
ANNUAL 2011 SESSION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE ON THE WTO

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**ADDRESS BY SENATOR DONALD H. OLIVER (CANADA),
MEMBER OF THE IPU EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

Geneva, 21 March 2011

His Excellency, President of the WTO General Council,
Distinguished representatives of governments and international organizations,
Fellow parliamentarians,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I have great pleasure in welcoming you to the annual session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO. A product of the collaborative efforts of the IPU and the European Parliament, the Conference is a unique tool for parliamentary scrutiny of international trade policies. The IPU believes in it very strongly.

Indeed, throughout its entire history, the IPU - the world organization of parliaments - has been proactively engaging legislators in international cooperation. Trade between nations is one of the cornerstones of this design.

Parliamentarians from all over the world are joined at our Conference by trade diplomats, officials of international organizations, and representatives of the academic community and the mass media. I extend to all participants and observers the cordial greetings of the IPU President, Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab, who is unfortunately unable to attend due to political commitments in his country, Namibia.

For the first time in its eight-year history, the Parliamentary Conference is holding its session on the premises of the WTO. To a mere outsider, this might look like just another meeting among the 8,000 that take place at WTO Headquarters every year. For parliamentarians, however, this is a long-awaited and politically symbolic step along the way to endowing the WTO with a meaningful parliamentary dimension.

By playing host to a meeting of legislators specializing in international trade, the WTO has shown its willingness to enhance its transparency and open itself to a greater degree of democratic oversight and accountability. We salute this development. Our gratitude goes first of all to the WTO Director-General, Mr. Pascal Lamy, who has been very supportive of this initiative. Sincere thanks are also due to his colleagues at the WTO Secretariat for their exemplary cooperation and hospitality.

Mr. Lamy will join us for a special hearing tomorrow. Ever attentive to questions from parliamentarians, he will bring us up to date on the latest developments in the Doha Round. Let's make good use of this opportunity. As national policy-makers, we need to identify more clearly, for example, what elements constitute the famous "narrow but real window of opportunity" that is often evoked in connection with prospects of concluding the Round by the end of this year.

We share the view that the time to get serious about Doha is long past. The issues that have stalled the negotiations are real, but they can be resolved if negotiators keep in mind the benefits of success and the costs of failure.

A successful deal would not only provide a debt-free stimulus for the global economy, but could also be an added spoke in the wheel of protectionism at a time when the world is still recovering from the consequences of the financial and economic crisis. The worst fears of global retreat from free trade have not been realized. Even so, "legal protectionism" has propagated in government procurement, investment and other areas not yet fully covered by WTO rules. New agreements in the Doha Round could spell out an insurance policy that would enhance the continued flow of growth-generating global trade.

Inversely, the costs of not reaching an agreement would be prohibitive. Among other things, they would result in a proliferation of bilateral and regional trade agreements, perhaps in ways that would frustrate global hopes for the overall gains in jobs and growth. Convinced of the pivotal importance of this aspect, the Steering Committee of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO has decided to devote one of the two thematic debates to it.

The second theme deals with rebalancing the rules of the multilateral trading system in favour of the poor. The objective of development is central to the Doha Development Agenda. Governments have made various pledges and pleas at the start of the Round, but tangible results in this area are yet to be seen. Can parliaments help break the deadlock?

We will listen to the views of parliamentary delegates from both developed and developing countries. In addition, we will benefit from the experience and

inside knowledge of trade negotiators whose job is to follow these issues on a daily basis in the WTO Committee on Trade and Development.

In fact, it is our intention to make dialogue and interaction between parliamentarians and WTO negotiators a distinct feature of the entire session. An exciting feature, too, may I add. After all, what can be more interesting and useful for us, legislators dealing with trade matters in our respective parliaments, than to engage with top-level WTO experts who are the best-placed to know because it is they who actually lead the Doha negotiations?

The subject chosen by the Steering Committee for the corresponding segment of the session's programme focuses on the delicate interlinkage between trade and sustainable development, which should give rise to a lively debate. I am sure that you have many questions to ask our distinguished Ambassadors - just as you do in parliament during questioning time with ministers and other government officials.

The concluding panel of the session will be somewhat different. For once, we have invited not trade diplomats and renowned international experts but journalists - those who write about the WTO and influence the way millions of people think about globalization and trade. There are many aspects of this relationship that may require clarification. Not all questions can be dismissed off-hand by simply suggesting not to blame the mirror. We can have an interplay of ideas that would be of interest and use to all sides, including parliamentarians, of course.

The IPU and the European Parliament, as the co-organizers of the session, have invested much time and energy in its preparation. We hope that it will be crowned with success and look forward to a rich and constructive debate, in the true parliamentary tradition.

With these words, let me officially declare the annual 2011 Session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO open.

I now pass the floor to the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Mr. Stavros Lambrinidis.