

NDP asks Tories to release details of Canada-EU free trade deal

BY JORDAN PRESS, POSTMEDIA NEWS

MARCH 14, 2012

OTTAWA — The Opposition NDP is asking the federal government to lift what it argues is a veil of secrecy over one of the largest free-trade deals in this country's history.

The federal government is on the verge of signing a free-trade agreement with the European Union, a deal that would be the largest Canada has signed since the North American Free Trade Agreement.

A House of Commons committee backed the government's push for a free-trade pact with the EU in a report released this week, but the NDP and Liberals were leery about the lack of details about what will be in the agreement.

The NDP asked for details of the Canada-EU Trade Agreement (CETA) to be released so Canadians could be consulted and ultimately be able to decide if the deal would be good for Canada.

"Transparency is essential," the NDP wrote in its dissenting opinion attached to the report, released Monday.

"Closed-door meetings have created a climate of secrecy in the CETA process. Too little public information exists for Canadians and their elected representatives, at all levels of government, to reach informed conclusions on the merits and risks of CETA."

The government now has 120 days to respond to the committee's report.

On Wednesday, International Trade Minister Ed Fast dismissed the NDP's arguments as part of an "anti-trade" trend. He argued that provinces and municipalities have been regularly consulted on the deal.

"We welcome the trade committee's report which rightly concludes that a Canada-EU trade agreement will create jobs, growth and prosperity in all regions of Canada," Fast said.

"These have been the most open, transparent and collaborative negotiations in Canada's history. This report, which follows extensive consultations undertaken by the committee with stakeholders, is further proof of this."

Free-trade talks between Canada and the EU have been ongoing since May 2009 and are expected to be wrapped up this year, even though the parties had aimed to have an agreement by late 2011.

The government has said that once a deal is finalized, free trade with the EU could add \$12 billion annually to Canada's economy and boost trade by \$38 billion.

Critics of the deal on both sides of the Atlantic argue that parts of CETA could have effects on domestic jobs, as they make the privatization of public services a likelihood and increase the prices of consumer goods and pharmaceutical drugs.

"While some witnesses raised concerns, the majority supported a CETA and felt that its effects would be positive for Canada," the report concludes.

The committee recommended the government complete negotiations with the EU and sign a free-trade deal "that is of net benefit to Canada."

The NDP and Liberals said the deal, as it is being sold now, doesn't appear to take into account whether public services will be protected, or give local governments the chance to make local procurements when tendering contracts.

In total, the NDP made 17 recommendations for the government to consider in its negotiations, while the Liberals made eight. Most recommendations push for the government to publicly say what is in the deal and consult with Canadians before the agreement is finalized.

"The brevity with which this committee has dealt with this agreement should be of concern to anyone interested in, let alone concerned about the CETA," the Liberals wrote in their dissenting opinion.