

GLOBE EDITORIAL

Speeding up Mr. Fast

The Globe and Mail

Published Sunday, Apr. 14 2013, 7:30 PM EDT

It was foreseeable, and indeed foreseen, that if the free-trade negotiations between Canada and the European Union dragged on, they might be overshadowed by the beginnings of the trade negotiations between the EU and the United States. That prospect is now imminent; those two vast political entities in potential combination naturally attract much more attention than Canada, a country of only 35 million people. Senior members of the cabinet, including Prime Minister Stephen Harper, would do well to take a much more active and conspicuous role in supporting the work of Ed Fast, the Minister of International Trade.

On Thursday, the Foreign Trade Minister of the Netherlands, Lilianne Ploumen, presented a brief to the Dutch parliament saying that the hope is now that the EU-Canada talks will be concluded "around the summer." Not so long ago, the hope was for February.

The Harper government is right to be pursuing many international economic agreements, but actual signed treaties have been elusive. There has been an investment agreement with the economic superpower China, and there has been a trade agreement with Colombia, a major Latin America country.

But, last month, Jim Flaherty, the Minister of Finance, said that an agreement with South Korea was "very close," but officials then had to issue some embarrassing contradictions. An India-Canada agreement is still a work in progress, and Canada's involvement in the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations, a matter of enormous potential, is at an early stage.

Reports about the EU negotiations have somewhat discouragingly recurrent themes: government procurement, European cheese, Canadian beef, length of patent protection for pharmaceuticals in Canada.

The overused phrase "political will" can be given real content if major political figures make their presence by direct phone conversations and

visits with their foreign equivalents. Mr. Harper should seriously consider meeting with European leaders such as Angela Merkel of Germany and François Hollande of France to overcome the sticking points. Enhanced trade with Europe, a Western continent with a long history of modernity, is an especially good fit for Canada. The EU-Canada talks should be completed sooner rather than later.