

II. DEFINITION AND AWARENESS

A. Meaning of Free Trade

As noted above, many participants had difficulty defining what free trade meant. Most people talked about it in the Canada-U.S. context and did not respond to the probe for perceptions of the concept of free trade. There was greater accuracy of definition and understanding among the higher SES participants, but even among these participants, many claimed they did not have enough information to express a view and felt that they needed the issue to be explained more to them. Many also felt they did not know who to believe about what was going on, or in fact what was being proposed.

Those who did express a view about the meaning of free trade mentioned the removal of tariffs and other barriers, and goods coming across which are "not taxed." Many appeared more concerned in a "top of mind" sense with the possible consumer price benefits of free trade, instead of focusing on issues relating to jobs. A considerable number focused on consumer products from the U.S. ranging from cars to alcohol and cigarettes which they felt would be available in Canada at cheaper prices. Considering responses in total, there appeared to be more interest if not concern among participants with the possible consumer price benefits of free trade, than with its possible impact on jobs.

Overall, the majority of participants also appeared to view Canada-U.S. trade more in terms of the flow of trade and investment north, rather than from a more balanced perspective of free trade meaning increased flows of trade both ways.

The issue of whether free trade will in fact be "free" was raised at this juncture of the discussion in several groups. An imperative of an equal bargaining process was identified and concerns expressed that perhaps the U.S. was going to get more. Other concerns, besides those relating to employment, involved uncertainty about whether Canadian companies could compete with American companies under free trade. Uncertainty here stems from an apparent lack of knowledge of Canadian business. Others felt that free trade would in fact provide the stimulus which might serve to make the Canadian workforce and businesses more productive and more competitive.