

G20 Summit: Canada-European Union Trade Deal Getting A Nudge

CP | By Mike Blanchfield, The Canadian Press
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OTTAWA - Prime Minister Stephen Harper faced renewed calls Friday to pull back the veil shrouding the controversial Canada-Europe free trade talks after saying that "significant gaps" remain.

Harper expressed that view after his 45-minute meeting Friday with European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso on the margins of the G20 summit in Russia.

Harper had intended to give the Europeans a friendly but firm nudge on the four-year-old talks. But as he made clear, a deal is not imminent.

"At the one level, we're very close on a number of issues, but I do have to say that based on the meeting we had today and some recent discussions, we still have some very significant gaps that have not been bridged," Harper said before departing for Ottawa.

"And that is the reality of the situation."

The Harper government has faced heavy criticism for negotiating the wide-ranging pact behind closed doors, with no public accountability.

The government has revealed little in public about the negotiations, sparking widespread criticism.

In contrast, the Europeans get periodic updates through the

European Parliament.

NDP trade critic Don Davies highlighted the fact that Peter Stastny, the EU's rapporteur on the negotiations, briefed a committee of the European Parliament in Brussels on Thursday.

Davies renewed the call for a similar briefing for Canadian MPs, but wasn't optimistic.

"Any time we put forward a motion at the trade committee to ask for a briefing, the Conservatives run and hide and go in-camera. They won't even debate the motion to have a briefing in public," he said in an interview.

Trade analyst Stuart Trew of the Council of Canadians called on the government to publicly air details surrounding the negotiations in Parliament.

"We don't think that's a decision the Conservative caucus should be allowed to make on its own," he said.

"We expect Parliament and the public to be able to review, alter and even reject the EU deal if it's found not to be in the public interest."

Davies said he was concerned by Stastny's assessment that Harper's office was sounding more "conciliatory" about the possibility of a deal.

"I'm hoping that the Canadian government is not just conceding to get a deal done."

Stastny — known in sports circles as a forward for the national team of the former Czechoslovakia, and for several NHL teams, including the now-defunct Quebec Nordiques — said he was more optimistic than he was several months ago.

He characterized the distance that remained in agriculture, intellectual property and provincial procurements as "minor

issues that should be and could be solved."

The fact that anyone from Europe has bothered to hint at progress in the contentious agricultural sector was music to the ears the Canadian Cattlemen's Association.

"He's not just a great hockey player, he's a real sharp guy in terms of economic policy," John Masswohl, director of government relations for the association, said in an interview Friday.

"That was the first time I had actually heard an acknowledgment from the EU side that the Canadian meat sector had actually made some concessions, and was being reasonable, which we've been doing all along."

One of the most persistent gaps in the negotiations has been balancing Europe's desire to win greater access for cheese producers with Canada's demand for greater access for its Canadian beef and pork exports.

The comprehensive trade agreement between Canada and the EU has been stalled for much of this year, and the slow pace has frustrated the Conservative government.

European officials have also expressed frustration, and have attempted to break the impasse by publicly suggesting Canada is to blame for dragging out the talks.

Both sides have said major gaps remain in agriculture, intellectual property rules on drug patents and provincial procurement.

Leaked documents previously obtained by The Canadian Press describe how procurement would be liberalized to allow European firms access to Ontario and Quebec's public hydro sectors, and freedom to bid on provincial and municipal tendering, as well as on universities, schools and hospital

contracts.

Harper didn't give specifics, but he suggested the provinces are not comfortable with the current state of play.

"As I've said all along, we want to see a deal. ... This would first of all be the biggest trade deal in Canadian history if we could get it done," he said.

"But we've got to get it done in a way that, in our opinion, and in the opinion of all the provinces, which are our partners in this, serve the broader interests of Canadians and the Canadian economy.

"And we are not there as of now."