
ANNUAL SESSION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE ON THE WTO

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President of the Interparliamentary Union,
Members of Parliament,
Ambassadors,
Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure to welcome the participants to what is already the fifth annual session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO. First of all, please allow me to extend greetings from the President of the European Parliament, Josep Borrell, who unfortunately cannot be with us today. However, he asked me to pass on his best wishes for the success of this session, which is being organised jointly by the European Parliament and the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

For many years, international trade issues were regarded as highly technical subjects which were the exclusive preserve of a select group of negotiators and experts. The conclusion of the Uruguay Round in Marrakech in 1994 marked the beginning of a new era in international trade negotiations.

From the outset, parliaments had to ratify the outcome of the Uruguay Round before the governments of their countries could join the WTO. In addition, unlike in the case of GATT the issues dealt with by this new organisation go beyond the scope of trade policy as it is traditionally defined and all these new issues have a direct impact on the daily lives of ordinary people and on society.

The Marrakech Agreement provided for negotiations to be resumed by 1 January 2000 at the latest. A new trade round was to be launched when the third WTO Ministerial Conference met in Seattle (United States) from 30 November to 3 December 1999.

The very first formal meeting of legislators from the WTO member countries was held at that ministerial conference. I am sure that those of you who were present can still remember only too well the massive and sometimes violent demonstrations which accompanied the conference. At that time, the WTO was seen as the symbol of a globalisation process which was endangering jobs, the development of poorer countries and, by extension, the survival of millions of people.

It was against this backdrop of revolt that a small number of parliamentarians decided to meet, at the instigation of the US Senator William V. Roth and Carlos Westendorp y Cabeza, the then chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Industry, External Trade, Research and Energy. That first informal meeting gave birth to the idea that the elected representatives of the peoples of the entire world should make their views heard. A very wide range of topics was addressed and matters relating to the democratic nature of the WTO and the transparency of its decision-making procedures were raised.

Parliamentarians next met in Doha in 2001, when, in a climate of dangerous international uncertainty, the Members of the WTO finally managed to launch a new round of trade negotiations focusing on development problems and the concerns of the poorer countries.

The Doha Round was launched with the aim of correcting imbalances in the multilateral trading system, on the basis of the shared conviction that only a multilateral system founded on fair trading practices and fair and equitable rules is capable of fostering genuine development.

The negotiations cover a very wide range of subjects, including agriculture, services, market access for non-agricultural products, the environment and the WTO rules. However, despite the definition of a more detailed negotiating framework in August 2004, no agreement was reached at the Hong Kong Ministerial Conference and less progress has been made in the Doha negotiations than many had hoped. It is particularly disappointing that the Members have been unable to secure vital compromises by the deadlines they had set themselves and that the failure to bridge the substantial gulf between the positions of the main players, including the European Union, the United States and the G20, finally led to the negotiations being suspended sine die in July 2006.

Against that background, the representatives of the peoples of the WTO member countries have an important role to play in making their governments grasp the urgent need to resume and conclude these negotiations. In that connection, our conference comes at a particularly opportune moment.

The European Parliament is particularly concerned that the failure to reach agreement on the Doha development programme might undermine the credibility of the multilateral trading system, and perhaps even cause its collapse, and could lead to a proliferation of regional and bilateral trade agreements which would involve lopsided and less transparent negotiations and exacerbate the imbalances between the developed and the developing countries.

The WTO is important because I am convinced that trade can be a powerful force for development and help to reduce poverty. The potential outcome of the negotiations is a source of great optimism, optimism borne out by some of the figures put forward by the World Bank.

The international community set itself a wide range of objectives at the Millennium Summit, the Doha Conference and the United Nations Conferences on development funding (Monterey) and sustainable development (Johannesburg). Trade is not the only solution, but the successful conclusion of the negotiating round could go a long way towards helping us achieve those objectives.

The developing countries and the least developed countries are those which would suffer most, in the short and medium terms, from a prolonged suspension in the negotiations, since the long-awaited rebalancing of the trade rules in their favour cannot be secured outside the multilateral framework.

I firmly believe that the developed countries should continue to create more favourable trading conditions for developing countries and LDCs, whatever the outcome of the negotiating round. It will be particularly important for developed countries and advanced developing countries to follow the EU's 'Everything But Arms' initiative, by ensuring market access which is totally free of duties and quotas for products from LDCs.

Equally worrying is the fact that the suspension of multilateral negotiations could lead to an increase in trade disputes, as WTO members could seek to obtain through dispute procedures what they would be unable to obtain through negotiation.

WTO members must now have the courage to restart the negotiations, to give them real impetus and to engage in an intensive and constructive dialogue in a spirit of compromise. In that sense it has been encouraging to witness the negotiators showing a willingness, over these last few days, to resume discussion. We hope that new proposals will soon be on the table.

For the Doha mandate to be fully implemented it is essential that the points agreed upon during the negotiations are retained and that the offers made thus far on the various negotiating points form the basis for further negotiation.

The fate of the Doha Development Programme lies today in the hands of those who control it – the members of the WTO. To those members falls the heavy responsibility of establishing positions of principle, negotiating concessions and deciding how far they can go in the various fields.

Parliaments cannot take decisions on behalf of their governments. We cannot impose a consensus. We cannot get things moving again when governments are being inflexible. But we are determined to do our utmost to persuade our governments that the persistent climate of uncertainty now hanging over the future of multilateralism, and of the WTO itself, will further exacerbate global economic and political difficulties and have economic, financial and social repercussions.

As the legitimate representatives of the people who elected them, parliamentarians have a triple role to play in the area of international trade. First, a 'supervisory' role, which consists of monitoring the actions of our governments and ensuring that they are accountable to us. Second, a role in examining and ratifying international agreements presented to us. And third, a role in drawing up and monitoring legislation to implement international agreements.

Furthermore, parliamentarians can help to explain to the general public how the trade system works and the benefits it brings. They can help people understand and control the mysteries of globalisation, and promote awareness and informed debate on international trade issues. And as legitimate representatives of the people, parliamentarians form an important link between the public, civil society and governments.

Until such time as genuine global governance is set up, centred on the United Nations, we need to use the most effective tool at our disposal for matters of international trade, which is the WTO. It is the most global organisation – having 149 members – and the only one with the means to ensure that international rules are respected, through its Dispute Settlement Body.

It still, however, needs to be made more effective, more democratic and more transparent. And I believe the current structure and workings of the WTO should be reformed as soon as possible to achieve this.

We parliamentarians have come a long way since Doha.

Since 2003 the European Parliament and the Inter-Parliamentary Union have jointly organised sessions of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO. I mentioned at the beginning that this is already the fifth session. After Geneva and Cancun in 2003, Brussels in 2004 and Hong Kong in 2006, here we are reunited once again in Geneva.

As you can see, there is no shortage of topics for discussion. I have no doubt that our discussions will be fruitful, and I am confident that our formal appeal for a resumption of the Doha Round negotiations will be heard.

Thank you for your attention.