

Tories launch political war on Canada-EU trade deal

Rebecca Lindell, Global News : Friday, April 27, 2012 11:00 AM

The Conservative government launched a massive public relations blitz on Friday to set the stage for the political fight they will face over a looming free trade deal with the European Union.

Tory MPs, cabinet ministers and senators hit the road to sell the benefits of the deal at 18 separate events across the country on Wednesday.

"Whether you're a fisherman, a manufacturer, a farmer or a high-tech worker, the benefits of an ambitious free trade agreement with the EU are very real and are very clear," Trade Minister Ed Fast told the Economic Club of Ottawa as he kicked off the campaign.

The Canada – European Union Free Trade Agreement has been in the works since 2009 and the Conservatives have said they would like it signed this year.

Boosting the economy by \$12 billion annually, Ottawa promises its impact will be deeper and more far-reaching than the North American Free Trade Agreement, encompassing not only goods, but investment, services and government procurement.

The speech quickly drew the battle lines between the Conservatives and anyone who does not support CETA.

"Trade is not for skeptics. It's not for scoffers. It's not for the faint of heart. It is not for the weak-kneed," Fast said. "Recognizing the value of free and open trade takes visionaries."

Fast lamented the fact that activists have been raising alarm bells about the trade deal, saying the dire predictions, many of which were also made during the NAFTA negotiations, wouldn't come to fruition.

"They trot out the same falsehoods they trotted out during the NAFTA negotiations a generation ago," he said. "They were wrong back then and they are wrong today."

Fast then turned his attack towards the House of Commons, saying those activists find allies in Tom Mulcair's anti-trade NDP.

"When the NDP refers to fair trade, that's really code language for no trade," he said. NDP foreign affairs critic Paul Dewar shot back in question period:

"Instead of spending their time on these bizarre, anti-NDP propaganda tours we don't they negotiate some responsible trade deals."

Dewar attacked the government for its track record defending Canadian interests when it came to the softwood lumber dispute with the U.S. as well as the "Buy American" policies of Washington.

"New Democrats are in favour of trade. What we are opposed to is selling out Canada," Dewar said.

Canadians have yet to see the details of the trade deal and assess for themselves whether the deal will bring the benefits Fast promises.

And critics have been adamantly lambasting the government for the secrecy surrounding the trade talks. They have also criticized the content of the deal saying it could open the door for the privatization of water and sanitation services, the elimination of local-purchase requirements by government and higher prescription drug costs.

Speaking to such criticism, Fast said public services, public education, health care, water services will all be expressly excluded as part of the deal.

"Our products, services and expertise are for sale. Our government powers to regulate and our water is not," he said.

The Conservatives are adamant the deal will open the door to enhanced economic opportunities across the country, claiming the \$12 billion translates into 80,000 new jobs or \$1,000 to the Canadian family's income.

"There is no better job creator and economic growth generator than free and open trade," Fast said. One of the most outspoken critics of CETA is challenging the government to prove the benefits they are selling.

"They can do all the name calling they want but the fact of the matter is they haven't put anything on the table that proves that this is going to be beneficial," said Ted Woynillowicz of the Council of Canadians, a social justice organization.

And while it's critical of CETA, the council is not anti-trade, according to Woynillowicz.

"Trade is always a good thing," he said. "My concern is let's make it fair and get a little bit of balance in here. Not just getting rid of our natural

resources.”

Woynillowicz said Canadians should expect the federal government to present an evidence-based, sector-by-sector analysis of CETA’s potential impacts, instead of just telling Canadians to trust them.

And it must be done before the trade deal is finalized, according to Woynillowicz. “It’s very undemocratic,” he said. “What good is it if Canadians get a look at it after it has been signed.”

While the Conservatives are out selling the benefits of the deal, its very future lies in the hands of the Europeans.

Earlier this week at a press conference with Danish trade minister Pia Olsen Dyhr, Fast said negotiations were 75 per cent finished.

But there are signs that last 25 per cent could prove to be a significant hurdle.

There are tough negotiations ahead on agriculture subsidies, municipal procurement, rules of origin definitions, and Europe’s opposition to the Canadian system of supply management for poultry, eggs and dairy.

Visa requirements could also make or break the deal as it has to get the approval of all EU member nations. Canada currently has a visa requirement on the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Romania, which those countries would like to see lifted.

A finalized trade deal with Europe would be the crown jewel in the Conservatives’ trade agenda, which is focused on diversifying Canada’s relationship so the country is not so dependent on the American market.

Since coming into office, the Conservatives have concluded trade agreements with nine countries, but no market as large as the European Union.