

Mr. President, it is a great privilege for me to be here, in particular, with such a large enthusiastic crowd. I was very much interested in your stories about how you began small and have grown. The one thing that rather surprised me was not that you had 550 people here but that, at one point in the evening, you seemed intent upon introducing each one of them.

Now this, of course, thanks to your careful planning and your collaboration with the trade negotiators on both sides, is an ideal moment to discuss Canada-U.S. relations -- the week in which the two countries announced that we had reached agreement on the principles of an historic free-trade agreement.

Debates in Canada about free trade go back to 1854, even before Canadian nationhood; later, just three years after Confederation, Sir John A. MacDonalld himself railed against free trade in the House of Commons. And, as every student of Canadian history knows, the government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier was soundly defeated in 1911 on a platform of what was then called "reciprocity". But those historical facts have to be seen as part of their place and time.

For example, it was hardly surprising that Canadians in the nineteenth century, who remembered American attempts as late as 1870 to overthrow our government, would be strongly opposed to opening up trade with a perceived enemy. And in Laurier's day, the U.S. interest in trade was viewed, with some justice, as a cover for America's expansionist goals.

However, what was a legitimate worry in 1911 is, today, simply irrelevant: a U.S. takeover of Canada ranks somewhere with flat-earth theories as a legitimate matter for concern. Canada is no longer an immature colony seeking to define itself; the United States is no longer under any misapprehension that Canadians want or need to become part of the U.S. or of any nation.

In the current negotiations, therefore, the task was to find out whether two sovereign countries, with many ties to each other, but with different history, different natures, different agendas, could forge an agreement that would work to the benefit of both.