

For example, on issues such as the environment and labour rights, it has been shown that as countries achieve greater economic growth and increased standards of living, higher environmental and labour standards are realized.

However, the breadth and scope of what can be achieved on social issues through trade negotiations is limited. The central focus of the FTAA is hemispheric economic integration, achieved through a rules-based trade and investment liberalization system.

This in no way undermines the legitimacy of the concerns of environmental, labour and human rights groups. What it does mean is it that we must tackle these issues through institutions with clear expertise and mandates in these areas.

For instance, the recent Organization of American States meeting in Windsor served as an unmatched regional forum for high-level discussion on fundamental human rights and democratic development issues.

Civil Society Consultations

But Windsor also reminds us that there are many groups who say they speak for the people of the hemisphere, who claim to articulate their concerns and their aspirations better than their own democratically elected governments. To those groups I ask, to whom are you accountable? You have many legitimate views, but opposition for the sake of opposition is, for me, not productive. From Seattle to Washington to Windsor, we see many views that need careful thought. But we also see elements that merely wish to oppose, without careful thought for the costs that will be borne by the very people these groups claim to speak for.

For my part, the Canadian government represents the aspirations of the Canadian people, and we strive to secure a future for them that is prosperous and full of opportunity. Trade is a key part of our strategy. The governments of the hemisphere also want the same for their people. We cannot embark on a true regional integration, economic, social and political, if we cannot accommodate their legitimate desire to share in the wealth-generating benefits of trade.

I am confident, and the Canadian government is confident, that openly debating these issues will generate more hemispheric support for the FTAA. Only by engaging our citizens can we demonstrate the legitimacy of our goals and convince the doubters. But debate is what is needed, not blind opposition.

This FTAA Civil Society Committee allows for concerned individuals and groups to express their views in writing on the implications of trade, including related issues such as labour and environmental standards.

In Toronto last November, we held a successful first meeting between many of the hemisphere's trade ministers and civil society groups, an important development in an ongoing process of civil society consultations at the hemispheric level.

On the domestic front, we have made a concerted and ongoing effort to listen to and consult with Canadians through a number of avenues. These include:

- Sectoral Advisory Groups on International Trade [SAGIT];