

WTO deliberations were further clouded by the hostile reaction of thousands of citizens in the streets of Seattle in 1999. Interest group leaders and their supporters did not view WTO structures as being sufficiently open to public involvement or criticism. The debate about world trade regimes is, as a consequence, coloured by issues of process as much as substance. This carries a lot of weight in democratic societies where citizens expect duly-elected officials to address questions of transparency and accountability, or run the risk of political defeat.

Efforts to work within existing domestic political institutions are often lost in the intense rhetoric surrounding international meetings. Canada, for example, was successful in engaging Parliamentarians before the Seattle meeting as reflected in the extensive and thorough report of the House of Commons Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade. They were also members of the official delegation. These initiatives, however, were lost in the media coverage of the streets of that city.

In the North American context, the issues of transparency is further complicated by mechanisms created under NAFTA that conduct deliberations in private and beyond public view. In a March 11, 2001 article in the New York Times, Anthony Depalma reported that while corporations are thrilled that NAFTA provides them with protection, critics are attacking the sweeping powers of its private unknown advisors.

One opponent was quoted as describing the whole process as "secret government" while a second asserted that this was no "way to do the public's business." The article ends with the observation that, since the clash between business interests and public policy will most likely continue, "the demand for a more transparent process will cause tension with the traditional concept of confidentiality."

The Quebec City process for dealing with the development of international agreements within the Americas clearly demonstrates the ongoing tension between civil society and the executive branches of the governments involved. Consequently, the move supported by Canada to open up the process through the sharing of draft agreements is a sign of internal progress and an important step toward the demarcation of a new process for dealing with outside interests. More importantly, despite this accomplishment, the question remains for Parliamentarians: How will this affect the relationship between the executive and the legislative branches of various governments in the Americas? Is there a stronger role for elected representatives who are not part of the executive? The Minister for International Trade recently addressed this issue with the following thought:

"But, what had inspired me was my faith in my fellow trade ministers realizing - as I have - that we are living in a very different world than what existed pre-Seattle. We are living in the world of the Internet - where so much information is available instantaneously, at a click of a button. We are living in a world where people are more skeptical; if they cannot hold something in their own hands not only does it have no value, it is actually suspect.

"By making the negotiating texts public, we will be demystifying them in the eyes of many citizens.