30 years since the creation of the WTO



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Note: The original text was provided in Spanish

The Uruguay Round was launched in 1986 in Punta del Este. Enrique Iglesias, the then Foreign Minister of Uruguay, was its first Chairperson. The initiative came as a response to the need to build a multilateral trading system in an era marked by the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

For the first time in history, nations decided to negotiate international trade. The agreement included goods and other issues such as intellectual property, services, investment and the environment. The "single undertaking" and consensus were the instruments that members would use to bring the Uruguay Round to a successful conclusion.

However, when I took over the chair of the Round at the ministerial level, the agreement on the agricultural sector was pending. Fortunately, the Blair House Agreement of 1992 between the United States and the European Commission unblocked the negotiations.

During that year, I visited Geneva, Washington, Tokyo and Brussels in my institutional capacity. The Round bore the name of Uruguay and, in order to be finalized, it needed the consensus of the members. At that time, Peter Sutherland had been appointed Director-General of the GATT, replacing the indefatigable Arthur Dunkel.

The final meeting of ministers would take place in Geneva at La Perle du Lac restaurant. The lunch would be attended by Peter Sutherland, US Trade Representative Mickey Cantor, European Commissioner Sir Leon Brittan, Canadian Trade Minister Roy MacLaren, Australian Trade Minister Peter Cook and Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim. The Uruguay Round would culminate in Marrakesh in 1994, where the World Trade Organization would be established.

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At that point, after consulting with Mr Sutherland, I decided to diplomatically raise my concern: "As you know, my country's name has been at the forefront of the Round for seven years, and yet it has not obtained a single concession; under these conditions I would have to relinquish the Chair." Mickey Cantor picked up

his pen and calmly asked me: "What does your country want?" As Mr Sutherland smiled, I replied: "Twenty thousand tonnes of duty-free meat for the American market. Plus a higher European 'Hilton Quota.'" Surprisingly, Minister Amorim interjected: "If you are negotiating, I must remind you of the Brazilian orange juice situation."

In the afternoon, accompanied by the Uruguayan Ambassador to the GATT, Miguel Berthet, I went to Leon Brittan's office. The latter, making no attempt to mask his annoyance, asked me: "Do you have the list of your requests?" After handing it to him, the meeting was adjourned.

In April 1994, the negotiations culminated in the city of Marrakech. Uruguay's contribution was recognized, especially the sterling efforts of Ambassador Julio Lacarte Muró, who, since 1947, had fought tirelessly to institutionalize the multilateral trading system.

Morocco was the host country. Its historical splendour was highlighted in palaces, gardens and the Medina. The medieval style of the Berber Empire was summed up in the beauty of the 12th century Koutoubia Mosque and its Moorish minaret.

In this magical setting, the Uruguay Round would conclude by consensus. Ministers and delegates from the 123 GATT members stood in anticipation in the room. After the opening speeches, the adoption of the Final Act was submitted for consideration. With Mr Sutherland at my side, I looked up, opened the floor, and in a fraction of a second, brought the gavel down briskly. The resounding noise was followed by gasps of relief, a round of applause and a standing ovation. The GATT Round had concluded with the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The ministers proceeded, one by one, to sign the Final Act, which was bound by a thin string to thousands of pages deposited in an adjoining room. In the evening, the relaxed dinner hosted by the Government was accompanied by a lively display of Berber cavalry, which, simulating a charge on the tents, came to an abrupt halt, firing their rifles into the air.

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A "slaughter of suns" was staged in the gardens of the Royal Palace in Morocco. The speakers would be the Chairperson of the Round (yours

truly), Peter Sutherland and King Hassan II of Morocco. Everything was carefully arranged. The monarch's speech was interrupted by the Muslim call to prayer, followed by a respectful silence. When it was over, he resumed his speech.

It was political dialogue and cooperation that had made it possible to create a multilateral trading system based on stable rules. It had been confirmed that any lasting negotiation was based on shared dissatisfaction. In Uruguay's case, the fact that the biggest trade negotiation of all time bore its name was a source of pride.

I still have the gavel I used to bring the Uruguay Round to a close. It is the symbol of that political will which, unfortunately, today threatens to dismantle multilateral trade and the WTO. Nevertheless, the current 166 members are well aware of the importance of preserving the system and so, alongside concern, there is also hope.

My memories have become challenges. In this era of change, the focus should be on avoiding a trade war outside the agreed rules. The responsibility to preserve and adapt the multilateral system is incumbent on everyone, in particular countries like Uruguay, which contributed to the creation of the WTO. We need leaders and states who can build bridges. In this context and without overestimating our role, 30 years after that historic event in Marrakesh, I reiterate my personal and political commitment to legal certainty and multilateralism.