

Harper trip shifts focus to EU trade amid Senate scandal

New paint on the prime minister's plane, but same old Senate questions remain

By Terry Milewski, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jun 11, 2013 10:04 AM ET

Prime Minister Stephen Harper took off for Europe Tuesday, hoping to leave the Senate scandal behind and bask in the glow of international summitry.

His freshly painted plane, no longer dull grey, will whisk him away from the grubby Red Chamber.

Harper will meet the Queen, hold talks with British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Francois Hollande, then attend the G8 summit in Northern Ireland. In the midst of such pageantry, who could be so gauche as to ask him about Mike Duffy?

On his last trip, everyone was.

In fact, none of the travelling media pack asked Harper about anything else when he went to South America in mid-May.

What was the deal with Senator Duffy? Where's that cheque he got from Harper's departed Chief of Staff, Nigel Wright? Prime Minister, how could you not know about it?

There wasn't one question about the thrilling prospect of Canada joining Mexico, Chile, Peru and Colombia in the Pacific Alliance trade group.

Few Canadians had ever heard of the Pacific Alliance. But many wanted to see that cheque.

This time, with luck, it may be different. For one thing, there will be no

questions, no reporters and not even any TV cameras when Harper meets the Queen to congratulate her on her 60 years on the throne. And, with Cameron and Hollande, there will be other issues to talk about – notably the long march to CETA, a Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with the European Union.

Trade talks stalled

CETA is a big deal. But, like all trade agreements, it's proving to be a struggle. Harper has set great store by his efforts to open trade around the world, but landing an agreement with Colombia is not a legacy for the ages. Landing one with Europe, the world's largest economy, would surely be something to make the folks at home forget, at least for a moment, about Nigel Wright's chequebook.

The problem, as always, is that neither side wants to blink first on the final, trickiest issues. Both are under pressure to finish a deal before Europe turns its attention to a similar agreement with the United States. But France and Ireland are balking at allowing more Canadian beef and pork exports into Europe. It's not a coincidence that Harper will visit both countries on this trip.

There's resistance back home, too. Europe wants to open up Canada's provincial government procurement market and get better intellectual property protection for pharmaceuticals.

So far, it's a standoff.

In this atmosphere, Harper's team is trying to play down the prospect of a deal during this trip. Better to lower expectations and hope to exceed them than to tout a forthcoming triumph and have it said that you failed.

So, a word of caution about the caution: saying there's no deal yet is exactly what you'd expect them to say if they were almost there.

Pomp, pageantry and hearty agreement

So far, it's the London leg of the trip that has the best chance of moving the dial off the Duffy channel.

For one thing, Harper and Cameron are conservative soul-mates,

unlike Harper and (French Socialist Party Leader) Hollande.

Harper will not only meet the Queen (albeit with just a stills photographer present), but will address the British Parliament on Thursday. It will be a grand occasion, even if Harper will speak not in the cramped British House of Commons but in the Robing Room, surrounded by ornate reminders of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Take that, Thomas Mulcair!

After that, Harper flies to Paris for two days, then spends the weekend in Dublin, Ireland.

Finally, on the following Monday and Tuesday, he attends the G8 summit, where he is expected to heartily agree with Cameron's drive, as this year's host, to crack down on international tax evasion.

That doesn't mean the crackdown will achieve much, but summits need to have outcomes and, well, what can this one do? Bring Iran to heel? End the war in Syria? Abolish North Korea? Not going to happen.

Along the way, Harper will certainly face questions from the travelling media pack. Some, no doubt, will be about Mike Duffy – but not all.

After a gruelling month of scandal in which Harper's standing has taken a severe beating, any relief at all will be welcome.