

In more than any other area, the relationship has thrived in trade. This didn't just start last year with the NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement], or five years ago with the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement [FTA].

For example, in the midst of worldwide depression in 1935, Canada and the United States negotiated an unprecedented bilateral trade agreement to lower tariff barriers on a wide range of products, an agreement that was expanded in 1938. While other nations were still putting up barriers, we were working to find ways to bring them down.

The same spirit lived on to inspire more recent accomplishments, such as the Auto Pact in 1965, and the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement in 1988.

If you'll allow me to offer a personal opinion, I am always disappointed with politicians who talk about all the job losses they say were caused by the Free Trade Agreement. This sort of unbelievable claim isn't just sad because it's untrue. It is sad because it makes light of the real forces that have caused suffering to so many people.

The recession caused tremendous pain in both Canada and the United States, as it has in each of the western industrialized countries. There are few tragedies greater than seeing a talented, conscientious person who wants to work, but loses the opportunity because of forces he or she can't control.

Many people have been lucky enough to avoid this experience, but there are very few who have not shared the pain of a relative, friend, neighbour or colleague who loses a job. It reminds us that a recession is more than just a term bandied about by economists; behind the word there are human faces, and a human cost.

Blaming free trade for this tragedy might score a few political points. And yes, it might fool a few people. But it does nothing to address the real problems. It's easy to raise false hopes. It's tougher, but more productive, to focus on restoring real hope.

Here is one way to start: it's time to debunk the myths about free trade.

Myth number one: Canada has been a loser under free trade with the United States.

Last fall, the C.D. Howe Institute released a detailed study that showed Canada's exports of goods and services have thrived in most sectors that were liberalized under the FTA -- even during the recession.