

Admittedly, these are not easy questions. And getting agreement on the answers may be just as difficult as it was on other fundamental trade issues covered by the NAFTA.

But we really don't have a choice. If we choose to ignore the "skeleton in the closet," it will continue to haunt us.

We shall continue to see inappropriate corporate and industry actions in all three NAFTA signatory countries, aided and abetted by outdated trade remedy legislation.

And these disruptive actions will continue to cost North American companies - such as your own - hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars a year.

The corporate counsel for General Motors, speaking recently before the U.S. International Trade Commission, cautioned about the need "to minimize possible economic harm to U.S. industries that are downstream from the ones involved in the unfair trade proceedings."

In the same month - last November - the American Bar Association declared that "the replacement of anti-dumping law by competition law for transactions between and within NAFTA nations is more clearly consistent with the concept of a free-trade area."

If even lawyers can see this issue so clearly, what is stopping the rest of us?

Firms should be encouraged to take advantage of an integrated North American market, not penalized for doing so. Preserving anti-dumping laws in a free-trade area does not really help producers in the long run, nor does it help the consumer.

Exactly whose interests is the current trade remedy regime protecting, given that our economies are so closely integrated? And, more importantly for you as business people and exporters, can we really afford to engage in such narrow, internecine protectionism when North America is faced with growing competition from an integrated Europe and an ascendant Asia?

These are fundamental questions. Their resolution will require both understanding and ingenuity. Varied and vocal domestic pressures exist on all sides of the issue. But our economic advantages as North Americans, now and in the future, will depend directly on our joint willingness to lead the movement toward freer global trade and investment.

That requires a commitment to recognize our common economic interests, a willingness to expand free trade under agreed rules, and to abide by them.