

GENERAL AGREEMENT ON TARIFFS AND TRADE

RESTRICTED

W.24/38
24 November 1967

Limited Distribution

CONTRACTING PARTIES
Twenty-Fourth Session

Original: English

REVIEW OF THE WORK OF THE CONTRACTING PARTIES AND FUTURE PROGRAMME

Statement by H.E. Mr. L. de Block, Minister of
Economic Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands,
on 22 November 1967

It is for me a great pleasure to be present today at the twentieth anniversary of GATT.

In my country one attains one's majority on his twenty-first birthday only, but I need not wait until next year to state the coming of age of GATT. On the contrary, GATT has played a vital rôle from its birth in 1947. The Netherlands belonged to the group of founding fathers. As a nation at the crossroads of world trade and shipping we have felt from the beginning that this organization is indispensable. A body which was and is significant to us in the field of trade both as a road-builder and a traffic regulator.

In those years with its many post-war problems the creation of GATT was a compelling necessity. In particular for small nations like ours an organization as GATT was important and permitted us to amplify our voice in the concert of nations. In this connexion, Mr. Chairman, I should like to draw your attention to a historic event, the getting together of Belgium, Luxemburg and the Netherlands, the first regional grouping, a phenomenon which since then has found so many followers. I may even say that GATT was a stimulator to the Benelux co-operation since it required a common attitude during the first tariff conference in 1947. We negotiated at the first tariff round here in Geneva exactly twenty years ago on the basis of the new Benelux tariff as an entity, and with a single joint delegation.

I need not recall that between the entering into force of GATT and this twentieth anniversary lies the year 1957, the birthday of the European Economic Community. This coming into being of a new, important group of nations naturally had an impact on international trade.

However, I can assure you that our affection and adherence to GATT did not change during this second decade of its existence in which we became, on the grounds of the inter-dependence resulting from our membership in this regional

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grouping, what one might call a "newly-dependent country". We still believe that GATT is indispensable; that GATT's rôle in the international field of trade is unique and that without GATT we would fall back into the jungle of protectionism.

I submit this view not only as Minister of Economic Affairs of the Netherlands, but also on behalf of the two other parts of the Kingdom, namely Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles, partners with equal rights in our Realm. They are developing countries with their own special problems. For GATT also has become the place to deal with these problems in a business-like manner. I recognize of course that there was criticism on GATT, one of the points being that GATT was a rich man's club. The tremendous expansion of GATT membership, now counting seventy-four Members with equal voting rights shows that this criticism is no longer justified. Another point of criticism, at first sight more impressive, is that in GATT everything is possible. I should like to point out that it is exactly the great value of GATT that it has strong rules but that the application of these rules can be adapted to circumstances. I recognize that - in particular in the field of agriculture - this flexible application may give cause to scepticism, but we should not lose sight of the achievements which GATT has obtained in the field of trade liberalization. Notwithstanding its flexibility GATT has also played its rôle of traffic regulator in the field of agricultural trade.

No human organization can exist without the inspiring power of people who believe in its objectives. Since I know that Mr. Wyndham White does not like to be praised I will simply say that he has an outstanding reputation and is living up to it.

I will confine myself to these few observations in addition to that which has been expressed by Staatssekretar Lahr on behalf of the member States of the EEC.