

Tories storm Canada to sell trade deal with Europe

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Conservative MPs fanned out across the country Friday to sell Canadians on a pending free trade agreement with the European Union and head off potential criticism.

Talks on a comprehensive trade deal with the EU are about 75 per cent complete, although significant hurdles remain to be crossed before ink can hit paper.

The federal government sent 15 cabinet ministers, three MPs and a senator to 18 events to push a trade deal with the 27-member EU and its \$17-trillion economic engine.

The campaign kicked off Friday morning with a speech by International Trade Minister Ed Fast to the Economic Club of Canada where he told business leaders "trade is not for skeptics or scoffers . . . it's not for the weak-kneed or faint of heart."

Fast said earlier in the week that discussions were moving at a "satisfactory pace" and he was optimistic a deal could be struck by year's end.

The deal, known as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), would create the most wide-ranging trade deal Canada has ever entered.

CETA would encompass not only goods, but investment and services, provincial and municipal government procurement, something that has alarmed 32 cities across the country that want to opt out.

Toronto is concerned the deal will limit its ability to buy locally or demand a local component in procurement contracts. The city's council passed a motion in early March seeking an exemption.

Fast said businesspeople are "risk-takers" who see advantages in free trade but warned there are forces in the country who don't want foreign companies to have market share in Canada.

"Sadly, there are still those who lack your vision," he said. "They are the anti-trade activists who find great joy in spreading misinformation about trade and its role as a key driver of economic growth."

Fast also said the North American free trade agreement proved the arguments of

opponents wrong.

The Conservatives claim CETA will generate an additional \$12 billion in the Canadian economy and create up to 80,000 jobs.

Critics say CETA could cost between 30,000 and 150,000 domestic jobs.

While the free-trade deal with the U.S. in the 1980s stirred up emotional debate around job losses and sovereignty, the agreement with the EU has, so far, ruffled few feathers even though it can't be ratified without the approval of all 10 provinces.

Don Drummond's recent report to the Ontario government said the agreement could have profound effects on health spending and could affect key areas of the province such as hydro-electric infrastructure and its green-energy plan.

Issues remaining on the table include the Canadian system of supply management for poultry, eggs and dairy - which Europe wants to scrap or curtail - and a mutually satisfactory definition of rules of origin have not been resolved.

Rules of origin - determining what is a Canadian-made product - has emerged as a complex issue since some Canadian manufactured goods, particularly autos, are integrated in North American and global supply chains.

Agricultural subsidies are also the sticking point in Canada's attempt to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership trading bloc and are a difficult political issue for Ottawa given the opposition from farmers in Quebec and Ontario.

The EU also wants copyright extension for drug firms, a change Canada's generic pharmaceutical makers oppose and critics say would increase the cost of drugs.

Fast reiterated the government wouldn't sign on unless it was convinced the deal would benefit the country.