

WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

WT/MIN(98)/ST/25
18 May 1998

(98-2010)

**MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE
Second Session
Geneva, 18 and 20 May 1998**

Original: English

IRELAND

Statement Circulated by Mr. Tom Kitt,
Minister for Trade

This, the second Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization, and the first to take place at the Headquarters of the Organization, has been labelled a “transition” Conference. It comes just 17 months after the highly successful first Conference in Singapore in December 1996 and perhaps a somewhat similar period before the third Conference where I hope to see the successful launch of a new comprehensive round of trade liberalization.

Although our meeting may be described as transitional it is taking place at a very important time in the history of the multilateral trading system. During the week we will be commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the system. It is an appropriate occasion therefore to reflect on progress in trade liberalization over the last fifty years and to look forward to how the system might contribute to the prosperity of the peoples of all members and prospective members of the World Trade Organization.

Notwithstanding the fact that the period since the first Conference in Singapore was expected to be relatively uneventful, it was marked by a number of important developments which further strengthened the multilateral system. Since Singapore we have witnessed the successful conclusion of multilateral negotiations on Basic Telecommunications and Financial Services. The plurilateral agreement on Information Technology which was concluded in Singapore has been developed and expanded in membership, and negotiations are well advanced for the further strengthening and broadening of the agreement.

Following from the decision of the Singapore Conference, 1997 saw substantial progress in developing the Integrated Action Programme in favour of the Least Developed Countries and the holding in October 1997 of the High-Level Meeting on LDCs.

These are but some of the very recent events in building up the structure of an all-embracing multilateral trading system. As we reflect on the past 50 years of growth of the system we must acknowledge the input made by our predecessors in painstakingly creating the solid system that we have in place today. Extremely dedicated people have devoted an enormous amount of energy and intellect in putting together the components of a system that is standing the test of time very well and is providing a solid and secure foundation for ever-expanding economic development. In its “Statement of National Trade Policy” published earlier this year, the Irish Government has reaffirmed its commitment to the continuing liberalization of the world trading system under the auspices of the WTO.

./.
.

One of the most important components in this system is the Dispute Settlement Understanding. In a relatively short period of time it has proved itself as an effective adjudication mechanism in clarifying and resolving a wide range of disputes. The willingness of Members to resolve their differences through this impartial mechanism has greatly strengthened the authority of this organization and the primacy of the multilateral trading system.

Looking to the future, a major task for the World Trade Organization is to ensure that it continues to make a vital contribution to enhancing growth, prosperity, jobs, an improved environment and better living and working conditions throughout the world. I believe that further broad based liberalization within the WTO framework will do that.

I am pleased at the progress that has been made since Singapore in the working groups set up to examine Investment, Competition and Transparency in Public Procurement. I look forward to the reports which will come from these Working Groups and to the subsequent discussions as to how the WTO should address these issues. Likewise with Trade Facilitation, which is so important in ensuring that the benefits of trade liberalization will accrue to business and consumers. The recent symposium on the subject has, I believe, shown the importance of addressing the topic of Trade Facilitation in the WTO. On the important question of core labour standards, also raised in Singapore, I look forward to significant progress being made at the International Labour Conference to be held in Geneva next month.

The programme of work agreed at Singapore, together with the pre-existing "built-in" agenda, means that the Organization has a very full workload and I can sympathise with those Members, particularly the least developed countries, who experience real difficulties in coping with the commitments of existing agreements, and find it extremely difficult to contemplate taking on new obligations.

Along with my fellow EU colleagues, I am fully committed to working constructively with developing countries who require technical or other assistance so as to ensure full and timely implementation of commitments undertaken in the UR Agreements.

The genuine needs and problems of the least developed countries must be recognised and appropriate steps taken to ensure a greater integration on their part into the multilateral system. I would strongly support the call on all developed Members of WTO to take appropriate measures to increase market access to products originating in these countries. The more advanced developing countries should do likewise, and I believe there are many who could do so.

Notwithstanding the fact that the WTO has a very substantial workload based on the "built-in" agenda and the Singapore decisions, I believe that the Organization must continue to push out the boundaries of trade liberalization. Looking back over the 50 years of GATT, we can see how much the gradual building of the system has contributed to economic prosperity, even if not as universally enjoyed as one would wish.

I believe the WTO must strive for greater liberalization in order to achieve the desire we all have of seeing continuing and shared global economic growth. I fully support therefore the calls of many Members for the way to be cleared to enable decisions to be taken when we next meet in eighteen months or so to embark on comprehensive multilateral negotiations which will result in even greater trade liberalization to the benefit of all.
