

B. Attentiveness and Understanding

1. Following

The quantitative survey results show that more Canadians (41%) say that they have been following the trade negotiations closely, than indicate that they understand the issue as well as they would like (24%). Consistent with the survey results, most of the group participants said that they have not been following the discussions closely.

Major reasons that emerged in the discussions relate to information and interest. Once again, people stressed that they did not have enough information about what was going on and therefore were unaware of what was being discussed. For instance, a Vancouver participant said that "I'm interested in free trade and have been following it but don't know what's on the table." Comments which emerged in Halifax include, "Not that much has come out about what is being negotiated - no one really knows what's going on," and "I would like to be able to follow it and (have) been trying to, but it's futile."

Several people felt that the information they were able to obtain via the media was more of a speculative nature and not informative about what issues were actually being discussed. While there was a recognition of the complexity of the issue, particularly among the lower SES participants, others felt that "It's not complex. We just need to know more."

Degree of personal interest in free trade in general was raised both as a reason why individuals were following the issue and for others, why they were not. On the one hand, several participants said they were following the issue because of their expectation that it could personally affect their jobs or those of their friends and relatives. For many others, the response was in effect, "I'm not interested because I don't see how it will affect me." A degree of cynicism and sense of powerlessness was also evident among still others who took this position one step further. That is, a comment which emerged in several groups was that some people were not following the issue because they felt that "It doesn't matter because I won't have any say in it."