

# CETA: only a few negotiating positions left to finalize

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There may have been some minor hiccups lately, but Canada's private-sector point man on the Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) says the Harper government and the provinces have only a few of Canada's negotiating positions left to finalize.

The big ones, he said, are increased intellectual property protection for pharmaceuticals and Quebec's position on government procurement.

"Quebec still seems to be reserving the right to exclude procurement coverage for utilities and transit," Jason Langrish, the executive director of the Canada-Europe Round Table for Business (CERT) said in an email to iPolitics.

"I suspect, however, that this is similar to the pharma IP issue. No one will commit it until the end, as they want to minimize the political heat that they may have to take."

While awaiting direction on these two remaining positions, Canadian negotiators are hammering out the details with their European counterparts on agriculture, labour mobility, investment, and the extent to which certain services will be covered.

These likely include but are not limited to financial services, telecommunications, and e-commerce.

Last Friday, CERT, which is co-chaired by former Liberal trade minister Roy MacLaren and is widely-acknowledged as the private-sector driving force behind the negotiations, sponsored a briefing in Montreal in which Langrish and Trade Minister Ed Fast updated the group's Quebec-based interests.

Langrish couldn't name all the attendees, but said they consisted of large companies, small-and medium-sized enterprises, agriculture producers and think tanks; the organization counts Siemens, Bombardier, Vale Inco, the Toronto Stock Exchange and the Forest Products Association of Canada among its many members.

Buoyed by the outcome of that meeting, Langrish is as convinced as ever that support for CETA is overpowering any opposition.

“Running opposition to a major initiative that is driven by Harper, Cameron, Merkel, provincial leaders, supported by all the major paper op-ed pages, respected think tanks — you get my point — will have to be much more significant than what we see at present to stop this agreement from passing.”

He compared the current debate on the CETA to the fierce one surrounding the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement in the late 1980s.

“Hell, a federal election was run in '88 with the opposition running a paranoid campaign against a free trade deal with the U.S., and it still went through. And we know with hindsight how wrong the no side was on that one.”

Langrish is similarly unconcerned about recent municipal objections to the agreement.

While Toronto city council, on March 6, voted 36-5 in favour of exempting itself from the CETA, the Canadian Federation of Municipalities, the umbrella organization for over to 2,000 communities across the country, continues to back the deal.

“Toronto and other municipalities are telling provincial governments that they need to know their concerns are understood and being addressed at the negotiating table, and as a national organization, FCM is working to make sure the federal government respects and protects municipal interests in CETA,” said FCM president Berry Vrbanovic.

Said Langrish: “The FCM ... is reasonable, onside and informed. They know what is really being negotiated and are fully engaged in the process.”

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