

'We're close' on Canada-EU trade deal, says British PM before meeting with

Harper

[PAUL WALDIE](#)

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British Prime Minister David Cameron expressed optimism about a trade deal between Canada and the European Union, saying he believes both sides are close to an agreement.

"It seems to me we're close," Mr. Cameron told a group of reporters on Wednesday. "It would be a pity if we can't get it over the line. It's important for both of us frankly. Britain and Canada are both trading nations. We should be demonstrating to the rest of the world that these bilateral trade agreements can drive growth."

Mr. Cameron will be meeting Prime Minister Stephen Harper Thursday for lunch in the British House of Commons and the trade discussions will be at the top of the agenda.

Mr. Harper arrived in London Tuesday for a series of meetings leading up to the G8 summit in Northern Ireland next week. He met with business leaders and the Queen Wednesday and will address the British Parliament on Thursday. He then heads to Paris for meetings with French President François Hollande and to Dublin on the weekend before going to the G8.

In a separate press conference on Thursday, Mr. Harper appeared less upbeat about the status of the negotiations which have gone on for months. There had been some hope among Canadian officials that a deal could be concluded while Mr. Harper was in Europe, but that now appears unlikely.

"These have been long discussions, they are continuing," Mr. Harper told reporters Wednesday. "We have been making a lot of progress and they are the biggest trade negotiations Canada has ever had in its history."

The Canada-EU deal was supposed to set a kind of template for negotiations between the EU and the United States on a similar agreement. But with the Canadian discussions dragging on, there is a concern among some Canadian officials that the EU could move on to negotiations with the U.S. instead.

Mr. Harper insisted Wednesday that Canada was not bound to any deadline to strike a deal. "We are not going to set a time line or a fixed date on which we are going to have agreement," he said. "Because it is essential that we be driven the by the contents of the discussions and we will not arrive at an accord until such time as we think we have the best accord we can get for the Canadian people."

He added that he will be pressing the issue during his meetings in Europe.

Thursday's meeting between Mr. Cameron and Mr. Harper is the second in recent months. The two shared a dinner in April when Mr. Harper attended the funeral of Margaret Thatcher. It's clear from Mr. Cameron that the two are close.

"Stephen has been a huge supporter to the United Kingdom also been a great supporter to me so I always enjoy meeting with him and talking to him," Mr. Cameron said Wednesday. "Also as someone who used to lead a minority administration and then managed to get re-elected as a majority leader, he's always got some interesting advice for me."