

Harper's office tempers expectations of striking EU trade deal at G8

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The Prime Minister's Office is playing down expectations that Canada will sign a free trade deal with the European Union during next week's trip to England, France and then Ireland for meetings of the G8.

Canada and the EU have been negotiating for years and discussions have intensified in recent weeks, fuelling speculation that a deal could be imminent. European officials have been hinting that a deal is nearly ready to be signed.

Inking a positive deal with Europe would be seen as a major political accomplishment for the Harper government at a time when it is under fire domestically over Senate expenses. For Canadians, a trade deal would be expected to provide a boost to the economy by giving Canadian firms more access to the European market. Potential benefits for Canadian consumers would include access to a broader array of European products, such as cheese.

Andrew MacDougall, the Prime Minister's director of communications, told reporters in Ottawa Friday that he does not expect a deal will be reached during the trip.

"We've been at the negotiating table for quite a while now trying to get the deal that's in Canada's interests," said Mr. MacDougall.

"We're actually trying to sign the most comprehensive trade agreement that Canada's ever signed. It involves multiple levels of government and we're not there yet. We're down to a few outstanding issues. I won't speculate or comment on what they are but negotiations are ongoing and I don't expect that we'll be in a position to sign a deal next week. But that said, we're at the negotiating table pressing hard and we'll continue to negotiate hard in Canada's interests."

European officials have previously indicated that the outstanding

issues are largely focused on Canadian requests for Europe to accept more beef imports and European requests for their firms to have access to bid on provincial and municipal government procurement contracts.

Reports have also suggested that rules around intellectual property, such as drug patent rules, have been a difficult topic for negotiators.

NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair held a news conference Friday to say that his party supports free trade with the European Union, provided Canada signs the right deal.

"It's an extraordinarily important trade deal," said Mr. Mulcair, who took note of Mr. MacDougall's comment that a deal will not likely be signed next week.

"That doesn't mean there won't be one the week after or the week after that," said Mr. Mulcair.

NDP MP Don Davies said his party will be looking to see what the deal means for prescription drug costs and supply management in the agricultural sector.

Mr. MacDougall also confirmed that the military plane used by the Prime Minister for international flights now has [a new look](#) after a \$50,000 paint job.

The drab grey military plane is now mostly white, with a deep blue underbelly and a red line separating the blue and white. The plane also features a colour image of the Royal Canadian Air Force logo.