

Charest, Harper, and free trade with the EU



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In the old days when a Quebec premier travelled to Paris, a dozen reporters from Quebec's National Assembly press gallery would tag along, cheerfully looking forward to another hilarious round of Ask About Sovereignty.

If the premier—Lévesque, Parizeau, Bouchard—didn't say something embarrassing about Quebec secession, his host surely would. Fun times. But when Jean Charest came to Paris at the end of July, almost nobody came with him and few of the local Canadians turned up either. Separation is so deep in the freezer nobody talks about it anymore. Who wants to cover real news?

And yet Charest brought his own ambitions, of a different sort, to lunch with Nicolas Sarkozy and a later meeting with France's prime minister, François Fillon. The Quebec premier is working closely with Ottawa to get the Europeans interested in a transatlantic, Canada-EU free trade accord.

The payoff would be tremendous: guaranteed low-cost access to a European market of a half-billion people and an economy the size of the United States; new investment; new workplaces for skilled Canadians overseas; new skilled manpower for labour-starved Canadian employers.

Still, it would be a serious exaggeration to say the idea has set the European imagination afire. When news of the talks got into Canadian newspapers in the spring, I phoned the office of Peter Mandelson, the EU commissioner for trade. The official at the other end sounded irritated. "Oh yes, that. We have no project resembling Canada-EU free trade. That idea came from the Canadian side." The way he spoke, the guy might have been saying it came from the cootie barn. But EU commissioners are less autonomous than they like to think. If member countries think something is a good idea, it may even trickle down to Brussels. Which is the bet that Charest

and Stephen Harper are making.

This was, to say the least, hardly the first time Sarkozy and Fillon have heard Canada's pitch. Harper bent their ear about a transatlantic accord in labour mobility, credentials recognition and other areas when he came to Paris in June. Nor is France the only country Canada is targeting. Harper also visited Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, whose country then held the rotating EU presidency. They announced both sides would carry out feasibility studies toward an accord.

Feasibility studies? No wonder Charest's press plane was empty. Yet there is something very methodical about what Charest and Harper are doing. If it's possible to kick-start Canada's seriously flagging reputation as a country that is ahead of its peers as a trading nation, they may yet pull it off.

What's most striking is the way Quebec and Ottawa are working hand in glove, with very little neurotic hand-wringing, on an international relations file. If anything, Charest



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is taking the lead. He got called last November by Roy McLaren, whose career as Jean Chrétien's first trade minister a decade ago did insufficient justice to his almost evangelical zeal for lowering global trade barriers. McLaren runs the Canada-European Round Table for Business, and he was looking for a champion for his latest pet project. Charest was a minister in the last big free-trading government, Brian Mulroney's. He'd do

In January, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Charest buttonholed a few players—Mandelson and Michael Glos, the German trade minister. Wary interest, and Glos took the idea to his boss, Merkel. Charest wrote to his colleagues in the other provinces; only Alberta's Ed Stelmach, who is starting to have quite enough problems at home, seemed uninterested.

When Harper and Merkel announced their feasibility studies in early June, Charest thought it was pretty thin beer. But an EU official in Ottawa told them the language

had to be weaker than the actual level of interest because Europe is still, officially, praying for success in the Doha global trade round. Flirting too openly with the Canucks seemed a handy way to jinx Doha. If the global round stalls, though, Mandelson has said the EU would like to launch negotiations with developing countries in the fall.

Canada is no longer usually seen as a Third World country, but what the heck. "That's where we saw our chance to offer the Europeans a negotiation with Canada that could be strategic for them," Charest told (the wee cluster of mostly French) reporters during his visit. "It would give them a foothold in North America. It would let us integrate more with economies we share common values with, to improve labour mobility, to do things that make sense—and that would allow us to compete better with emerging economies."

Meanwhile, Christos Sirros, a former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister who now represents the province in Brussels, met with his colleagues from other Quebec trade delegations and told them to start pushing business leaders and politicians in their assorted countries. To date, about 100 Canadian and European business leaders have signed letters of support for the idea of a transatlantic accord.

Still, as Charest told the little knot of reporters, "noth-

ing happens in this kind of thing without a tight deadline." And here's one now. In 2008, exchanges between Canadian and French politicians will happen with unprecedented frequency because of the celebrations surrounding the 400th anniversary of Quebec City's founding. And on Canada Day, 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy will take over the rotating European presidency. "At that moment, we hope for a firm decision to begin negotiating on a real accord," Charest said.

If it doesn't work out, all you've wasted is the time it took to read this page. If it does, it will be because of the peculiar relationship between two peculiar men: a prime minister willing to let a Quebec premier take the lead on a global file, and a Quebec premier willing to keep the rest of Canada in mind. Not the threat of separation but a feat of integration. M

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