

WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

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Statement by H.E. Mr. John Weekes
Ambassador, Permanent Representative

The annual reporting exercise together with the Director-General's Annual Report allows us to take a step back -- to take note of and reflect upon our activities over the past year. It is also useful when thinking prospectively about the WTO and the multilateral trading system. It enables us to place our specific work and detailed efforts into the broader context; what we have done, the results achieved, the trends which have to be taken into account, the tasks yet to be completed and the directions that might be taken in the future.

A year has already passed since the Singapore Conference and upon reflection we have made good progress. As was pointed out by the Director-General in his Annual Report, there have been significant additional sector commitments on information technology products and pharmaceuticals. We also have an Agreement on Trade in Basic Telecommunications, and we are continuing our efforts to complete an agreement on financial services this week.

The Singapore Conference also resulted in the launching of discussions, in a business-like manner, in the areas of trade and investment, trade and competition and transparency in government procurement. The discussions in the working groups are proving both educative and thought provoking. They will surely be invaluable in helping to answer some questions Members may have and in paving the way for future decisions in these areas.

However, we must not be complacent about either the quantity or quality of the work being done. The GATT/WTO success has flowed from its Members being ever vigilant and attuned to the changes occurring in the trading system. The world economy and the global trading system are evolving continually, and at an ever increasing speed. Consequently, we as Members have the responsibility to ensure that the multilateral rules-based system is equipped to deal with that evolution, in order to preserve the stability of the system.

As we prepare for May 1998 and beyond, we must not forget that increased transparency in the work of the WTO is an essential element in the achievement of our overall goals. It is clear that there is an audience interested in the activities of the WTO. A quick review of the WTO Internet Site statistics confirms this: an impressive record of 30,000 hosts served from 134 countries for the month of October and a volume of material downloaded running at about 10 to 11 gigabytes (the equivalent of millions of pages) per month. Without an informed audience and domestic support, our objectives of further liberalization and rule-making will be far more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Our present approach with regard to transparency is untenable; we need only look at the number of newspapers and other publications printing WTO material which is designated as confidential. Clearly,

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what we are doing here in Geneva is of interest to an ever-wider range of civil society. Canada thinks that an important first step in facilitating input into each Member's domestic deliberations on important issues would be to issue proposed agendas as public documents.

With regard to activities in other fora which create a synergy to the benefit of all WTO Members, the primacy of the open, rules-based multilateral trading system under the WTO was reaffirmed during the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit which was held in Canada in November of this year. The Ministers' Joint Statement and the Economic Leaders' Declaration, which have been circulated to Members¹, highlighted the action taken to accelerate by two years the timetable for the identification of sectors for early voluntary liberalization. Our Prime Minister stated that "These bold steps create a powerful example for the rest of the world as we prepare to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the WTO".

We are looking forward to the up-coming Ministerial Conference and the 50th Anniversary. It will be an opportunity for us to pay tribute to the great strides that we have taken in developing an integrated as well as a more viable and durable multilateral trading system. We should also take this opportunity to have a frank exchange of views on the directions we would like to take in the future. We will all benefit if we explore fully the various views regarding the implementation of WTO commitments and the scope of our future work.

The Ministerial Conference and the 50th Anniversary will be a time for leaders to reflect on how best to proceed in the future to ensure the strengthening of the multilateral trading system, so that 50 years from now we will be able to look back with the same sense of accomplishment and pride as we do now at the last 50 years.

In much the same way as the Uruguay Round was built on the achievements of the GATT, we must continue to build on the work in progress to prepare for further liberalization. As our Prime Minister said at the conclusion of the APEC summit, "The goal of freer trade is more important now than ever. And we will continue to move ahead."

¹WT/L/248 and WT/L/254, respectively.