30 YEARS OF THE WTO COMMITTEE ON MARKET ACCESS

DDG A. Ellard opening remarks

Tuesday 13 May at 15:00 in Room W

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

It is a pleasure and an honour to join you today as we mark the 30th anniversary of the Committee on Market Access.

Why the CMA matters

Market access is one of the cornerstones of the multilateral trading system, and it lies at the heart of what the WTO seeks to achieve: enabling trade to flow as smoothly, predictably, and transparently as possible through agreed rules. For the system to operate effectively, it's essential to have clarity and predictability regarding tariffs, as well as clear guidance on when and how goods might be prohibited or restricted. These disciplines are foundational for traders as well as for the entire WTO framework.

This is why the work of the Committee on Market Access (CMA) is not merely technical; it is foundational to the integrity and effectiveness of the entire WTO framework. Even amid widespread uncertainty these days surrounding tariff levels, this Committee provides stability for governments and traders on a wide variety of nuts-and-bolts issues, such as tariff classification, trade restrictions, and information sharing through databases and other means by operationalizing a durable system of rules and a mechanism to address concerns.

What makes it unique

This Committee is **unique in at least three aspects**.

First, unlike many WTO bodies created under specific Uruguay Round agreements, the CMA was established in 1995 by a decision of the General Council. It evolved from two GATT bodies: the Committee on Tariff Concessions and the Technical Group on Quantitative Restrictions, reflecting the evolution as well as the continuity of multilateral trade rules from the GATT to the WTO.

Second, the CMA is accustomed to working calmly during challenging times. Its first meeting took place on 25 April 1995, before the Uruguay Round had fully concluded with respect to new Schedules of concessions. While many Schedules had already been annexed to the Marrakesh Protocol, others were still being finalized. The CMA began its work amid this complex transition.

Today, 30 years later, we are honoured to welcome Mr. Jean Saint-Jacques of Canada—who chaired that inaugural meeting—as a member of our distinguished Panel of former Chairpersons.

Third, the CMA's broad and flexible mandate makes it unique. Most WTO committees oversee specific agreements. The CMA, by contrast, handles provisions rooted in the GATT itself. Its scope includes tariffs, Schedules of concessions, the Integrated Database, quantitative restrictions, and more. It is also designed to take on any market access issue not covered elsewhere, ensuring the Committee remains responsive to evolving Member needs.

What has been achieved by the CMA

Since its first meeting three decades ago, the Committee has served as a cornerstone of transparency and predictability in global trade, delivering tangible results. Let me provide a few examples.

- First, the CMA has enabled Members to make their commitments more accessible. The CMA has overseen the update of the Members Schedules of concessions on Goods, with more than 700 certification procedures to update these schedules. The **Consolidated Tariff Schedules (CTS) Database** and the **Goods Schedules e-Library**, spearheaded by the Committee, provide this information in a centralized and user-friendly manner.

- Second, the continued work on **transposing commitments into updated versions of the Harmonized System** (painstaking as it may be) has been essential to ensuring the legal clarity and comparability of concessions across time and among Members. Undoubtedly, this stands as one of the most important exercises carried out within the CMA and WTO framework.

- Third, the CMA has strengthened transparency around applied tariffs and import data. Its stewardship of the **Integrated Database** and, more recently, the new **Tariff and Trade Database**, has helped keep critical trade data up to date and accessible. I encourage all Members to consider automatic transmission of data to support this effort.

- Fourth, the Committee has significantly improved the **notification of quantitative restrictions**. The 2012 Decision on Quantitative Restrictions introduced a structured and comprehensive system, supported by the QR Database. This was particularly valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic, when transparency about restrictions was urgently needed.

- Finally, another growing area of work is **trade concerns**. What was once a rare agenda item has become central to the CMA's meetings. Today, 32 trade concerns will be discussed – 7 new and 25 previously raised. These discussions are not limited to raising problems, but are increasingly collaborative, including experience-sharing sessions.

Why has the CMA succeeded

Several factors help explain the Committee's success.

- First, the CMA is a forum where **cooperation** consistently prevails. In a system that can find it difficult to reach consensus, this Committee regularly reaches outcomes across a wide range of issues. A prime example is the Committee's collective initiative to propose changes to the World Customs Organization regarding the classification of essential medical goods based on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts are expected to result in concrete changes to the next Harmonized System update.

- Second, the CMA has shown remarkable **adaptability** to the changing needs of Members and the evolving global trade landscape. It has embraced digital tools, improved notification practices, and launched thematic sessions to facilitate more focused discussions on emerging issues, such as supply chain resilience.

- Third, the Committee remains committed to **transparency and predictability** – principles that are increasingly vital in a rapidly evolving and turbulent global trade landscape. In a world marked by rapid technological change, shifting production networks, and evolving trade patterns, the CMA helps ensure that governments, businesses, and consumers have reliable and timely information.

People behind the CMA

None of this would have been possible without the dedication of the people behind the CMA.

To all CMA Member delegates: your engagement, pragmatism, and spirit of collaboration are what make this Committee effective. You are the driving force behind its achievements, and nothing can be accomplished without your continued involvement. Moreover, the leadership provided by successive Chairpersons, some of whom are with us today, has also played a vital role in steering the Committee's work with dedication, integrity, and impartiality.

I would like to pay tribute to the dedication of the WTO Secretariat, whose technical expertise and unwavering commitment have been instrumental in facilitating the Committee's work over the past 30 years. Let me recognize the team from the Market Access Division, which has serviced and supported the work of this Committee for the past 30 years. While it is not possible to name everyone who has contributed over the years, I would like to pay tribute to the successive Secretaries of the CMA: Yvette Davel, Suja Rishikesh Mavroidis, Roy Santana, and Roberta Lascari, who have each played a vital role in supporting its work together with other colleagues from the Market Access Division.

I would also like to thank colleagues from the Economic Research and Statistics Division, including Jürgen Richtering, Adelina Mendoza, Dayong Yu, Alya Belkhodja, Eric Ng Shing, and Thomas Verbeet and others who have helped to bring the Integrated Database and Consolidated Tariff Schedules to life. Their work in managing and processing trade and tariff data remains central to the Committee's effectiveness.

Closing

As we mark 30 years of the CMA, we should take pride in its achievements, while also recognizing that the future holds unprecedented challenges.

Congratulations to all who have contributed to the CMA’s work. Your efforts over the past thirty years have strengthened the foundations of the WTO and enhanced the functioning of the multilateral trading system.

Let's continue working together to ensure that the Committee continues to uphold its legacy, remaining responsive, representative, and innovative in addressing Members' needs and supporting a transparent and predictable trading environment.

I am confident that through our collective continued dedication, the CMA will remain a dynamic and effective forum in the years to come.

Thank you.