

Canada's still secret EU trade pact closer to completion

Canada, Europe can now send negotiated text of free-trade deal up the line for final approval in Ottawa and Brussels.

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By: [Les Whittington](#) Ottawa Bureau reporter, Published on Tue Aug 05 2014

OTTAWA—Canada's long-running negotiations with the European Union moved forward Tuesday, but the fine print of a free-trade deal that will impact nearly every Canadian remains secret for now.

In the latest [step](#) in five years of bilateral talks, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government announced negotiators are ready to send the text of the Canada-EU trade liberalization agreement up the line for final approval in Ottawa and Brussels.

This development comes [10 months after Harper travelled to Brussels](#) to unveil a long-awaited breakthrough in the Canada-EU negotiations. But haggling over the final trade-offs subsequently bogged down and the deal wasn't completed until last week.

The Conservatives say the agreement, the biggest free-trade treaty ever contemplated by Ottawa, can provide a long-term boost for the economy.

But information on how consumers, farmers, businesses, investors and other Canadians will be affected by the agreement with Europe are being kept under wraps. The text of the 1,500-page treaty must be vetted by lawyers and translated into French before it's made public, a process that could take months.

While business and provincial governments have been kept in the loop as the talks have progressed, the public has seen few details of the changes being negotiated on its behalf — something that has long been a source of [criticism in Ottawa](#).

“The question Canadians are now asking is whether Conservatives negotiated a good deal for Canada. Unfortunately, Conservatives have kept Parliament and Canadians in the dark throughout the negotiations with talks conducted in secret and without any transparency,” the New Democrats said in a statement Tuesday.

A Canadian government official said the public will get a look at the text of the deal as soon as possible. However, the official, who spoke to the media on condition of anonymity, could not say when that would happen.

The next step will be ratification of the treaty by the Harper

government and various European authorities — including the European Parliament and each of the EU's 28 member states. In all, this is likely to take until mid-2016, according to the federal official. That could make the fate of the pact, known officially as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), a hot topic in the federal election expected next year. The Conservatives will campaign on CETA as a major development in Harper's campaign to strengthen Canada's crucial export industries by signing more free-trade pacts.

"This is another important step toward the implementation of the historic Canada-EU trade agreement, which will create jobs and economic opportunities for hard-working Canadians in every region of the country," International Trade Minister Ed Fast said when the latest information on the negotiations came out Tuesday.

But Harper is likely to face questions about his handling of the negotiations and whether the Conservatives put final approval of CETA at risk by taking too long to reach agreement with the EU. Canadian Chamber of Commerce President Perrin Beatty welcomed the latest step in the CETA talks but cautioned "there's still a lot of work ahead to put CETA into effect.

"To get through the next phase, policy-makers will need to continue to exert the leadership that got us to where we are today," he said.

The Canada-EU pact contains [investor-state dispute settlement \(ISDS\) measures](#) that have become a source of widespread concern in Europe. While businesses say they are needed to provide security for investors, opponents say they allow multinational corporations too much leeway to sue governments over environmental, health and other regulations.

With this issue boiling up in the EU, Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht recently questioned whether Europeans were reaching a point where free-trade pacts with investor protection measures would no longer be acceptable.

Maude Barlow, national chairperson of the Council of Canadians, said the mood in Europe has changed since the CETA negotiations began and the Harper government shouldn't be celebrating yet.

"This is very early in a complicated and long process," she said. "The whole process could take years and there are many opportunities along the way for the deal to implode."

Some of the difficult issues in the final stages of the talks concerned financial services, maritime transport and agriculture, with Canada

demanding better access in Europe for Canadian beef and pork and the EU seeking to [sell more cheese in Canada](#).

Harper will lead a trade mission to Britain early next month to give Canadian businesses a head start in the new trade environment in Europe, officials said. And Harper will host a signing ceremony for the CETA text at a Canada-EU summit in Ottawa in late September.