

Mulcair open to free-trade with Europe

NDP leader hints he'd side with Harper Conservatives if his concerns are addressed

BY PETER O'NEIL, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 1, 2013

OTTAWA — New Democratic Party leader Thomas Mulcair says he's "very open" to the Harper government's proposed Canada-European Union trade deal – as long as concerns in areas such as prescription drug prices and public sector procurement are addressed.

Mulcair said the NDP will view the accord, if it is reached, through a far different lens than the Canada-China investment protection agreement that his party vehemently opposed.

He said that Europe, unlike China, has laws on human rights, the environment and labour practices that are at least as advanced as Canada's.

"You're looking at 500 million people (in the EU) who evolve in a similar universe as ourselves," he told *The Vancouver Sun*. "So we're very open to it, but we're going to look at it critically."

Mulcair's comments risk drawing the wrath of labour, environmental and left-wing nationalist groups that have vehemently opposed free trade deals.

And his stand could potentially put him offside with B.C. NDP leader Adrian Dix – who earlier this week openly disagreed with Mulcair on national unity.

But Mulcair is attempting to make his party — once viewed as a left-wing protest movement — more attractive to a broader cross-section of Canadians, including some who believe the NDP is too tightly aligned with groups hostile to the private sector.

Mulcair, in an interview where artwork on the walls and tables pays homage to former NDP leaders Tommy Douglas and Jack Layton, noted that he can't comment in any detail on an agreement that is still in the final stages of negotiation and therefore not public.

In addition to concerns about drug prices and government procurement, Mulcair said the NDP will also weigh whether the trade deal will have an overall negative impact.

Since the 1988 Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement was stuck "you've seen a drop in the revenue of the middle class in Canada," he said. "The top 20 per cent have seen their revenues increase, the other 80 per cent have actually seen a drop.

"So that's a part of the analysis that's always going to have to be done. Is this going to be a race to the bottom? Is this going to be something that will put pressure on wages, and working conditions for all Canadians, and bring us down? Or is it going to open up other opportunities and bring us up?"

The NDP recently broke new ground by agreeing to a trade deal with tiny Jordan, but has otherwise opposed major trade and investment pacts and especially the 1988 Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement.

The party's long-standing position led to an allegation last October by International Trade Minister Ed Fast, the MP for Abbotsford, that the party is a leading member of Canada's "great free trade denier" movement.

Mulcair stressed that, like Dix, he has significant concerns in areas such as prescription drugs and procurement.

The EU, on behalf of major European multinational corporations, wants greater patent protection for brand-name drugs and a greater ability for companies to bid on contracts let by provincial and municipal governments and public institutions like hospitals, school boards, and utilities.

Dix, among other critics, has regularly cited a 2011 academic study sponsored by the generic drug industry which said Canadians would

pay an extra \$2.8 billion annually if Europe's demands are met. B.C.'s share of that would be \$249 million.

Mulcair said the Harper government could easily resolve this concern.

"That's the easiest one for the federal government to fix, if ever they wanted to move in that direction, because they could compensate the provinces for the loss."

Mulcair's messaging on trade is part of a broader strategy, evident since he became leader last spring, to squeeze out the centrist Liberal party and give the NDP a shot at forming government in 2015.

Mulcair focuses largely on economic issues in question period and has personally avoided potentially controversial "protest" events, from the Quebec student protests last year to Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence's liquid-only fast.

He cited as an example unflattering video footage of Quebec separatist Premier Pauline Marois, when she was official Opposition leader, banging two kitchen pot lids together last year during the so-called "casserole" protests in support of students upset about tuition hikes.

"I think people are expecting someone who sees themselves as the leader of a government in waiting to understand the issues, to speak passionately about them, to work with his MPs to make sure that these issues are understood by the public, but to stay with the same image — which is actually a physical example to not necessarily the one banging casseroles."

The NDP has caused some angst among left-wing groups for not simply coming out and opposing Canada-EU free trade. Party insiders recognize the NDP could lose longtime supporters and not necessarily gain voters elsewhere by endorsing free trade.

However, the federal NDP is less vulnerable than it once was to pressure from the union movement. Federal election rules, unlike those in provinces like B.C., ban union as well as business contributions to campaigns.

Mulcair repeats like a mantra his goal of convincing Canadians the federal NDP is capable of providing “good, competent public administration,” and last month brought provincial NDP leaders – including the premiers of Nova Scotia and Manitoba – to Ottawa to underscore that point.

The NDP’s breakthrough election in 2011, he said, needs to follow through with a major effort to convince Canadians the party is competent. He said a key asset will be MPs like Vancouver Island lawyer Murray Rankin, recently elected in the byelection in Victoria.

The bilingual Rankin, according to Mulcair, has a “phenomenal” background as an environmental lawyer and law professor.

The NDP is “the party with the second-highest number of seats. We have to go from that state of fact to a state of mind (that the NDP is) a government-in-waiting,” Mulcair said.

Rankin is “the type of person who beams forth that type of confidence in our competence, to provide good, competent public administration, which is the key.”