

Ed Fast: A rookie minister with two big free-trade deals on his plate

STEVEN CHASE

OTTAWA— From Friday's Globe and Mail
Published Thursday, May. 19, 2011

Ed Fast may be the first International Trade Minister in Canadian history who's won an award for gospel music – but colleagues say the B.C. MP's approach is more diplomat than preacher.

One of nine new ministers appointed to Stephen Harper's majority government cabinet Wednesday, Mr. Fast developed a reputation during five years on the backbenches as a low-key, but effective tactician who uses quiet pressure rather than confrontation to get results.

Chuck Strahl, the recently-retired Harper minister who, like Mr. Fast, calls B.C.'s Fraser Valley home, recalls how the Abbotsford MP used honey rather than vinegar to lobby cabinet ministers.

"Some guys would make it difficult for you in public whereas Ed would say 'I want to influence your decision, but don't want to cause you a problem,'" he recalls.

"In the end, I and many other ministers did what [we] could to address Ed's needs."

Mr. Fast will have plenty of opportunities to exercise his diplomatic skills in the months ahead as the point man at International Trade.

The Conservatives have set a hectic pace to sign two major free-trade deals, promising during the campaign to ink an agreement with the European Union by 2012 and with India by 2013.

“Everybody knows how badly the Prime Minister wants these deals done,” Mr. Strahl says.

The challenge for Mr. Fast will be to build support for these deals among provinces, companies and other interests – knitting together stakeholder agreement so that there’s no political or industrial backlash against concessions that Canada makes.

The newly-minted International Trade Minister will also have to work on opening up other markets around the world, including in Asia and shepherding other free-trade negotiations Canada is pursuing.

Mr. Strahl doesn’t doubt that Mr. Fast, a lawyer by profession, has the temperament for the workload.

“Ed is not prone to highs and lows. He’s consistently a results-oriented guy and people gravitate to someone like that.”

Mr. Fast could have a schedule conflict ahead though. Father’s Daughter, the southern gospel group he formed with three daughters, was planning to tour western Canada in mid-summer. It won an award for southern gospel album of the year from the Gospel Music Association of Canada in 2010.

The MP plays piano for Father’s Daughter and may have to pack his International Trade briefing books for the road unless the group alters plans.

Mr. Fast’s legislative record hasn’t been loaded with international trade experience.

He recently chaired the Commons justice committee and, in 2007, succeeded in passing a private member’s bill that doubled to 10 years the maximum prison sentence for luring children over the Internet for sexual purposes

Prior to entering federal politics in 2006, Mr. Fast served as a councillor in Abbotsford, about 70 kilometres outside Vancouver, where he earned a reputation among colleagues for reliability and careful preparation.

George Ferguson, who served as mayor in the Abbotsford area for decades, calls Mr. Fast one of the best councillors he ever had.

“He always did his homework. He always gave anything he did a lot of thought before he came forward with an answer.”

Abbotsford councillor Patricia Ross, who prefaced her remarks by noting she doesn't belong to any political party, says she was impressed with Mr. Fast's dependability. “He's a very hard worker.”

Ms. Ross helped lead the city's fight against the Sumas Energy 2 power plant in Washington State, just south of Abbotsford, a construction project that was eventually cancelled in 2006. She handled media relations and lobbying for the issue and says Mr. Fast could be relied upon to support her throughout the campaign.

“When he gives his word, he keeps it. He's no pushover.”