

Free trade with Europe?

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A free trade deal with the European Union seems to make sense for Canada. The EU is a huge market, with 500 million people, and we don't have to worry about the Europeans compromising human rights or exploiting labour or plundering the environment. Plus, the more trade we do with Europe, the less dependent we are on the American market.

It was this last point that propelled Pierre Trudeau to negotiate a "contractual link" with Europe in the 1970s. It never amounted to much, however, and our dependence on the American market only deepened with the signing of the Canada/U.S. free trade deal by Brian Mulroney's government in the 1980s.

Now Stephen Harper is Prime Minister and following in Trudeau's footsteps. Harper is in Europe this week to push for a "comprehensive economic and trade agreement" with the EU, although his stated goal is *not* to use Europe as a counterweight to the U.S. "One of the most important things is to continue opening global trade and to resist protectionism," said Harper in Brussels on Wednesday.

In a teleconference Thursday with journalists, Trade Minister Peter Van Loan — who is also in Europe this week — said the trade talks are going well, with a meeting just finished in

Ottawa and two more rounds planned for July and October. He added that he expects the deal to be completed some time next year, but he acknowledged that the negotiators have not yet grappled with the “stickier issues.”

Those issues include farm marketing boards and provincial procurement policies, such as Ontario’s Green Energy Act, which requires a large share of projects like wind farms to be domestically sourced. Background documents reveal that these policies have definitely been targeted by the Europeans. And Canadian critics of the EU free trade deal believe this is also Harper’s real aim in the negotiations: getting rid of such barriers to free trade *within* Canada. Undermining this argument is the presence of provincial representatives at the bargaining table. Indeed, Quebec has been pushing for a deal.

Another looming issue is development of the tar sands. The European Parliament this week passed a resolution expressing “concern about the impact of the extraction of oil sand on the global environment.” This is definitely not part of Harper’s agenda.

Such proposals are all hugely controversial — or they would be if anyone were paying attention. The problem is that the Canada/EU negotiations are taking place below the Canadian radar screen. Helena Guergis and Rahim Jaffer are getting more ink and air time here than free trade with Europe. In Parliament this week, just one question was asked about the negotiations.

In principle, broadening trade with Europe and lessening dependence on the U.S. is an attractive idea. But the details of a deal with the EU could negatively impact many Canadians. It is time, then, to make these negotiations part of the political debate in Canada.