
ANNUAL 2008 SESSION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE ON THE WTO

Geneva, 11-12 September 2008

Organized jointly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the European Parliament

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Vice-President of the European Parliament
Annual session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO
Geneva, 11 and 12 September 2008**

Members of Parliament,
Ambassadors,
Delegates,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a real pleasure for me to welcome you, on behalf of the President of the European Parliament and on my own behalf, to what is already the sixth annual session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO.

Allow me first of all to convey greetings from Mr Hans-Gert Pöttering, President of the European Parliament, who unfortunately cannot be with us today. He did however ask me to pass on his best wishes for the success of this latest session, which is organised jointly by the European Parliament and the Interparliamentary Union.

I should like to express heartfelt thanks for the hospitality provided by the Interparliamentary Union, which for the third time is hosting this important assembly, a body for dialogue and cooperation among parliamentarians specialising in questions of international trade.

The very first formal meeting of legislators from WTO member countries was held during the Third WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle (United States) in 1999. At a turbulent time, marked by widespread and sometimes violent demonstrations against the WTO, a small group of parliamentarians decided to meet, on the initiative of American Senator William V. Roth and Carlos Westendorp y Cabeza, who was then chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Industry, External Trade, Research and Energy.

It was at this first informal meeting that questions relating to the democratic character of the WTO and the transparency of its decision-making mechanisms were raised, giving rise to the idea that the elected representatives of the peoples of the entire world should make their voices heard.

Parliamentarians met again at Doha (Qatar) in 2001, when, against a background of dangerous uncertainty at international level, WTO members finally succeeded in launching a new round of trade negotiations known officially as the Doha Development Agenda, with a wide-ranging and ambitious programme focusing on development problems and the concerns and needs of poor countries.

The conclusion to the Doha Round multilateral trade negotiations has been deferred on countless occasions.

It cannot be denied that many of us are disappointed and concerned at the failure of the WTO mini-ministerial meetings held in Geneva at the end of July 2008.

It is true that adopting modalities for agriculture and non-agricultural market access could have been a major step towards the conclusion of the Doha Round.

Under these circumstances, the representatives of the peoples of WTO member countries have an important role to play in making their respective governments understand that these negotiations need to be concluded. In this respect, the holding of this conference is particularly timely.

Failure of the Doha Round and a shift towards bilateral or regional agreements could shatter the credibility of the multilateral trade system and might even cause it to collapse, resulting in a process of uneven liberalisation and development, while exacerbating the imbalances between developed and developing countries.

The European Parliament is also worried that the end of multilateral negotiations could result in an increase in trade disputes, as WTO members might seek to obtain through litigation what they could not achieve through negotiation.

The WTO is important, for I am convinced that it plays in a central role as one of the multilateral organisations contributing to international economic governance, more effective control of globalisation and a fairer distribution of its benefits.

The world needs a strong multilateral trade system, since this is the most effective way of developing and managing trade in the interests of all and provides an ideal framework for settling disputes.

Trade is not the only answer, but the success of this round of negotiations could ensure a genuine opening-up of markets and stricter multilateral rules, stimulate economic growth, development and employment at global level and make an effective contribution to achieving the Millennium Goals for sustainable development and the integration of developing countries into the global economy.

WTO members must have the courage to press on with the negotiations, give them a strong impetus and engage in a lively and constructive dialogue in a spirit of compromise.

In this regard, it is encouraging to note that, at the end of the July mini-ministerial meetings, the WTO members stated very clearly that the negotiations must not be abandoned since the results achieved were too important to be allowed to lapse.

Indeed, solutions were found to countless problems which had been outstanding for many years, even if the negotiations foundered on the question of the extent to which developing countries could increase customs duties to protect their farmers in the event of a surge in imports, in the context of a 'special safeguard mechanism' (SSM).

Nevertheless, as we are well aware, the WTO members decided that the Doha negotiations would be seen as part of a single undertaking. Given that the WTO operates by consensus, this all or nothing approach means that sufficient progress has to be made on all key questions. No trade agreement will be adopted unless all outstanding issues have been resolved.

At the end of nine long days of negotiation, there is a danger that the progress achieved could come to nothing. This must give us pause for thought as to the pros and cons of the single undertaking ...

We hope that the agreements reached during the negotiations can be preserved and that the offers put forward in July on the various items on the negotiating agenda will provide a suitable basis.

The fate of the Doha Development Agenda now lies in the hands of the members of the WTO.

We cannot take decisions on behalf of our governments. We cannot impose a consensus. We cannot break the deadlock when governments are proving inflexible. However, we are determined to do everything in our power to convince our governments that the failure of the negotiations would further exacerbate global economic and political difficulties and would have economic, financial and social consequences.

As I told you in 2006, at the last annual session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO, in our capacity as the legitimate representatives of our electorates, we as parliamentarians, have a threefold role to play in the field of international trade.

Our first role is as a 'watchdog', monitoring the actions of our governments and ensuring they are accountable to us. Secondly, we must examine and ratify the international agreements put before us. Thirdly, we must draw up the laws to enforce and support these international agreements.

We can also help to explain to the public how the trade system works and what its advantages are; we can help people to understand and come to grips with the mysteries of globalisation, raise awareness and promote informed debate on questions relating to international trade. In addition, as legitimate representatives of the people, we provide a vital link between populations, civil society and governments.

The most effective tool available to us in the field of international trade today is the WTO. It is the most universal organisation (bringing together 153 countries) and the only one with the means to enforce international rules through its dispute settlement body.

At a time when multilateralism and international cooperation face challenges on many fronts, we as parliamentarians must reaffirm our commitment to a multilateral approach to trade policy and our support for the WTO as the guarantor of regulated international trade.

Nevertheless, we still need to make it more effective, more democratic and more transparent. In 2004, lengthy consideration was given to the future of the WTO and the institutional challenges facing it by the Consultative Board chaired by Peter Sutherland, although there has been no tangible follow-up to its findings.

In the light of recent developments, we feel it is more necessary than ever to give renewed consideration to the decision-making process, mission, functioning and future of the WTO, with a view to possible reform of the organisation to enhance both its efficiency and legitimacy.

We parliamentarians have made substantial progress since Doha.

Since 2003, the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO has been organised jointly by the European Parliament and the Interparliamentary Union. At the beginning of my speech I mentioned that this is already the sixth session. After Geneva and Cancun in 2003, Brussels in 2004, Hong Kong in 2005 and Geneva in 2006, we find ourselves here in Geneva once again.

Over the next two days we shall be addressing WTO negotiations and the future of the multilateral trade system, we shall be examining the links between trade and climate change, and we shall be looking at how trade can help reduce the threat of conflicts over food and energy. Lastly, we shall discuss how information and communications technologies can help economic growth through the development of electronic trade worldwide.

Our final sitting tomorrow afternoon will be devoted to the adoption of:

- a code of conduct for relations between governments and parliaments on matters relating to international trade;
- amendments to the rules of procedure of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO drawn up by the steering committee; and
- a final document, the preliminary draft of which has been drawn up by the steering committee.

As you see, there is no shortage of topics for discussion. I am sure that our dialogue will be fruitful and am confident that our formal appeal will be heard.

On that note, I officially declare the 2008 annual session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO open, with the wish that all those taking part will derive great benefit from its work.

I should like to thank you for your kind attention and to wish you every success.