Charest says he spoke with Prime Minister Stephen Harper in November and found him "enthusiastic." He says he has spoken with Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell, New Brunswick Premier Shawn Graham and Newfoundland Premier Danny Williams. He has thus done more for Canada-EU free trade in two months in other words, than the federal government has done in 15 years.

Mr. Charest wants Canada-EU free trade for the right reason. The EU is so European. Yes, Canadians would benefit from lower tariffs and lower barriers to investment. Yes, Canadians would get richer. But Mr. Charest explicitly champions free movement between Quebec/Canada and the 27 member



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**Quebec Premier Jean Charest has done more for Canada-EU free trade in two months than the federal government has done in 15 years. In a purely political sense, his campaign for a pact is perfect.**

countries of the European Union. "The space we want to create would facilitate the movement of manpower, men and women, between Europe and Quebec, Europe and Canada for work purposes," Mr. Charest said. "This would allow us to recruit more qualified manpower to come to Canada and it would allow more Quebecers and more Canadians to go more easily to Europe and to develop more high-level jobs to meet the competition that will come from emerging countries."

This is cumbersome. Mr. Charest meant to say this: Quebec may well be a nation but it will be forever a small nation. It needs chal-

lenges greater than itself. It needs aspirations that transcend its borders. It needs complex social and economic connections. It needs dynamic personal and professional mobility — more upward mobility, sure, but more outward mobility, too.

Quebec's connection with Canada is necessary — but it's essentially political.

Quebec's connection with the U.S. is necessary — but it's essentially commercial. Quebec's natural connection is with continental Europe.

Quebec has always imagined itself as European, has always expressed itself as European. This re-

Chancellor Angela Merkel put it last month, shares "common interests, the same values" — and 60 per cent of the economic production of the world.

For Mr. Charest, though, the quest must be for the extension of European mobility rights to Quebecers. Free movement is now a fundamental European freedom, an essential part of "European citizenship." Would the EU extend these rights to Canada/Quebec? Perhaps. It has extended them to three countries that aren't EU members — Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland. (These mobility rights apply fully throughout the first 15 EU countries; they go into effect in steps for the 10 countries that joined in 2004; and they will apply — in time — for Bulgaria and Romania, the last countries to join.) In Davos, Mr. Charest specifically covered Europe's "mutual recognition of professional qualifications." The EU has extended this recognition to Iceland as well, along with co-ordination of social security benefits. If Iceland, why not Canada?

We wouldn't get absolute European mobility rights, of course. nor would we want them. A transatlantic swap of unrestricted rights could open Canada to casual entry by economic refugees and sophisticated criminal organizations. A Canada-EU free-trade agreement would, however, permit the easy exchange of business and professional people for starters, an expansion of the freedom to work where one chooses to work.

This kind of freedom of movement has made Britain amazingly mobile. (More than five million British citizens work abroad.) And more European. (As many as one million continental Europeans work in Britain.) It has worked for Britain. It would work for Canada — and for Quebec, too.

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