

Leaders declared their commitment to "begin immediately" to construct the Free Trade Area of the Americas [FTAA] by 2005, with "concrete progress... made by the end of this century." The next step was taken at the trade ministers' meeting held in Denver, U.S.A. last June. The Denver Declaration established a preparatory work program explicitly linked to eventual negotiations.

Ministers confirmed that the FTAA should be comprehensive in scope and that the final package would represent a "single undertaking" whereby a participant must accept all the elements of the agreement and not just those it momentarily finds convenient. Colombia will host the next ministerial meeting in March 1996, with a third conference tentatively set for 1997 to review the results of the detailed information exchange and analysis that have now been set in motion.

The next challenge is to build on the positive but still tentative results to date and the subsequent preparatory work. What might provide the required momentum and what are the potential obstacles that might derail the process?

The process launched last June in Denver should help to keep all regional players focussed on the free trade objective. Over the next year and a half, 12 working groups will analyze the substantive detail on issues ranging from tariffs and trade remedy law to intellectual property. A different country will chair each of the groups. The venue of the ministerial meetings will also vary. This is positive. It reinforces the process among the more than 30 countries involved of buying into the 2005 vision.

Nonetheless, participants with the resources to help drive the preparatory activity - and this includes Canada in the first ranks - will have to work hard to ensure that the momentum in the current preparatory phase does not become beached on the twin shoals of technical minutia and the lesser commitment of some hemispheric countries to pursuing vigorously a comprehensive package for 2005.

Moreover, in my view, the currently agreed work program, while necessary to achieve the FTAA, is not likely close to being sufficient to provide the momentum required to achieve an ambitious result.

Consequently, countries that are in a position to negotiate must move forward forcefully over the next two or three years in order to create a concrete free trade dynamic that will capture the attention and imagination of the rest of the hemisphere. From a Canadian perspective, accessions to the NAFTA can most credibly create this desired momentum.