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Peter Morton

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MEET THE PRESS: HOW DOES THE PRESS VIEW THE HANDLING OF CANADA/U.S. DISPUTES?

*Peter Morton**

First to answer Mr. Blanchard, I like to believe we do interfere. It is our job to interfere, to make it as miserable for you guys as much as possible, to screw up the negotiations that are supposedly behind closed doors, but, as you know, rarely, rarely, are. A long time ago, Courtney and I used to share a couple of jokes about the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and the NAFTA negotiations. We got the first from the Canadian side. The perfect trade deal was one that was negotiated in secret and was never made public.

The second joke is that there are only two headlines in trade stories, "Trade War Looms, Deal Near." That is basically all we know. It is never more complicated than that. No one ever wants to see the details afterwards. We only want to know when the war is actually looming. When it starts, yeah, well, whatever, you know! I think back to the only time there actually was a trade war between Canada and the United States. That was over something as amazing as beer.¹ I am sure many of you remember that one. Jules Katz, the former U.S. trade negotiator, was really upset about that one more than anything else. She was not upset about softwood limber, wheat, culture, or any of the other big issues. She was upset because Budweiser could not come into Canada. You know, it was just the big thing.

But anyway, I am going to move ahead a bit, because the state of what we cover and what you guys do has changed so very much in the past year and a half or so. I would not say it is because of Seattle. It really goes back to the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. You recall that deal. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development was trying to cut some sort of quiet little arrangement, and suddenly the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) came screaming onto the scene. When we first started covering trade, it was really only two sets of people who were involved in the talks. It was the negotiators and the media. Then this third component started creeping in and playing a broader and broader role.

* Morton bio.

¹ United States -- Measures Affecting Alcoholic and Malt Beverages (1991-92), 39S B.I.S.D. 206.

Canadians, of course, know Maude Barlow and her role very well.² I was in Seattle, and I have seen a sea change concerning the question of what globalization is. The boring stuff is gone in the trade agenda, you know, non-tariff barriers, tariffs, steel plates, all that sort of stuff. Now we are into issues of people. There is a sense, unlike Mr. Blanchard's view, that, regrettably, you have to include people in talks now. It is pretty unfortunate, I know, but they have to be there somehow. The trick is that no one has quite figured out how to do it yet. The NGOs, who do they really represent? I saw them in Seattle, and it was just a little bit like Kent State. There were kids fighting for a cause, but they did not quite know what it was. Many of them, I am sure, did not even know what the WTO was. I talked to some of them, and they just talked broadly about cutting down trees and poor people, but they did not really have a sense of it. In Washington, they are a little bit sharper. They are aware of the depth of poor countries, the bureaucracies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank, which are truly, truly stunning. There are 10,000 at the World Bank alone. Things do not move very quickly there.

My role has now changed. One of my big cues was getting the entire NAFTA agreement before the governments were prepared to release it. The governments just flipped. I mean, it was not that big of a deal. Everybody knew what was in it. But the fact that I had seen this precious document bothered them. They write the numbers in the corners so everybody knows who leaked what to whom and when. It was a big deal. We were so narrowly focused on the detail of it. Now substance does not mean anything any more. It is completely gone. It is all dramatic, stunning.

I was over just listening to James Wolfensohn, the President of the World Bank; the other day, when he had his inaugural news conference for meetings no one ever covers. We have ignored them for years because the World Bank and the IMF were going to reform. So he was there. I actually felt kind of bad for him because he was saying that the 10,000 people who work for these organizations actually do try to help developing countries. A third of them are out in the field all the time. They are doing their best. Then 30,000 kids descend on D.C. to say, "Let's tear down the institutions." So there is clearly a problem. It is not only trade. We saw Seattle. All of these international institutions are not getting the message out to the people. You cannot hide behind the doors anymore. Those days are gone. They went out with NAFTA. The Uruguay Round was probably the last chance you could do the secret deals and then dump it on people, and say, "There it is, what do you think, boys?"

² Maude Barlow is the chairperson for the Council of Canadians, Canada's largest citizen's rights group.

With the WTO, there were other sorts of more systemic problems, but the backdrop of all of this intense mistrust is changing the way the trade bureaucrats are going to have to deal with things. They are going to have to move out of their shells a bit and try to communicate with this group out there who are searching for a cause, quite Frankly. I do not think they are quite aware what they are looking for yet. But if they do find it, watch out, because they are formidable.

I know I am not dealing with bilateral issues a lot, because right now, other than the softwood lumber issue, they are basically dormant. We are into a remarkably quiet period in Canada-U.S. trade relations, so I lose my only two stories, "Trade War Looms, Deal Near," so we have nothing until softwood lumber comes back. That is going to be fun, let me tell you. We are desperately looking forward to that one. So I will just leave it at that.

