

There are two reasons why there could be no better timing for a conference on export and investment opportunities for Canadian business in Brazil.

First, the assumption of office on January 1, 1995, of the new Brazilian President, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, marks an important stage in the transition of Brazil to an open-market economy.

Second, later in January, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien will lead a large business delegation to Brazil, Argentina and Chile. His visit will demonstrate this government's commitment to stimulating economic growth and creating employment through expanded trade with Latin America.

In fact, 1995 will be a year of unprecedented opportunity for Canada to achieve a major expansion of its economic relationship with Brazil, to the benefit of both our countries.

Beyond that, 1995 also promises to be an exciting year for hemispheric trade, starting with the Summit of the Americas in Miami in less than two weeks. Although a two-day meeting is unlikely to produce dramatic results, one would hope that we can come out of the Summit with a firm commitment to the process of rules-based trade liberalization in the Western Hemisphere, and, ideally, a blueprint for Chile's early accession to the NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement].

The Western Hemisphere has the opportunity to emerge as a free trade model for the world. In January of this year, Canada, the United States and Mexico implemented the North American Free Trade Agreement, building on the bilateral Canada-U.S. agreement negotiated five years before. Additionally, Mexico has entered into a free trade arrangement with Venezuela and Colombia under the umbrella of the G-3. A revived Andean Pact will link the economies of Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela through freer trade. Brazil has joined Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay in moving the Mercosul further toward a full common market.

In supporting the ideals of freer trade through Mercosul, Brazil has shown commendable foresight, courage and political willpower. A first, and all-important, commitment to open markets has been made. Thanks to strong, visionary leaders in Brazil and throughout the Americas, bilateral and multilateral free trade is breaking out all over the Western Hemisphere.

These remarkable strides in recent years make it all the more curious that the next logical step — a single free trade regime for the Western Hemisphere as a whole — remains elusive.

An increasingly tangled web of bilateral and regional trade agreements is hardly helpful from a business perspective. It leads to a confusing overlap of rights and obligations, including