

Majority of Canadians support Canada-EU trade talks: poll

BY TERRY PEDWELL

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OTTAWA _ Prime Minister Stephen Harper has the backing of a majority of Canadians as he launches the next phase of trade talks with the European Union, a new poll suggests.

And federal officials say the vast majority of provinces are on board, too, despite the objections of at least one premier, Newfoundland and Labrador's Danny Williams.

Harper will travel to the Czech Republic on Tuesday to participate in meetings with European leaders.

At the top of the agenda is the formal launch of negotiations toward what officials are calling an "economic partnership" akin to the North American Free Trade Agreement involving Canada, the United States and Mexico.

A Canadian Press Harris-Decima survey of Canadians, conducted near the end of April, suggests 70 per cent of respondents want their federal government to pursue more free trade agreements internationally.

That's somewhat of a surprise given the state of the economy, says Harris-Decima senior vice-president Jeff Walker.

"Often in difficult economic times, people have a protectionist instinct and resist increased trade," said Walker.

"But Canadians indicate that for the most part, they believe that Prime Minister Harper's trade agenda is a step in the right direction."

The poll, conducted among 1,000 Canadians between Apr. 23 and 26, indicated there is even stronger support for trade talks with the European Union specifically, with 75 per cent saying they thought it was a good idea.

The results are considered accurate within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The talks with nations involved in the EU are the latest in a string of negotiations aimed at making it easier for goods and people to flow across borders, on the premise that markets that are more open generate more trade and more jobs.

The Conservative government has been pursuing agreements within the Western Hemisphere as well, recently inking a deal with Columbia that is currently before the House of Commons, and beginning talks with Caribbean countries as well as Panama.

The aim is to counteract the effects of the global recession by boosting trade in areas where countries have traditionally balked at opening up their borders to goods and services from other nations.

“It's not simply enough to avoid protectionist measures” in tough economic times, says Kory Teneycke, Harper's director of communications.

“We need to proactively move forward with trade liberalization.”

The talks won't be easy. The EU has sought concessions from Canada that would open government procurement to contract bidding from European states.

There are also disputes over seafood export tariffs and the proposed European ban on products from Canada's seal hunt.

That's where Danny Williams comes in. The Newfoundland and Labrador premier issued a statement in March announcing he would not support the talks.

“At this point, we are not willing to sign on to support the negotiation of a new and comprehensive economic agreement with the European Union,” Williams said.

Senior federal officials who briefed reporters about the talks said most provinces support the federal government's pursuit of a deal, so long as they are closely consulted on issues touching on their jurisdiction.

But Williams said his government had “very genuine concerns that our province's issues may not be safeguarded or dealt with in an appropriate way by the federal government.”

The European Union's 27 member nations constitute the largest economy in the world, with half a billion people, and the EU is Canada's second-largest trading partner behind the United States.

Canadian officials estimate a trade agreement could boost economic output by \$12 billion annually. There is no deadline being imposed on reaching a deal, but those officials say they'd like to see results quickly.

Harper is expected to hold trilateral talks Wednesday with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek.

The prime minister is also slated to pay Topolanek what's being dubbed a “courtesy call,” where the two will likely speak about the influx of Roma refugees coming to Canada.

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney has raised concerns about the number of false refugee claimants coming from the Czech Republic.

Canada has not ruled out reimposing visa requirements for Czech nationals visiting Canada, although officials say they would prefer to settle the matter through diplomatic discussions.

“Reinstituting a visa requirement is, I guess, always an option,” said Teneycke.

“But government's preference is always to work co-operative to try and resolve these things.”

Ottawa lifted visa requirements for Czech citizens in 1996, only to reinstate the protocol a year later after hundreds of Czechs applied for asylum in Canada.

The requirement was lifted again in October 2007. But Canada again threatened to require visas after refugee applications increased.