

EMBASSY

New EU envoy in Ottawa as talks pick up

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A new European Union top envoy has arrived in Ottawa, as free trade talks between Canada and the EU begin to pick up again following an August lull.

Marie-Anne Coninx, who has been named as the EU's new ambassador to Canada, touched down in Ottawa on Sept. 9. This comes a few days after Prime Minister Stephen Harper said "significant gaps" still remain on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, after a meeting with European Commission President José Manuel Barroso at the G20 summit in Russia.

But after a sleepy August, there are signs negotiators are back in the saddle.

Effect on talks

Observers say that while the talks will be at the top of the new envoy's agenda, she will likely have a bigger role to play if a deal is signed.

"I think the main issue on her agenda will be to do what she can to get the CETA approved," said Lawrence Herman, international trade counsel at the Toronto law firm Cassels Brock & Blackwell.

Ms. Coninx, who still has to present her credentials to the governor general, was previously heading the EU's delegation in Mexico and has worked for the European Commission in Geneva, New York and Brussels.

"I'm assuming that, coming from Mexico, she will bring an important knowledge and experience of the North American market," Mr. Herman said.

Kathleen Sullivan, executive director of the Canadian Agri-food Trade Alliance, said that while decisions about the deal would likely be made in Brussels, the ambassador would play an important role as the EU's chief diplomat in Canada.

Ms. Coninx will likely be busy in the short-term meeting with key political officials and stakeholders, both on CETA and on other issues, Ms. Sullivan said.

John Masswohl, director of government and international relations with the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, said there would be more of a role for the ambassador on CETA once the two sides sign a deal.

At that point, it would be important for the European ambassador and her Canadian counterpart to explain why the deal is good for both sides, Mr. Masswohl said.

Ms. Sullivan agreed, saying it's normal to have sensitivities in any trade deal.

"I would expect the EU ambassador, and indeed ambassadors and high commissioners from EU countries, to play an important role in promoting the deal in Canada and in

addressing any concerns or sensitivities that Canadians have regarding the deal,” Ms. Sullivan said.

Kurt Hübner, the Jean Monnet chair for European integration and global political economy at the University of British Columbia, said that since the ambassador isn’t directly involved in the negotiations, the envoy’s role would be more as a communicator.

Mr. Hübner said the former EU ambassador Matthias Brinkmann did a good job in getting his views out, and was often quoted by media. He noted that Mr. Brinkmann at times tried to put responsibility on the Canadian side.

“I don’t know how active the new person will be in this regard,” Mr. Hübner said. “Maybe there’s another kind of tone we can expect.”

He said Ms. Coninx enters the game when “things are stalled in some respects.”

“Maybe she will become a person we will see who will try to mend things and to talk in a more behind the scenes to the various actors in Canada to make sure things are being discussed.”

‘We are not there as of now’

Observers say the talks likely stand where they were in mid-July after negotiators met in Ottawa.

August is traditionally when many Europeans take holidays, and things essentially shut down in Brussels during that time, Ms. Sullivan said.

“Nothing has occurred since the last meeting in late July, as was expected,” Mr. Masswohl said on Sept. 6.

Helene Banner, press officer for EU trade policy with EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht’s office, wrote in an email that negotiations resumed last week including through talks between Mr. Harper and Mr. Barroso at the margins of the G20 summit on Sept. 6.

Chief negotiators and their teams corresponded via phone and e-mail and continue to do so to “bring the negotiations forward,” Ms. Banner wrote.

Peter Stastny, the EU’s rapporteur for the CETA negotiations, was quoted last week as saying that he was hearing “conciliatory, optimistic rhetoric” from Mr. Harper’s office. The European politician also acknowledged that obstacles remain.

But Mr. Harper seemed to strike a slightly different tone during a press conference after his meeting with Mr. Barroso.

“Based on the meeting we had today, and recent discussions, we still have some very significant gaps that have not been bridged, and that is the reality of the situation,” Mr. Harper said.

“But we have to get it done in a way that—in our opinion, and the opinion of all of the provinces which are our partners in this—serves the broader interests of Canadians and the Canadian economy, and we are not there as of now,” Mr. Harper said.

Issues still outstanding

Ms. Banner said the most important outstanding issues are agricultural in nature. Other outstanding issues likely include rules of origin for automotives, investor-state dispute

mechanisms for financial services, procurement, and geographical indicators, where certain products are recognized as coming from a particular region, said a source who asked not to be named due to being close to the talks.

The source said the two sides have essentially sorted out intellectual property protection for pharmaceuticals, which was often cited as one of the most challenging issues.

In an exit interview with media in July, Mr. Brinkmann said, "I think we know where we land with that."

The source said officials would have developed a revised proposal primarily focused on a lot of the outstanding issues in July, and that any revised package would need to be discussed amongst European commissioners and with member states.

But stakeholders are hopeful a deal will be wrapped up early this fall.

Ms. Sullivan said she thinks things could move quickly once political decisions are made.

There have always been handful of remaining issues, and there are only so many different ways they can be resolved, she said.

"I imagine just based on the extensive conversations they've had all this year that they've examined all those potentials, and I think that now it's probably time for political deliberation," Ms. Sullivan said.

She said once decisions on the tough issues are made, the two sides could make a high-level political announcement even though some technical details could be outstanding.

In that case, it would still mean a few months before the two sides had an actual signed deal in hand.

While some have speculated about whether the talks could flow into next year, Ms. Sullivan said she doesn't think there's much justification for that.

"I think if they need to keep talking that much more, then there may just not be a deal to be had."

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