
ANNUAL 2008 SESSION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE ON THE WTO

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Geneva, 11 September 2008

Fellow parliamentarians,
Representatives of governments and international organizations,
Ladies and gentlemen.

I have great pleasure in welcoming you to the annual session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO. In its six years of existence, the Conference has proved to be an effective tool of parliamentary scrutiny of international trade policies. It is a place where members of parliament - elected representatives of the people - engage in debate and interaction with WTO officials and negotiators, renowned international experts, and with each other, of course.

Today's meeting is the largest international parliamentary conference on trade ever organized. We have almost 100 parliaments represented at this major event. We are joined by members of diplomatic missions in Geneva, officials of international organizations, representatives of the academic community, business, NGOs and the mass media. I extend a cordial welcome to all of you on behalf the Inter-Parliamentary Union as the host of the session. I take this opportunity to convey to you the greetings of the IPU President, Mr. Pier Ferdinando Casini, who is unable to attend due to important political commitments in his country, Italy.

Our session is taking place at a critical moment for the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations and for the WTO as a whole. For the third summer in a row, attempts to reach a breakthrough in WTO talks have ended in failure. Despite the repeated commitments by WTO members to conclude the Round by the end of 2008, the mini-ministerial meetings held in late July fell short of an accord, once again.

In their initial reactions to the collapse of the mid-summer talks, governments refrained from the bitter blame-game that had marked similar breakdowns in the past. And although the subsequent exchanges have become somewhat harsher, everybody seems to concur: the mini-ministerial meeting came surprisingly close to an agreement.

Thus, there is hope. Or is there? This is what we shall try to establish during our session, from a parliamentary perspective, but with the help of experts who are certainly the best-placed to know because it is they who lead these negotiations.

The first among them is Mr. Pascal Lamy, the WTO Director-General, who will join us for a special hearing in about two hours time. He repeated time and again after the mini-ministerial meeting that "no one is throwing in the towel" yet. I personally find his words rather comforting and look forward to what he has to tell us today.

I am likewise encouraged by the attitude of the chairs of the agriculture and NAMA negotiating committees who have declared their intention to produce papers "capturing the work" done during the mini-ministerial meeting. The chair of the Committee on Agriculture has kindly accepted our invitation and will address the session tomorrow. He will provide us with first-hand information on what to expect in this crucially important field of negotiation. He will be joined by the chair of the special session for trade in services, which is another very important area indeed.

I have no doubt that you have many questions to ask them. Let's make good use of this opportunity - just like we do it in our own parliaments during hearings with ministers and other government officials.

Whether the WTO members can pick up where they left off during the mini-ministerial meeting remains to be seen. Governments have made various pledges and pleas to retain what is currently on the table. The truth is however that they have no obligation to honour such non-binding commitments offered in the course of negotiations.

This is a situation where parliaments can help. Parliament represents a political spectrum which is naturally wider and more diverse than that of government. In multilateral trade negotiations for example, they can contribute to identifying negotiating opportunities in areas where government officials would normally show reluctance. Members of parliament are uniquely qualified to assist in building consensus through compromise - a skill in which they are well versed.

Parliaments and the executive branch of government have very different responsibilities in relation to international trade negotiations. Governments negotiate rules and arrangements on behalf of States, while parliaments scrutinize government action, influence policies pursued in intergovernmental negotiations, ratify trade agreements, implement them through appropriate legislation and budget allocations, and oversee the implementation process as a whole.

We insist that trade negotiations must be subjected to democratic parliamentary scrutiny, so as to avoid situations when parliaments are faced with a *fait accompli* and have to ratify the already negotiated agreements as an indivisible package. This leads to tensions, which are further exacerbated when WTO's dispute settlement system is used to challenge national laws.

Not without some initial reticence, the WTO seems to be responding to this pressure by enhancing its relations with actors beyond its formal membership and in particular by engaging with those who have representational mandates. This is a fundamental paradigm shift. We welcome it as a step in the right direction, towards introducing greater democratic accountability of the WTO.

Our commitment to an inclusive, equitable, robust and sustainable global economic agenda founded on the rules-based multilateral trading system remains unwavering. We are convinced that there is no viable alternative to multilateralism and that engaging in a splurge of bilateralism is not an option. It is for this reason that we have decided that the session's agenda should be focused first of all on the reasons for the protracted stalemate in WTO talks and on possible parliamentary action to help overcome it.

At the same time, the session's agenda provides ample opportunities to address other important trade-related problems, such as climate change, food shortages and soaring energy prices. Indeed, trade can be used as a means of adjusting supply and demand and thus defusing the potential tensions over energy and food. Or it can be used to exacerbate them. Likewise, international trade has the capacity to attenuate harmful environmental trends. But trade can also be a negative factor of climate change.

The underlying choices are political, not technical. Parliaments alone will not save the world from extinction by greenhouse gases. That can only be done if the right partnerships are forged between governments, legislators, civil society and the private sector, putting the interests of the general public before narrow concerns. What parliaments can do, however, is lay the legal foundations that are absolutely necessary for such partnerships to work.

The closing sitting of our session, which will take place tomorrow afternoon, will be devoted to the adoption of guidelines for relations between governments and parliaments on international trade issues, to amending the Conference Rules, and to the adoption of an outcome document, the preliminary draft of which has been prepared by the Conference Steering Committee.

The co-organizers have invested much time and energy in the preparation of this session. I address words of warm thanks to the leadership and staff of the European Parliament - our partner in this exercise - for everything they have done to facilitate this process. We hope that the session will be crowned with success and look forward to a rich and constructive debate, in the true parliamentary tradition.

Let me conclude by recalling that today is the sad anniversary of the tragic events that took place in New York on 9/11. May I suggest that we stand together for a moment of silence.

While we remember the horror of that day and the many innocent victims, we should repeat forcefully that peace and security is ultimately built on the foundations of development, trade and social justice and not just of military might. It is therefore more urgent than ever that you, the negotiators, conclude the Doha Development Round.

With these words, let me officially declare the annual 2008 Session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO open.

I now pass the floor to the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Mr. Manuel António dos Santos.