

I know there will likely be questions about the environmental and labour agreements we will be negotiating with the U.S. and Mexico.

Some may argue that we should wait for the conclusion of these talks before proceeding with the NAFTA implementing legislation. They note that the Clinton Administration will present the environmental and labour agreements and the implementing legislation to Congress at the same time.

That is their business. From our perspective, it is in the interests of Canadians to get the Bill out in the open and to start the parliamentary debate.

Let me point out that all three governments have agreed that the NAFTA will not be reopened. We have also all agreed to implement the Agreement on January 1, 1994. We expect all NAFTA partners will live up to that commitment. The negotiation of the NAFTA is over.

That said, we are encouraged that the Clinton Administration shares our determination to pursue discussions on the environment and labour. Frankly, we now have a golden opportunity to pursue further Canadian interests that will go far beyond the technicalities of trade agreements.

When we concluded the negotiations of the NAFTA last August 12, we had created a trade agreement that was more sensitive to the environment than any previously negotiated.

But equally important, at that time we agreed that Environment Ministers should meet to discuss the establishment of a North American Commission on the Environment. Work on its mandate has been slow because of the change in the U.S. Administration.

But the renewed interest in this area by the Clinton Administration and the importance they are attaching to an early agreement in both labour and the environment are indeed welcome.

When the three sides meet in mid-March, Canada will come to the table with constructive proposals.

But let me make the obvious point. The NAFTA negotiations have been a catalyst for trilateral co-operation in these important fields. Bluntly stated, without a NAFTA, there would be no trilateral agreements on labour and the environment.

We are confident that informed and serious consideration will confirm the NAFTA's rightful place as part of Canada's economic strategy.