

What are the best ways to ensure provincial consensus and compliance?

- Consensus-Building. The past decade saw great strides in strengthening formal mechanisms for consulting both the provinces and private sector interests. There remains room, however, for examining better ways to build broader consensus among the Canadian public on trade policy issues. Are there better ways to engage Canadians on the issues raised by trade negotiations? How can Canadians be made to think more positively about the interaction between the domestic and international economies?

Some of these questions lend themselves to quantitative analysis; others require legal analysis. Some need basic exploration to understand the implications for Canada, others require analysis of Canada's strengths, weaknesses and interests. Whatever the approach, future research and analysis should begin now and proceed on the basis of a much more thorough appreciation of the changing commercial and political context within which the issues will need eventually to be addressed. In short, research and analysis needs to be forward-looking and build on the seminal changes in attitude and perception in Canada since 1985. What we cannot afford is too much more research – and public debate – based on circumstances and phenomena that no longer exist.

Conclusions

The increased awareness in Canada of trade policy issues over the past few years has brought both immediate challenges and long-term opportunities. With increased awareness has come more controversy and public debate. As a result, the Government has had to engage in greater public management of Canada's approach to individual issues. The energy and resources devoted to this aspect of trade policy (consultations with the provinces and with industry and labour as well as press briefings) may at times make policy makers look back fondly to a simpler and less controversial era. But this greater awareness has also stimulated greater interest by academic and independent analysts in trade policy issues. This greater interest is of tremendous potential benefit to Canadians. To reap those benefits, however, policy analysts and policy makers will have to achieve a more efficient division of labour.

The time horizon of policy makers is of necessity short-term. In a democratic society, policy is designed within the confines of the competing pressures of special and general interests and requires compromises. Decision-makers practice the art of the possible and they do so on the basis of very short time horizons. In designing policy and reaching decisions, they rely on the intellectual capital accumulated over previous years. If that intellectual capital is rich and varied, it should provide a sound basis for decision-