

Four years ago, we concluded the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and you and others like you, on both sides of the border, set out to make it work. Tonight I can stand before you and say that, after a positive start, Canada reached an all-time record high in its exports to the U.S. in the first quarter of 1992.

Four years ago in Canada, we were in the midst of a great debate, a vigorous debate about the economic future of this country. We debated whether we should open our economy to greater competition and experiment with a new set of rules to govern our trade relations with the United States. Canadians were involved. Views were put forward with great passion and conviction. In the end, the issue was settled by Canadians in an election.

Four years later, the debate has flared up again. Canadians continue to find the issue compelling. Some still feel threatened by the demands of the global economy; others are stimulated. Some have changed their mind; others remain constant in their views.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the substance of the debate then and now. Four years ago, we staked our faith on what might be; today, some of the evidence is in and we can talk about what is. And to those Canadians who had the confidence and the gumption to give free trade a try, I say, "The evidence is good." To Maude Barlow, Mel Hurtig, and their imitators in the NDP and Liberal Party, who would have us believe that every sparrow that falls is the fault of the FTA, I say, "It's a bum rap, dangerous and dishonest."

Let us consider briefly, for a moment, the history of our trading relationship with the United States and how we got to where we are. Last Friday's newspapers carried reports of a recent GATT review of Canadian trade policies, and those reports dwelt heavily on the fact that more than two-thirds of our total foreign trade today is with the U.S. (The figure is in fact 72 per cent on a balance-of-payments basis, and 70 per cent on a customs basis.) In a remarkable example of putting the cart before the horse, some of those press stories, not content just to report on the GATT study, offered their own view that this state of affairs was "in part thanks to the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement." I invite all Canadians to consider the facts.

In the roughly 50 years of mostly Liberal government between 1935 and 1985, our U.S. trade rose as a proportion of our global trade from 45 per cent to 74.7 per cent (on a customs basis). Only once in that half-century did the figure drop significantly: the 1955 to 1965 decade, which included the six Conservative years under Mr. Diefenbaker.