

GENERAL AGREEMENT ON TARIFFS AND TRADE

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CONTRACTING PARTIES
Fifth Session

Opening Speech of Chairman, Mr. L. D. Wilgress,
at the Fifth Session of the Contracting Parties,
Torquay, November 2, 1950.

Representatives of the Contracting Parties:

I declare open the Fifth Session of the Contracting Parties.

This promises to be the most important session we have held since the conclusion of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade three years ago almost to the day. The number, variety and complexity of the items proposed for inclusion in the Provisional Agenda indicate clearly the value which Governments attach to our deliberations as an opportunity for discussion of the problems confronting world trade. Article XXV of the General Agreement provided that representatives of the Contracting Parties shall meet from time to time for the purpose of giving effect to those provisions of the Agreement which involve joint action and, generally, with a view to facilitating the operation and furthering the objectives of the Agreement. A provision of this kind was essential in view of the multilateral character of the Agreement and the wide coverage of the items included in the Schedules annexed to the Agreement. The general provisions of the Agreement also can be applied only if an opportunity arises from time to time for consultation between the Governments who are parties to the Agreement. It is as a result of these circumstances that these sessions of the Contracting Parties have become the sole existing international forum for the discussion of commercial policy questions on a world-wide basis. That the importance of our deliberations in this connection is recognized by the Governments is evidenced by the high level of the representation which I see before me to-day, and it is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to this opening meeting of the Fifth Session.

I wish particularly to welcome the representatives of those contracting parties who are with us for the first time. As a result of the Annecy negotiations the number of the contracting parties has been increased by nine, so that we now have representatives of 32 governments around this table. This fact in itself is another testimony of the vitality and strength of the General Agreement. I feel certain that our deliberations will be enhanced by the addition of those contracting parties who are with us for the first time. We can look forward to their contributing constructively to our labours. I am sure I am expressing the feelings of all the original contracting parties in bidding them a hearty welcome and inviting them to feel as much at home as if they had been parties to the General Agreement from the outset.

It is also with pleasure that we welcome the return to our deliberations of the Cuban Delegation who, at our Third Session, found it necessary to withdraw, not from the General Agreement, but from participation in our sessions. Their return to this Session evokes happy memories of the hospitality so many of us received at Havana, and also recalls the active part Cuban delegations have played in the past in the work pertaining to the General Agreement.

It is a further testimony of the importance of our work that we have with us to-day so many observers from other countries, from the United Nations, and from other international agencies. With the contracting parties and the observers the number of governments which can take part in our proceedings is

44, and, besides, there are observers from three international agencies. We have a close working arrangement with the International Monetary Fund and we are glad to see that they have sent to this Session a strong delegation. We look forward to receiving valuable assistance from them. And, to the other observers, I wish to express the hope that they will find their attendance at our Session both instructive and profitable.

This time we have returned to the country where the work which led to the conclusion of the General Agreement started. It was at the First Session of the Preparatory Committee in London that the groundwork was laid for the tariff negotiations which resulted in the General Agreement. I know that all the other contracting parties will wish to join with me in extending to the United Kingdom Delegation our most sincere thanks for the arrangements which they have made for the conduct of our proceedings. This beautiful room in which we are now meeting is typical of all the arrangements which have been made to facilitate our work. We are also very grateful to the Mayor and to the good people of Turkey for all they are doing to make us feel at home in these beautiful surroundings.

The importance of this Fifth Session places a great responsibility upon all of us. It is essential for the future of the General Agreement that we conduct our deliberations in a business-like manner but with due despatch, always cognisant of the need for giving thorough examination to the questions which are before us. Experience has shown that our deliberations lose value if too much time is spent in the investigation of any item since the need for a thorough examination brings about a diminishing returns in respect to the extent of undue consumption of time. Now that we have attracted to our deliberations the high-level representation which is so important to the future welfare of the General Agreement, we must see to it that we do not lose ground in this respect by undue procrastination or prolonged discussion over matters of detail or legal technicalities, many of which could often be left unresolved for the purpose of the enquiry we may have in hand.

As many as 31 items have been proposed for inclusion in our provisional agenda. If we are to get through these items both thoroughly and expeditiously we shall have to work hard and with determination. I believe that if the delegations are so disposed it will be feasible to accomplish all that is necessary within the time limit which we have set ourselves. This objective is to bring the Session to a close well before the Christmas holidays. I would appeal to all delegations to co-operate with the Chairman to this end.

At the Fourth Session in Geneva we commenced the first stage of the comprehensive review of import restrictions called for by the provisions of the General Agreement. This will be carried a stage further at this Session by consideration of the draft questionnaire which is to be sent to all contracting parties. We shall also continue at this Session the examination of quantitative restrictions to elucidate the degree to which some may possibly be used for purposes inconsistent with the provisions of the General Agreement. There will also be further consultations on recent changes in import programmes as required by the provisions of the General Agreement.

This Session is taking place at the same time as the Third Round of Tariff Negotiations. We have made every effort to arrange that the tariff negotiations will not conflict with our deliberations and, here, again, I must appeal to delegations to cooperate to this end. We do not want our deliberations to interfere with the tariff negotiations, but it is even more important that the tariff negotiations should not detract from the important work which we have to do. I am therefore glad to see that many countries have sent additional representatives to participate in our discussions without drawing upon those whom they had assigned to be responsible for the tariff negotiations. At the same time, it will be necessary for us to give consideration to certain aspects of the tariff negotiations which are being held under the auspices of the Contracting Parties. There are a number of items on the provisional agenda which relate to the conduct of the tariff negotiations, particularly the arrangements for the accession of new contracting parties as a result of the tariff negotiations.

It is encouraging to see that a number of contracting parties have proposed items for inclusion in the agenda designed to bring about a settlement of difficulties which have arisen in their relations with other contracting parties. We should give to these complaints the sympathetic consideration and attention which they deserve. I am sure you will all agree that it is a constructive step that our sessions are being used as a means for the examination of difficulties which arise from time to time in the conduct of world trade. This shows the value of having a code of good conduct and a forum in which the application of this code can be discussed. It is in the interests of all of us that world trade should be conducted with a minimum of friction and that countries should have due regard for the legitimate interests of other countries in measures which they may adopt for their own purposes.

Other items on our provisional agenda concern the administration of the General Agreement. It is natural that, with the increase in our numbers and the changing trends in world trade, the administration of the General Agreement should become more complex. We shall deal with these matters at the current session and the experience which we gain will enable us to give careful thought to the manner in which we can best ensure the efficient administration in the future of the valuable instrument which has been placed in our hands.

We can take pride in this instrument. As I look back on the ceremony in the Council Room at the Palais des Nations on October 30, 1947, I see clearly that we were building then even better than we knew. We realised that we were making history in giving life to the first multilateral tariff agreement of wide scope. I do not think, however, that any of us then foresaw the value which would arise from these periodic sessions of the Contracting Parties in accordance with the provisions of Article XXV. It is therefore with pride and satisfaction that I welcome you hereto-day and it is with confidence that I look forward to a constructive and profitable Fifth Session.