

The TPP and Canada: Playing the Fool

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They have not heeded our calls to be transparent about what the negotiating framework is and what they are prepared to sacrifice. Andrew Thompson, NDP candidate, Toronto, Sep 26, 2015

The very fact that Stephen Harper is still in with a chance come the Canadian election is a summary of political survival and grand deception. The recent debates have seen him come back from the dead and showing signs of considerable life. His treatment of the Syrian refugee situation has proven miserly and calculating. Like his counterparts in the Commonwealth (Australia, and the UK), taking in refugees is a matter of a few spaces rather to satisfy temporary moral outrage. The hope is that consciences will be salvaged, allowing for the general business of government to go on.

Military action against the “source problem”, however, is far more valued, despite the obvious consequence that any military measure, rather than solving a refugee crisis, actually boosts it. Not that Harper is willing to answer too many questions about that fact, having stipulated to journalists that he will only take four a day on the campaign trail.

Then comes the issue of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement which is being sold by various trade ministers within the group of 12 negotiating delegations as reaching the final stages for the September 30 meeting in Atlanta.

Fundamentally, the TPP is an American dominated program which, paradoxically, hollows out the partners it seeks to bring along, even as it hopes to retain ascendancy. It is a form of plunder by stealth, featuring an imposition of controls, be it internet access or the use of patents and generic drugs. Free it may well be, but that will be primarily a matter for US corporate elites.

Nor can there be an equality of negotiating power when countries like Japan and the United States happily conclude their own side agreements on specific industries without consulting other partners. Leverage is still allowed outside the remit of the TPP for the powers to conduct their own affairs, leaving the smaller states in the lurch.

Harper has found himself wanting in that department but has made concluding the TPP prior to the October 19 election a matter of priority. This is “economism” in its purest form: a vast ideologically self-justified aversion to the consequences of such arrangements in favour of unflinching dogma. Naturally, he keeps insisting on the virtues of magical consumption, reducing Canadian citizens to purchasing units in data sets. The TPP was never a creation of citizenry for citizenry and resembles the deadened language of boardroom economics and number crunching. Never mind that these numbers themselves do not show a desirable picture.

Resistance has, however, evolved in some quarters, even if it could be more adamant and ferocious. The dairy farmers, for one, are up in arms, notably in Quebec, which accounts for half of the country's dairy farms. Canadian negotiators are willing to allow a swamping of milk from their southern neighbour, while no such concession is being made for Canadian dairy farmers for access to the US market.

Given the clandestine nature of the TPP proceedings, speculation abounds whether the figures of access are accurate at all. Isabelle Bouchard, director of communications at Dairy Farmers of Canada, is doubtful about rumours that a 10 percent access to US dairy products would be granted without a reciprocal access for Canadian products to the US. "The deal is still being negotiated. The 10 percent is the ask of the US and that, so far, the Canadian government has not agreed to." [1]

Not that one should necessarily take her word for it, given the leaked chapters available via WikiLeaks showing Canadian capitulation in areas such as copyright. Bouchard's misplaced reasoning is based on the notion that, as New Zealand and Australia are also seeking access, this is unlikely to take place.

The message is also taking centre stage in campaign platforms, with contenders always suggesting that they will be firm about protecting Canada's sacred industries against the corporate incursions of their mighty neighbour.

Conservative candidates have put up the rather feeble position that the final document will not compromise the industry. Trade Minister Ed Fast continues to insist that such proposed concessions are "absolutely false", the rumour factory gone wild. "Our government remains committed to defending our system of supply management." [2]

The Fast statement is an apt illustration of one political mode of operation: Never trust an official who has to openly state that he is defending a system that is actually being negotiated for abolition or reform. The very fact that it is there to begin with casts doubt on the position.

The negotiating patterns show time and again that overall capitulation will take place if, in the broader assessment, it is deemed appropriate, however erroneous that assessment is. Ex post facto justifications will be provided, suggesting that the negotiators were being realistic, when, in truth, they were bulldozed without a prayer. Bouchard does herself concede that any such access, on such a scale, without appropriate trade-offs, will be "catastrophic" for the Canadian dairy industry. Belief will have to be the not so worthy substitute.

Such behaviour resembles, in all too haunting a manner, the "Silent Surrender" thesis of the distinguished economist Kari Polanyi Levitt, whose devastating examination of foreign direct investment in Canada through the 1960s never lost its long, echoing appeal. This is a model writ large for TPP US domination, a broader code for multinational bullying within TPP economies, even as it is directed against Chinese interests.

Effectively, such concessions imply acts of negotiated suicide. This is the grand act of hegemonic victory, and should it succeed, the vassalised states will only have themselves to blame. Accommodation, in such cases, tends to be a form of mild economic servitude.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.producer.com/2015/09/farmer-group-disputes-reports-that-canada-set-to-welcome-more-u-s-dairy-products/>

[2] <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/canada-election-2015-trans-pacific-partnership-dairy-1.3245455>

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