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As Harper Heads to Europe, Trade Deal Still Top of Mind

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Don't count out the possibility that Canada and the European Union will ink a free-trade deal during Prime Minister [Stephen Harper](#)'s tour of Europe just yet.

Mr. Harper's chief spokesman has already [down-played expectations](#) for a pact this week, but that was probably the government hedging its bets in case Mr. Harper doesn't come back with a deal of some kind. The Canada-EU trade talks have been going on for four years.

Mr. Harper heads to Europe Tuesday on a week-long visit that will culminate in his participation at the Group of Eight leaders' summit June 17-18.

He's under pressure to complete a trade deal before Brussels turns its attention to trade talks with the U.S. A successful deal would also help the prime minister shift the focus away from political travails in Ottawa related to spending scandals in the Senate.

It's not all one-sided, either: the EU needs to show the U.S. that it can close a deal.

Canadian negotiators have been in Brussels for three weeks now, trying to close the gap on the last outstanding issues. They've been ordered to stay on for another week, according to people familiar with the matter.

The biggest stumbling block is probably Canada's demand for more market access for beef and pork. France and Ireland, major beef producers in Europe, have been "difficult" on this issue, according to one person familiar with the matter. So it's noteworthy that Mr. Harper is stopping in both these countries during his tour.

"My guess is, finally the Prime Minister is inserting himself politically into this agreement," according to another person familiar with the matter. "He's going to go to these places to negotiate the final bits of the

agreement.”

Other thorns include opening up the Canadian provincial government procurement market and greater protection for intellectual protection for pharmaceutical patents.

Several people familiar with the matter have told The Wall Street Journal that negotiators are trying to work out an agreement in principle. That would allow leaders to sign a pact while still-difficult technical differences get ironed out. Spokesmen for Canadian Trade Minister Ed Fast have insisted that any technical issues that remain after an agreement is inked would be minor.

Rudy Husny, a spokesman for Mr. Fast, reiterated this Monday, saying that “an agreement will only be finalized, and an announcement made, when Canada’s key interests have been met, including core technical details.” (Mr. Fast, incidentally, will accompany Mr. Harper to the U.K., France and Ireland.)

An EU spokesman wasn’t immediately available to comment.

Mr. Harper isn’t scheduled to stop in Brussels, but he could make a detour there to announce a deal, or perhaps unveil it on the sidelines of the G-8 Summit, according to people familiar with the matter.