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Chair

Mr. Lee Richardson

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•(1145)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Lee Richardson (Calgary Centre, CPC)): Order. We'll begin.

Sorry for being late. Obviously, we're late as a result of a vote in the House.

I'm not going to make any comments about it, Mr. Julian. I know you're interested, of course, in the important matters at hand here, and wouldn't filibuster or drag down the efforts of the committee.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, what was that comment? I didn't hear.

The Chair: I was just saying we're coming to order for the 37th meeting of the Standing Committee on International Trade.

I'm very please to welcome again to the committee, from the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, David Stewart-Patterson, the executive vice-president, and Sam Boutziouvis, the vice-president of economics and international trade; and from the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters Association, Jean-Michel Laurin, who is the vice-president of global business policy.

We are continuing our discussion of Canada-South America trade relations, with particular reference to Canada-Colombia.

I think because we are starting so late we're going to proceed right away. I'll ask our witnesses to begin with an opening statement, and then we'll follow up with questions.

I don't know if you've had an opportunity to discuss amongst yourselves who wants to begin.

Are you going to begin, David?

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson (Executive Vice-President, Canadian Council of Chief Executives): Yes, if that's all right with you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: All right.

We're going to hear first from David Stewart-Patterson.

Is Sam going to complement that?

Mr. Sam Boutziouvis (Vice-President, Economics and International Trade, Canadian Council of Chief Executives): Just in the question and answer session, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

Mr. Stewart-Patterson.

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the members for the opportunity to appear this morning to talk about trade with South America, and obviously with particular reference to Canada-Colombia. My colleague Sam Boutziouvis is with me and will help me with any questions that come up.

Obviously, it's no secret that the Canadian Council of Chief Executives has been and remains a strong and consistent supporter of international trade and investment liberalization generally. Obviously, we were heavily involved in the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement onwards into the North American Free Trade Agreement. And I think more recently, we supported trade and investment liberalization multilaterally, regionally, and through bilateral agreements as well.

The reason we consistently support free trade and investment liberalization is simple: open markets are good for Canadians. Open markets create more high-quality jobs for our people. They open doors for Canadian exporters. And of course, by supporting business growth, they help to generate the tax revenues governments depend on to fund public institutions and social programs. So in a very real sense, Canada's prosperity depends on our ability to do business in both developed and developing markets around the world.

I think our country's most immediate opportunity in South America is quick implementation of the free trade agreement that Canada has negotiated with Colombia. I am going to speak directly this morning to Bill C-23, and urge members from all parties to support prompt passage of this legislation. I'd argue that this bill deserves your support for four major reasons.

First, enhanced international trade is vital to help our country recover from the global economic downturn. At the moment, Canada is experiencing a bit of a lopsided economic recovery. Domestically, there are signs that we're beginning to make progress. But our international trade performance continues to disappoint. The strong Canadian dollar and weak demand in our largest market, the United States, have combined to make life difficult for many of our exporters. We're also seeing a rising tide of protectionist measures, such as the buy American provisions in that country's stimulus legislation. Looking ahead, Canadians know from our own experience in the 1990s that the huge government deficits being run up in the United States create a real danger of prolonged weakness both in future American demand for our goods and services and in the value of the American dollar.

In this environment, I think it's vital for Canadian companies to continue to do everything possible to diversify their export markets. Passing Bill C-23 would reinforce these efforts. Conversely, further delays in passage of this bill would undermine the goal of improving Canada's global trade performance and slow our return to strong economic growth.

The second major reason for supporting this bill, Mr. Chairman, is that it will produce real benefits for Canadian workers, farmers, and companies. The agreement is going to benefit companies and workers across a wide range of industries, including the automotive sector, steel, chemicals, public infrastructure development, oil drilling, environment and engineering services, information technology products and services, agriculture, fertilizer, paper and other forestry products, copper products, textiles, apparel and footwear, mining, and advanced manufacturing.

Equally important, Bill C-23 is going to help level the playing field for Canadian workers and farmers, stimulating growth in commercial relations, raising awareness, and further opening this dynamic and growing economy to Canadian know-how and Canadian ingenuity. Upon implementation, the agreement will eliminate tariffs on nearly the entire range of Canadian exports to that country.

Colombia's tariffs on Canadian goods currently range from 15% to 108%, which obviously represents a huge disadvantage right now for Canadian exporters. Passage of Bill C-23 would erase that disadvantage and help Canadian workers, farmers, and businesses stay ahead of our global competitors.

I have to add that Colombia is not standing still here and waiting for Canada to get its act together. Just this past week, President Uribe signalled his interest in pursuing a free trade agreement with South Korea, and spoke of working towards an enhanced relationship with Japan. Investment talks have already started between Colombia and China. Meanwhile, Colombia and the European Union are aiming to wrap up negotiations on an economic partnership agreement by next March. Colombia has already completed negotiations with member states of the European Free Trade Association.

By the end of 2010, the Government of Colombia expects to have completed nine trade agreements, representing 45 countries. In our view, it is only a matter of time before Canada's number one trading partner, the United States, secures its own free trade agreement with Colombia. At a meeting on June 29, President Uribe and President Obama instructed their teams to renew efforts towards such an agreement. President Obama expressed confidence that a deal can be struck that "is good for the people of Colombia and good for the people of the United States".

Some commentators have referred to Canada's trade agreement with Colombia as a defensive form of FTA. We do not agree. Rather, we believe that implementing the Canada-Colombia agreement quickly represents an opportunity for Canada to get out in front of our international competitors.

• (1150)

The third major reason this bill deserves your support is domestic policy. It's going to benefit the people of Colombia. Domestic policy reforms introduced over the past decade have served Colombians

well. Colombia experienced accelerating economic growth between 2002 and 2007, thanks in part to improvements in domestic security, rising commodity prices, and market-based macroeconomic policy reforms.

Over that period, poverty levels declined by 20%, and unemployment fell by 25%. Naturally Colombia's economy, like all of ours, is being hit by the global downturn. But the good news is that, like Canada, Colombia has come through 2009 relatively well. As the recession took hold, President Uribe's government took many of the right steps. It cut capital controls, arranged for emergency credit facilities, promoted investment incentives, and encouraged exporters to find new markets.

The Canada-Colombia free trade agreement will signal Canada's strong support for the pro-growth initiatives of President Uribe, and it will further increase confidence in doing business in Colombia. In doing so, the Canada-Colombia FTA will reinforce efforts to promote greater safety, peace, and confidence in Colombia.

On the subject of security of Colombia, the facts are inescapable. After decades of turmoil, violence has dropped to levels not seen in a generation. Tens of thousands of paramilitary fighters have demobilized, and education enrolment has increased dramatically. I think people around the world are recognizing this growing sense of security and safety. One notable result, for instance, is that more than 200,000 cruise passengers docked in Cartagena in 2008, almost double the number in 2007. Significantly, Colombia now attracts more than \$1.2 million visitors every year, double the number in 2002.

Earlier this year, the board of governors of the Inter-American Development Bank chose to meet in Colombia on the occasion of the bank's 50th anniversary. Scheduled to take place in Colombia is the 2010 World Economic Forum meeting on Latin America. Recent improvements in security in Colombia have had tremendous impact in attracting foreign investment. Between 2005 and 2009, foreign direct investment into Colombia has averaged over \$9 billion U.S. a year.

The fourth and final argument I would suggest in favour of passage of this agreement quickly is that it meets the highest global standards. Officials of the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development have concluded that "the agreement signed with Colombia represents the most comprehensive labour agreement in the world today".

Canada in fact has achieved labour protection provisions that go beyond those even being sought by the United States and the European Union. A speedy resolution mechanism embodied in the Canada-Colombia labour side agreement will in a very real sense help to improve conditions for Colombian workers.

Officials of the Department of Finance, for their part, have concluded that “this free trade agreement tries to support corporate social responsibility, environmental laws and labour laws”. In addition to its strong provisions on labour standards, “the corporate social responsibility aspects of this agreement are the first time Canada has included such commitments” in a trade deal.

These provisions are included in both the investment and the environment chapters of the Canada-Colombia FTA.

The Canada-Colombia agreement will also enhance the impact of Canada's development aid programs in Colombia. Certainly there's a case for more aid to support marginalized communities—women and indigenous groups—legal assistance, and judicial reform. Failure to implement our free trade agreement would instead undermine our ongoing development efforts to strengthen Colombia's social and economic fabric.

To summarize, Canada should be doing everything possible to deepen commercial relations with developing markets such as Colombia. The prompt passage of Bill C-23 would help Canadian workers and businesses, of all sizes, both in stimulating economic recovery in the short term and in building sustainable competitive advantage. Implementing the free trade agreement would also benefit Colombia's economy and society, and it would signal Canada's strong support for countries and governments committed to democracy, the rule of law, peace, and security.

This is a deal that is good for Canadians. It is a deal that is good for Colombians. It sets an example for the world. We should just get on with it.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stewart.

Monsieur Laurin.

Mr. Jean-Michel Laurin (Vice-President, Global Business Policy, Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My comments will echo those of my colleague to my left.

First of all, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee on this very important hearing.

I'll talk a little bit about the current economic context and why this proposed agreement with Colombia is important, and answer some of the concerns that Canadian companies have right now.

First of all, our association represents manufacturers and exporters in every industrial sector in every province. We have small, medium-sized, and large manufacturing companies as members from across Canada. Together, the sectors we represent are the largest in the Canadian economy, employing over 1.7 million Canadians.

The current economic context we are faced with in the manufacturing sector today is very difficult, as you know. Our members have been heavily impacted by the recession. From July 2008 to about May of this year, our sales have dropped by 28%. If we look year on year, it's about a 20% decline in sales that Canadian manufacturers have experienced. The downturn has been affecting

manufacturers and export-dependent companies from every province. If you look at manufacturing sales by province, every province of the country has experienced a significant downturn in sales.

That is rooted in part in the fact that the U.S. economy and the European economy have been heavily impacted by the recession. Our exports to the U.S., for example, are down 31% this year compared to last year. If we look at our exports to major countries or groups of countries, one thing we realize is that developed economies have been heavily impacted by the recession but emerging economies seem to be performing a little better in that context.

What we are seeing, for example, is that while our trade with the United States has declined significantly, our trade with some other regions of the world—for example, Asia and certain Latin American countries—has declined much less. In some cases we have even seen some improvement.

The current challenge for manufacturing and exporting companies throughout the country is that we've had to contend with a very rapid and very significant decline in consumer demand. We are still hopeful that we're going to see a sustainable recovery ahead in the next few months, but there are still some impacts of the recession that are being felt in our sector. Obviously, the appreciation of the Canadian dollar and the strength of the Canadian dollar right now, along with the lack of availability of financing for a lot of companies, are probably the two largest risk factors for a recovery coming ahead in the next few months. Obviously we are concerned with protectionism and lack of trade liberalization with certain markets.

In that context, when we talk to our members about what the nature of the recovery is going to be and how we will ensure that we have a vibrant and dynamic manufacturing sector in the future, and how to ensure we emerge from this recession in better shape, one of the key things that companies are telling us is that we need to develop new markets. Demand is still weak in the U.S. economy. If you look at global trends, one thing we are realizing is that emerging markets are growing much faster, but they are also playing a much more important role in the world economy. That is where Canadian companies need to position themselves. That is where our trade policy needs to go as well, to try to help Canadian companies grow their businesses in these rapidly developing markets.

That's a trend that hasn't started just this year. For example, a few years ago the great majority, over 90%, of our exports were going through the U.S. or directly to U.S. customers, whereas today about three-quarters, 75%, of our exports go to the United States. That is in large part because we have been able to grow our business in other rapidly growing markets.

•(1200)

In terms of Canada-Colombia trade, one thing we've witnessed is that trade between the two countries has grown very rapidly. For example, between 2004 and 2008 our exports to Colombia have grown by 83%. Colombia is a very good example of a market that is growing very rapidly where we have been successful in expanding our presence in that market and responding to some of the needs and demands that they have by supplying them with Canadian products and services.

Also, good news with respect to our trade with Colombia is that we've been exporting a lot more manufactured high value-added goods to that country. In 2004 manufactured goods accounted for about 50% of our exports to Colombia, whereas last year, according to the most recent statistics, 67% of our exports to Colombia consisted of manufactured goods. This is good news, because we've been able to grow our trade not only in agricultural products but also in high value-added manufactured goods.

If we look at this FTA precisely, considering that tariffs on industrial goods average about 11.8% and tariffs on agricultural goods amount to about 16.6%, getting these tariffs removed would improve the competitive position of Canadian exports into that market. Considering what David was saying earlier, that we have other trading partners who are negotiating with Colombia, if we can get that deal passed, and if we can deliver those results to Canadian companies, we're going to be in a much better competitive position going into that market going forward.

To summarize, one thing we're realizing is that more and more of the world's economic growth is going to come from emerging economies such as Colombia's. That's good news, because it means there are new business opportunities for Canadian companies. As Canadian companies are going to look to grow their businesses beyond North American markets, they're going to look at countries like Colombia.

The good news is that Canada's trade policy is aligned with that business priority. We haven't just negotiated with Colombia and Peru, for example, but Canada is currently negotiating with the European Union and other countries around the world as well that want to open trade opportunities for their companies with Canada. I think that's good news for Canadian business and that's good news for the Canadian economy.

I'll conclude here.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Laurin.

We'll now proceed with questioning.

Considering the hour, I'm going to ask members to be very careful today with regard to sticking to our predetermined time allotments. That would be seven minutes for the first round.

We'll begin with Mr. Brison.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank our witnesses very much for being here with us today.

In terms of the Colombian economy, one of the challenges Colombia has faced after 40 years of civil war is the reliance on the narco-economy. Do you see legitimate trade as having the potential benefit of giving Colombians the real and sustainable opportunities that can help wean them off that narco-economy, which has sustained a conflict that's become less about ideology and more about drugs?

Secondly, as you referenced, these labour and environment agreements are, according to our own public servants but also international negotiators with whom I've communicated, the most robust that we have signed as a country with any other country, but also the most robust of any agreements between any countries in the world. Given that we already have a trading relationship with Colombia, do you see any way that this new rules-based agreement can do anything but improve labour standards and environmental conditions?

There are arguments that somehow this deal can diminish labour standards or diminish environmental standards. Do you see any way that is conceivable, given that they are as robust as they are and given that we already have a trade relationship now without these rules?

•(1205)

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: I think your question begs the answer.

Coming to your first question, clearly, the easier we make it to do legitimate business, obviously the more we decrease the room for the underground, the illegal economy. The more opportunities there are for Colombians to do well in a market economy subject to the rule of law, the less incentive there is to get involved in the drug trade, and I think the better off all Colombians are going to be.

Similarly, as you've observed, and as I have already said, I think we have a very robust groundbreaking set of side agreements, labour standards in particular, built into this agreement. It's hard for me to say how on earth anything that is essentially groundbreaking, world-leading in its provisions.... It's obviously going to be a significant contributor to the well-being of Colombian workers and to the population as a whole. It seems pretty obvious to me.

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Cannis has a quick question as well.

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): First, I want to pick up from Mr. Brison, because he triggered something.

We're in Afghanistan and we're spending billions of dollars. We know what the problem is. The illegal drug trade is flourishing, and yet we're there to help prevent human rights violations, help them build a stable society, and we're being told by other people, other parties, that we have to stay away because some of these similar problems exist in Colombia. Maybe you can comment on that.

You mentioned they're not standing still. You talked about China, EU by 2010, nine other agreements, 45 other countries. If we continue procrastinating putting this deal together, if we don't act on it ASAP, and down the road we come back to it, what's your view? Will we be dealing from a weaker position than now, given that? And I use the Central American Free Trade Agreement, where we were there, but we procrastinated, the U.S. ratified, and now they're sitting there in cabinet saying we'll talk, we'll see. We lost some bargaining chips then, I believe, or maybe you disagree with me; please let me know. Will we be repeating the same thing should we not act on this?

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: I would suggest that in any case where we're looking at our relationship with a particular trading partner, and a number of countries are looking at improving their trade relations, if we get in there first we're going to have an advantage. I think in particular here there's an opportunity for Canadian companies and Canadian farmers, agricultural exporters in particular, to gain in export over their American counterparts if we get in there first.

Mr. John Cannis: That was it, Mr. Chairman. I'm keeping it short.

The Chair: You have two minutes left.

Mr. John Cannis: We're trying to conserve time, sir.

The Chair: Oh, excellent.

Avec les deux minutes, Monsieur Guimond, vous avez neuf minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Guimond (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good day, gentlemen.

So much for small talk. Today, we are discussing the free trade agreement between Canada and Colombia. You know the Bloc Québécois' position on this matter. We are opposed to the agreement, first of all, because it is a bilateral agreement and Colombia's record on human rights is very poor. For these reasons, we cannot support it.

It's clear on listening to you that you have quite a stake in this agreement. You represent many Quebeckers and Canadians. I'm curious about how you and your members feel about doing business with a country that has one of the worst human rights records.

• (1210)

Mr. Jean-Michel Laurin: The manufacturing sector in Quebec and in Canada is currently in the throes of a rather serious crisis. Quebec businesses are looking to develop new export markets in leading sectors like aeronautics and machinery and equipment manufacturing for the mining industry in particular.

With respect to the automobile parts market, for example, or the truck and tractor market, some rather interesting business opportunities present themselves. This is not a traditional market like the United States, for example, a country with which our members are accustomed to doing business. You asked how our members feel about doing business with a country like Colombia. For starters, we

generally do business with commercial partners. Security and other areas are a concern for some companies. However, in my opinion, the agreement presents some interesting business opportunities for Canadian companies. Having a free trade agreement in place enables...

Earlier, I mentioned that the two countries already do business with each other. We export over \$700 million worth of products to Colombia. Trade levels, which are already significant, have been increasing dramatically. The issue here is how trade will be impacted by this free trade agreement.

First of all, the agreement will provide more certainty and give Quebec and Canadian companies a competitive advantage, because companies that import goods will no longer have to pay the customs tariff. Secondly, trade will be covered under the parts of the agreement that deal with the environment, human rights and social rights, something that is currently not the case. I don't quite understand your opposition to the agreement. The current situation is such that—

Mr. Claude Guimond: Why do business at any cost with a country that...You mentioned exports totalling \$700 million, but we have never seen any studies to back up that contention. We have reason to question these figures.

Earlier this week, we discussed agriculture. A hog industry representative stated that the value of this market was \$4 million or \$5 million annually. That isn't enough to save Canada's hog industry.

I have a simple question for you. Why would you insist on wanting to do business with a country like Colombia, given its record on human rights? Perhaps some of your members are aware of the country's record. Generally speaking, do your members accept this situation?

[English]

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: The reality is that Canadians care about human rights and we are not passive about it. We engage other countries around the world because we want to make the situation better. One way to improve the situation of human rights in Colombia and in other countries is to engage them and bring them towards the rule of law.

We talked about Afghanistan. We know there are huge problems there. That does not stop Canadians from caring about what happens in Afghanistan, or from intervening in order to make the situation better.

We are arguing that by engaging in legitimate trade with Colombia we are advancing their economic situation, their social situation, and their progress in human rights. Colombia has made huge progress in the past decade. That is very important, we should assist in continuing it, and that is what this agreement will do.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Guimond: Would this agreement not have been an opportunity to encourage a country like Colombia to improve its record on human rights?

[English]

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: That is what is already happening. If you look at what has happened in Colombia over the past decade, as Colombia has succeeded in engaging in more legitimate trade, we have seen a relative decline in the narco-economy. We have seen improvements in human rights. We have seen an improvement in general human development, according to the latest United Nations Human Development Index. Colombia is now further ahead than Peru. We don't have any problem with engaging in free trade with Peru. Why would we have a problem in increasing our legitimate engagement in Colombia?

• (1215)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Guimond: You represent many businesses and many individuals. Have you thought of adopting fair trade practices? Fair trade is not an extreme left-wing concept. Rather it is a principle of sustainable development that takes into account the environment, economic considerations—it has to be a win-win proposition—and social considerations. Shouldn't you be exploring this option in order to develop other fair trade markets? Do you have any thoughts on this matter?

Mr. Jean-Michel Laurin: I'm not sure how you define fair trade. However, here is how most Quebec and Canadian companies define trade with foreign companies, whether in Colombia or elsewhere: the two companies involved in the transaction are free to set the terms and conditions they want. Canadian companies are nevertheless committed, especially in Latin America, to being socially responsible. Canadian companies are recognized around the world for adopting sound practices. A number of Canadian businesses are genuine role models in this area.

Can we do more? Probably, but I think we have nothing to be ashamed of, compared to what is happening in other countries. Besides, I think most of the trade between Canada and Colombia involves companies that use sound business practices in the community and have good working relations with suppliers and the local communities in which they are established.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm happy to see both of you yet again. You come forward often here.

I'd particularly like to praise the Canadian Association of Manufacturers & Exporters for their buy Canadian policy. That, of course, is shared by the NDP, the only national party that has understood, as you have, the importance of government procurement being directed to Canadian companies and Canadian manufacturing.

As you know, this is a very controversial agreement. The business case simply is not there. Mr. Guimond mentioned the \$6 million in pork sales. We had the beef cattle industry come forward and talk about \$6 million in potential beef sales. We have the grain growers actually saying they prefer a multilateral agreement. So we're talking about very small levels of sales compared to the overall export industry. The reality is that, as this committee decided earlier this

week, what is really needed is a level playing field in funding for export promotion.

So the issue comes back to one of values.

There have been scads of reports, and Mr. Stewart-Patterson, I respectfully have to say, every single independent and impartial human rights organization disagrees with you—most recently, the report on resource extraction, *Land and Conflict*. Have you read this report or have you received it?

I'll just mention a brief excerpt: Striking correlations have been observed between where investment—both domestic and foreign—takes place and rights abuses, ranging from murder and massacres and related massive land and property theft to violations of the rights to freedom of movement and to a healthy environment.

Human rights violations are linked to efforts by those behind Colombia's murderous paramilitaries to create conditions for investment from which they are positioned to benefit.

This is a report that came out just a few weeks ago.

I'm sure I know the answer already, but I need to ask, am I correct that the Canadian Council of Chief Executives would not be in favour of a free trade agreement with North Korea?

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: I don't think the North Koreans are interested in free trade with anyone.

Mr. Peter Julian: No, but you wouldn't support that, right?

And you would not support a free trade agreement with Myanmar, with Burma, which also has significant human rights violations.

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: If I recall, you didn't support a free trade agreement with the United States, but that's another matter.

Mr. Peter Julian: Just on the record, yes or no—or, if you haven't taken a position, that's fine too—do you support a possible free trade agreement with North Korea or with Myanmar?

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: We came to talk about South America, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Peter Julian: No, no, I just want to ask you. If you haven't taken a position, that's fine.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chairman, that's out of order.

Mr. Peter Julian: Okay. Let's assume you haven't taken a position.

If that's the case, that's unfortunate, of course, in terms of Canadian values, because those Canadians who shop at many of the stores that are part of your association are Canadians who believe profoundly in those Canadian values.

You have disagreement from every independent and impartial human rights organization, and this week there is a report out from the Colombian Commission of Jurists that analyzes cases of torture by the military arm of the Uribe regime. I'll just read a couple of paragraphs before I ask you a question on that.

Isabelle Heyer, who's a member of that commission, said, Torture continues to be generalized and systematic in Colombia. It is perpetrated by the Public Force, by the paramilitaries and by the guerrillas, but the party principally responsible for these acts is the state.

She said half of the 2003-08 cases can be blamed on security forces, while another 42% are attributable to the right-wing militias. This is the last five years, an 80% rise in torture.

Madam Heyer said sexual violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive modes of torture, calling it an habitual, systematic and invisible practice, which enjoys impunity in the majority of cases and whose principal perpetrators are soldiers and police.

So there is strong disagreement from independent and impartial human rights organizations.

Do you find acceptable an 80% rise in torture from the Colombian military? This is the military arm of the government, controlled by the government. Do you find that acceptable?

• (1220)

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: Mr. Julian, I will presume that you consider the United Nations an independent and impartial institution dealing with human rights, and if so, I would point out that the most recent review by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has praised Colombia for the progress it has made. It says, the Government has made great efforts to strengthen the rule of law, mainly through increasing regional State presence in locations previously under the control of illegal armed groups.

It is noted that the government demonstrated goodwill and made significant efforts on the issue of extrajudicial executions. It concluded: the extraordinary measures recently taken, including separating some senior military commanders from service, have reinforced the "zero tolerance" policy for human rights violations.

So are you—

Mr. Peter Julian: If you read further in that report, you could also, as you know, read that... You know that every single independent human rights organization has actually condemned the Colombian government for those cases; you could actually read into the record very negative evaluations, consistently negative evaluations, of the Colombian government.

But this is my question. I would like you to answer it. If you refuse to answer it, that's quite all right, but that would show the public who are watching these hearings, of course, where the Canadian Council of Chief Executives stands. The simple question is this: do you find acceptable an 80% rise in cases of torture by the military arm of the Colombian government, yes or no?

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: You're asking me a question about an allegation that I have no—

Mr. Peter Julian: Well, it's not an allegation; it's a report.

That's fine.

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: What I've noted, Mr. Julian, is that the United Nations—

Mr. Peter Julian: I will move on.

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson:—while acknowledging that there continue to be problems, said—

Mr. Peter Julian: I will move on. Thank you.

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson:—the Government of Colombia is improving in every respect.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Stewart-Patterson, I do have limited time. I understand your peer position, but—

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Well, I've asked you questions and you're refusing to answer. It's too bad.

Now, next week, we finally have our first human rights advocate coming forward for African Colombians, and that's Mr. Carlos Rosero. We have not heard from human rights advocates on this bill at all. I know that many, many groups across the country are extremely interested and will want to come before this committee, but that will be for next Tuesday.

Since you're not willing to answer those questions, I will just make a final comment that we have the European Community moving away from an agreement with Colombia. We have the United States and the U.S. legislature, the members of Congress—I visited a few weeks ago—refusing to ratify the deal. We have other countries such as Norway moving away.

Every time we have a presentation on Colombia, we get another horror story about some other country that may beat us to the market—

The Chair: Seven minutes, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Peter Julian:—but I think you would agree that there are other issues, human rights issues.

The Chair: Mr. Harris.

Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, I'd like to thank you for your presentations. As always, they are very concise and factual.

There are a couple of things I'd like to get your opinion on. First of all, even the socialists can agree that we're in the middle of an economic struggle. Not only our nation but other nations around the world are seeking new ways to improve their economies. Trade agreements are right at the top of the list. They're wanting to go into markets they've never been in before, because they're trying to use every tool available to them to recover their economies.

It seems to me that the view of the NDP is inconsistent with the reality of the global economy and the challenges it faces. Their view is that Canada should simply step out of the lineup of free trade because of their ideological reasoning and allow the other countries to go in, gobble up the trade agreements, and get themselves well established. Then some day down the line we would limp back into that lineup and try to recover something we would have had in the first instance. I think we certainly would be missing a huge opportunity.

I'm trying to find some realism in the arguments across the way there. It appears to me that this point of view seeks to simply cut Colombia off, cast them adrift with their problems, and tell them to fend for themselves. Canada will go to countries that fit more with our values.

Somewhere there are countries that had the same struggles, or similar ones. We've engaged them in trade agreements and bilateral agreements of every type, and we've actually been able to help them because of our presence and the very presence of those agreements.

I would think that if the folks across the room are seeking to try to help Colombia with some of those human rights problems and democratic problems they are concerned about, it would be in their best interest to encourage an agreement whereby Canada can establish a solid agreement relationship with that country and be talking to them on an ongoing basis. Surely some of the values we hold dear in this country are going to be passed on through discussions on those agreements. That way we will be assisting them out of their challenges.

I just throw that out, because it seems to me that we have an opportunity not only to help our producers, manufacturers, and suppliers of goods and services, but in this case, Colombia. We would not only be able to help them with their economy through trade, but the very association, which would be bound by an agreement, would be a good opportunity for us to fit the other things in with all our other discussions.

• (1225)

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: I certainly agree with your observation. I think Colombia's history in recent years has demonstrated, in fact, that the more that country is able to engage in legitimate trade and investment relationships with other countries, the stronger its economy has grown, and the stronger the rule of law and public safety and security grow.

Are there still serious problems in that country? Absolutely. The question is whether we are going to help or hurt by engaging more fully in legitimate economic relations with that country. I think what we're arguing is that by continuing and intensifying our engagement with Colombia's legitimate economy, we are going to reinforce that country's progress not only in economic terms but also in terms of public safety and security.

Mr. Richard Harris: You pointed out the example of Peru, which has come from some very bad times to become a major trading partner.

I'd like to pass on some time to my colleague, Mr. Keddy.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

• (1230)

The Chair: Yes, you have two minutes.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Oh. Two minutes may make my point.

Welcome to our witnesses. I appreciate your coming back to committee.

You can see that this has been a thoroughly divisive discussion for some members of Parliament. I think most of us have tried to look at this in a positive manner and to take the positive points from it. We very much see this as a progressive agreement with a country that's

moving in the right direction in a very progressive way in a part of the world where democracy and the rule of law sometimes are challenged.

But they've made great strides. President Uribe, in particular, has made great strides. To me, the coalition he's put together, when you really look at his cabinet, is a coalition from the centre, from the right, and from the left. These Colombians have one thing in common: they want a peaceful country to live in, they want the rule of law to apply, they respect the judiciary, and they want jobs and opportunity for their people. We've heard that time and time again.

To me, there's one overriding factor here that we continue to ignore. The Americans signed an agreement with Colombia. It's held up for strictly political reasons at this time. We have an opportunity here to actually get ahead of our American competitors in a very important part of the world where good things are happening.

In order to do that, we need the support of the opposition parties. I suspect that two of those parties we won't get the support of. I think we do have potential to get support from the official opposition. I respect the position they've taken on Colombia.

But we also need not just your support here at committee; quite frankly, we need your support in lobbying members of the opposition and convincing them of the merits of this agreement.

We do live in a bit of a vacuum sometimes in Ottawa. There are a lot of jobs, there are a lot of opportunities, and there are a lot of companies that would benefit from this agreement.

I think we need both of your associations to carry that torch a little bit.

Mr. Jean-Michel Laurin: Do you want me to respond?

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Well, yes. I know that your job—

The Chair: Mr. Keddy, I know we'd all love to have a response, but you've gone over your time.

We're going to turn now to...

I was going to say Mr. Brison, but Mr. Brison is not here.

Mr. Cannis, do you want lead off while we're waiting?

Mr. John Cannis: I don't mind leading off until he comes in.

We got onto trying to compare what we're doing in Afghanistan with what is happening in Colombia. We really didn't have an opportunity to touch on that.

This is irrespective of what we're hearing or what we're reading in the news about torture. That's a separate issue altogether. It's the fact that we made a decision as a country, as a government, to go to this trouble spot, which we knew was a trouble spot, to address human rights violations, labour abuses, etc. We made that decision.

Is it wrong to make the same decision now to go to a trouble spot—if we want to use that expression—where indeed we have a government that has shown a sincere interest in trying to correct it? Meanwhile, the current president in Afghanistan said today in his inauguration that, you know, we're going to straighten it out. Well, he had five years, and we didn't see progress.

We had President Uribe, as I think was mentioned earlier by Mr. Keddy, before our committee before the recess. The man unequivocally stated that they'd had problems, but they'd made these efforts, those efforts, and so on.

We were introduced to a gentleman by the name of Frank Pearl, who was taken on by the Colombian government. His mandate is to work to help reintegrate people who have gone astray, people with the paramilitary, to get them retrained, re-entered back into their homes, their communities, etc., to become productive citizens.

Personally, I've read, I've seen, I've heard—I can't say I've seen, but I've read—and, being a typical Canadian, I like to give the benefit of the doubt. Are we wrong in doing what we're doing in Afghanistan? If we are, why are we doing it in Afghanistan and why are we not doing it in Colombia? At least in Colombia right now, we have an opportunity to market our goods and services. In Afghanistan maybe there's a future market, I don't know. But right now we have a market in Colombia.

Are we wrong in doing that, David?

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: Not in my view. We are doing the right thing already in the sense that we already have a commercial relationship there, and I think our commercial relationship with Colombia has been contributing to the progress that's being made.

This free trade agreement would simply open a lot more opportunities to reinforce those commercial links in ways that I think Colombia has already shown make for real progress in the well-being of Colombian citizens. If we can help improve the lives of Colombians simply by engaging in legitimate commerce and investment, it seems to me that's a hugely positive thing for us to be doing.

I can't imagine that anyone would want to say let's take Colombians back to where they were in the bad old days. Surely there's recognition that huge progress has been made there. Is it still a trouble spot? Are there are still issues? Of course. But can we not continue to help make progress in that country?

Mr. John Cannis: I want to ask one last question—

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: And keep in mind economic progress. Economic progress is an important underpinning for the rule of law and for safety and security. It's when people are suffering in poverty that they're more likely to turn to desperate means, and I think that is why it's important for us to do everything we can to reinforce the progress.

• (1235)

Mr. John Cannis: You were asked some tough questions by the member from the NDP about this agreement, that agreement, and I'm going to ask you a similar question, but in reverse. Do you know of any free trade agreements that the NDP has ever supported that you can tell this committee about?

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: I think I made the observation earlier that Mr. Julian's party opposed even free trade with the United States. I don't think they did that on human rights grounds, but the fact is I don't think they've ever seen a free trade agreement that they like.

On the other hand, I think it is patently obvious that expanded commercial relations with our trading partners have served Canadians well and also have served to strengthen economic and social progress around the world.

If I may, it comes back to this point that free trade with the United States was sort of the first and biggest deal that Canada did, and it created huge benefits. I think one observation that can legitimately be made is that it helped strengthen our commercial relationships with our major trading partner too much. I think one of the challenges we face strategically as a country right now is looking at a United States that is facing some serious medium-term economic challenges.

We are in a situation now where we should be working as Canadians harder than ever to diversify our relationships around the world. I think in that sense the Colombia agreement is not just important because of the commercial benefits that may evolve in that bilateral relationship but symbolically important in terms of Canada's ambitions in the world.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Holder.

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Thanks very much.

I'd like to thank our guest for returning. I think the dialogue you've shared with us is sincere and an important one.

I know we seem to have reflected on one party in particular in terms of members opposite who seem to take a differing view. I wish it were just one; it seems to me that there are others.

My challenge is that what I see here is really an ideologically driven dialogue. There are those who seem to put party platforms ahead of progress. What makes me sad is that, again, this is petty party politics ahead of doing the right thing for Colombians and Canadians. That makes me distressed.

What I see missing from some parties opposite is a recognition that Colombians are trying to do the right thing, that Canadians are trying to do the right thing. I think it's shameful to suggest that somehow Canadians don't care about human rights in other countries. I think that's very sad.

I think of the 1.7 million Canadian workers who are represented by your association, Mr. Stewart-Patterson. I guess I need to ask you, if we were to ask your 1.7 million Canadians workers and their manufacturers how they feel about coming together to try to promote more of their business while we're living through a global recession that is, lest it be forgotten, the worst that anyone around this table has ever experienced—none of us have lived through the kinds of times that we're living through right now, unprecedented—what do you think those workers might say, sir?

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: Well, again, I think Canadians respond as human beings who obviously care about the welfare of themselves, their families, and therefore look at what the economic opportunities are that they have, that their enterprise, their employer has; and they care about their jobs.

But I think Canadians also do have shared values that they care about very much. If you look at Canada's record around the world, Canadian enterprises engaging in the developing world, I think of it being, by and large, a huge force for good in improving the lives not just of their own employees, of Canadian workers, but also of those in developing nations who are being brought more fully into an open global economy. It is in trading among ourselves that we actually achieve the greatest benefits for all.

• (1240)

Mr. Ed Holder: Let me suggest to you, if I may, what I think is shameful, that somehow there are those who either refuse to recognize or don't understand—I think it's ideological, and they refuse to recognize—that this agreement provides real benefits for Canadians and Colombians.

When I say that, I mean workers, farmers, miners. My Cape Breton granddad was a coal miner. I will tell you this: it might shock Mr. Julian, but he was a member of the CCF. I will tell you that proudly, because at that time, the challenges for miners' rights in Cape Breton made it really difficult. He always fought on the side of what was right and he used common sense.

I don't always see that with members opposite, and I don't quite get it. I think we have to come to a point—we *have* to come to a point—where we say this is right for Colombia, this is right for Canada.

As it was said in a recent meeting, we already do business with this country, so why wouldn't we have a rules-based agreement that ensures we are going to protect the labourers in Colombia, that we protect the interests of Canada as opposed to some kind of what I would call willy-nilly kind of arrangement where there are rules but they are limited rules? I struggle with that.

I want to say one other thing. I noticed something that came across. Transparency International, an NGO, ranks Colombia higher than China, Russia, and India in terms of human rights. I could give you more statistics, many statistics, on how the standard of living in Colombia has improved over the years. Would I tell you it is perfect? Probably not. But I would say to you that without an agreement, what's the alternative?

Would you respond to that in our last few moments, please?

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: If I may, I think I have made the point already. Are there serious and ongoing legitimate concerns in Colombia? Yes, as there are in many other countries. What are Canadians doing to improve the situation? In my view, we will be helping to improve that situation for Colombians by continuing their integration into the legitimate global economy.

Mr. Ed Holder: I just wish that while you were making that response, our members opposite had the chance to listen.

Thank you very much, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. John Cannis: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

First, I want to say that I really enjoyed the comments.

You know, I'm a very straightforward, blunt person. I hesitate to identify who is not listening, who is not agreeing, etc.

Mr. Ed Holder: I apologize.

Mr. John Cannis: I would ask my good friend Mr. Holder to identify next time who he is referring to, not just members opposite.

The members opposite include us, as the Liberal team. As he knows very well, we are very much in support of moving Bill C-23 as soon as possible.

Mr. Ed Holder: I'd like to clarify, then, on that point of order, Mr. Chair.

For those members of Her Majesty's loyal opposition who are still here, they listened very well.

The Chair: There you go.

We have next on the list Monsieur Cardin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You have five minutes.

Mr. Serge Cardin: Hello once again, since this isn't our first meeting. We will also be meeting with other organizations a second time.

Mr. Laurin, you testified earlier that the majority of CME members are in favour of the agreement. I'm not sure what kind of consultations you held, but I would like to know the reasons members had for not supporting the agreement.

Mr. Jean-Michel Laurin: First of all, I want to make it clear that none of our members expressed opposition to the agreement. Some actively support it, either because of their commercial interests in Colombia, or because they view this country as a potential export market for their product. Other companies are not as directly involved because, for a variety of reasons, they do not see the agreement as a short-term or medium-term business opportunity for them.

As I see it, our members are united in their support for the ratification of a free trade agreement that will make our products more competitive in this market.

Mr. Serge Cardin: Then you should have stated in your testimony that support for the agreement among your members was unanimous.

Mr. Jean-Michel Laurin: Each year, as a matter of fact, we ask the majority of our members to identify the countries with which they would like Canada to sign a free trade agreement and develop closer commercial ties. Of course, they generally name countries in which there is a potential to market their products and services.

• (1245)

Mr. Serge Cardin: I would like to reassure certain committee members. The Bloc Québécois has, of course, voted in the past in favour of free trade agreements and will certainly do so again in the future. However, as you know, we prefer a multilateral approach over a bilateral approach. We note that there are some inconsistencies. There is not necessarily a common denominator that highlights the positives of free trade.

As I see it, there are two fundamental aspects to free trade. There is the trade aspect, so to speak, the exporting and importing of goods. The process does not really involve much contact with people. It really does not affect those areas in which we would like to see some improvement, namely human rights, social rights and labour laws.

The companies that you represent want to invest and set up operations in Colombia. Some are already doing business with this country. We hear the claim that trade will automatically improve human rights, but are these companies really interested in improving the situation? We've seen what has happened with globalization. Companies have set up operations in other countries to take advantage of conditions that do not exist here at home, namely lower wages and less stringent labour laws. The environment was often a secondary consideration. We know that's true.

That being the case, will your members really want to help improve the human rights situation and the social conditions of Colombians, or even protect the environment, even though the government sometimes shows some favouritism? Do you really think this is what your members want?

Mr. Jean-Michel Laurin: I would have to answer yes. You say that wages are often lower in these countries. It's true that in some cases, manpower is more widely available. Moreover, that is one of the reasons why certain companies opt to invest in foreign countries. However, it is not the only reason. If, for example, a Canadian firm invests in Colombia and manages to find workers, the reason is that people are looking for economic opportunities. This country is experiencing some fairly serious problems. I think we can help to improve people's lives by expanding their options and by creating new opportunities for them.

People are turning to the black market because of the shortage of opportunities. For that reason, I think the best way of resolving the problem is by forging a closer partnership, by establishing closer business ties and by creating opportunities, not only for Canadian firms, but for Colombian companies as well.

History has shown that investing in a foreign country, offering people economic opportunities and enabling them to develop their skills and maximize their potential is the best route to economic development in the medium and long term. Canada has proven that this approach works. We enjoy our current standard of living because we have benefited from investment opportunities and have worked to develop our skills and improve our ways of doing things.

Mr. Serge Cardin: You know—

[*English*]

The Chair: That's a little over five minutes. Thanks very much.

It might be helpful to note that we might invest in their gold and copper mines, because they have gold and copper in their mines.

Go ahead, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Richard Harris: Thank you very much.

I think we'll all agree that Canada holds human rights high in this country, the rule of law, democracy, and all of the good things that we've come to enjoy. We've had struggles in our country to get there, but nothing like those of Colombia and some other South American

countries that have had decades of civil war and huge abuses of human rights.

It seems to me that Mr. Julian and the folks from the Bloc are saying that until Colombia agrees to accept the conditions that we enjoy in Canada in the area of human rights and law, we don't want to deal with them. They don't want to deal with them until they say, yes, we'll sign on to whatever level you want to impose.

I'm suggesting that maybe they are unable to come that far ahead in such a short time because of how far back they may have been in things like human rights, labour, and the rule of law. Maybe they aren't able to. They're suggesting that we cast them aside in the meanwhile, step out of the lineup, and let all of the other countries take our place and take the seats in the trade show to the point that maybe when we want to come back, there won't be any room for us.

The very people they would sign agreements with may not hold anywhere near the values that we do. We may never ever get to try to influence them with our values and our rule of law because we're simply not going to be in the same theatre as they're playing in now, having had all of their trade requirements filled by other countries that may be so far back from us in human rights, the rule of law, and democracy, that we would maybe think that those trading companies are backwards, but they're going to be there in our place.

That's the big fear I have about holding this thing up and standing back while we insist that they embrace this ideal package before we'll even deal with them. Someone else will go in there and get the trade with a package that may not compare in any way to what we could have offered them.

• (1250)

Mr. Jean-Michel Laurin: That's a very good point.

There are already Canadian businesses doing business with Colombian companies. That trade has been growing in the past five years, as I've demonstrated. The question I have for some of those who have expressed skepticism or opposition to this trade agreement is what else are they proposing to improve the situation?

I think this free trade agreement, as you're saying, may not be perfect. That argument could be made, and some would agree with that. But I think it's definitely better. It provides a much better framework for our trading relationship with Colombia. There are already Canadian companies doing business in Colombia and vice versa. How can we improve that and try to work more closely with Colombians to improve their economy?

Mr. Richard Harris: The trade relations we have with them, even though not on a free trade basis, of course had an influence on the progress they've made over the past number of years, and that's a good thing.

Mr. Jean-Michel Laurin: It would give a tremendous advantage to Canadian companies doing business in that market, as you've explained.

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: If I may, I think you've raised an important point.

Colombia has made a huge amount of progress and it still has a great deal of progress to make. But assuming all goes well there and that they achieve the level of prosperity, safety, human rights, and well-being of their citizens that we enjoy here in Canada, when that day arrives, are they going to look back and see Canadians as people who helped them get there, or as people who kicked them in the teeth?

Mr. Richard Harris: That's a good point.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That's a minute early.

We'll go to Mr. Cannis.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to allocate my time to my good friend Mr. Cannan, if I may.

The Chair: Mr. Cannan.

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I feel the love and I appreciate it, Mr. Cannis.

I have sat here attentively and listened for almost the last hour and a half and at numerous other meetings on the specific issue of Canada-Colombia. I had the good pleasure to travel with some of my colleagues to Colombia just over a year ago. It was definitely an eye-opening experience, and an honour to have the opportunity to meet a president of a country who is so highly respected.

He came to Canada and sat in front of a committee. I think it's the first time a head of state has ever sat in front of a committee to answer, head on, any questions. He's not afraid to answer anything. I really admire leadership. Whatever you believe from a political perspective, it speaks highly of the gentleman who's trying to reform the country.

There's one observation I have. Connie Watson is a CBC reporter, the Latin American correspondent, who travelled with us one day when we went to the rural area and saw first-hand some of the poverty and almost inhumane situations people are living in. And speaking with the individuals with the UN there and asking whether they thought this is the right direction or keep the status quo, the consensus all across was that a rising tide lifts all boats to give them an opportunity and give them a chance to better themselves.

I just ask you, gentlemen, in closing, then, sitting here today, in my position—and I heard the words “missed opportunity”—what closing comments would you like to reiterate to this committee as we try to get this through? As a taxpayer and a citizen, I just sit here appalled at the waste of time and money, and we see the opportunities for Canadian businesses to create jobs and stimulate the economy not only here but globally in this global economic crisis. Maybe you can help us further this and move the ball over the goal line.

Thank you.

•(1255)

Mr. David Stewart-Patterson: If I may, I think there are two parts to that answer. The first is, why do we need to do this for

Canadians? I think in that sense, again, it's important to move ahead with Canada-Colombia free trade not simply because of the benefits of that single agreement with that single partner but because we live in an era where multilateral trade talks, while they might be preferable, haven't been going anywhere. That's why Canada and other countries around the world have kind of chosen to focus their efforts on bilateral deals, because at least they're manageable and we can get things done. I think it's important for Canada, for our own benefit, to carry on getting things done in terms of improving opening up our trade investment relationships with other partners around the world.

I think it's important strategically, at a time, as I said, when our major export market, the United States, is facing some serious medium-term challenges. And I think that gives Canadians an extra incentive: if we care about Canadian workers, Canadian jobs, and Canadian incomes, we need to be doing everything possible to open up other markets around the world, and particularly developing markets because those are the ones that are going to be growing fastest in the years ahead.

But in terms of the Canada-Colombia free trade deal, I think it is also important to do this for Colombians. It is important for us to do that to recognize the progress that the country has made. It is important for us to do that to reinforce that progress and to ensure that the well-being of Colombians continues to improve in the years ahead. I think Canadians have a proud track record of engagement in the developing world. We have helped other countries and the people in other countries advance themselves and their well-being. I think it's particularly important for us to do that in practical terms and in symbolic terms, as well, by quick passage of this agreement.

Mr. Jean-Michel Laurin: In closing, I would just add that I think timing is of the essence in this case. There are tremendous economic challenges faced by Canadians because of this recession and because of the crisis that's being faced by some of our leading sectors. There are also some economic challenges that are significant for Colombians.

I think we have a very interesting, very unique opportunity to try to address some of those challenges by passing this trade agreement. I would urge all parties to ratify it as soon as possible, because that's one significant way to try to improve the situation, not only for Canadian workers and Canadian businesses but also for our Colombian partners.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

In closing, I think we'll leave the last word to Mr. Holder.

You have two minutes.

Mr. Ed Holder: Thank you very much.

Again, thank you, guests, for your thoughtful comments; extremely helpful.

I've reflected on everything that everyone has said. Fundamentally, irrespective of some ideologies, let me say that I believe that all of us, whatever way we define it, want to do the right thing—whatever way we define that. We can argue or debate on degrees of right.

I guess I'd like to leave you with a thought, and it goes back to something Mr. Stewart-Patterson said: this helps the people of Colombia. Violence has dropped and education has increased.

Frankly, it strikes me that we can take one of two options. What's the alternative here? We can either shun them and say, you know, as far as we're concerned, we're going to put them over there until they "get it". But I think that sense of isolationism is dangerous for them. I think that makes it worse for human rights and for raising the standards and quality of living in that country.

But I would also bring it home. I mean, if we care about our farmers, if we care about our miners, if we care about our workers here in this country relative to this global recession, if we care about trying to do the best thing that's right for Canada as well, this just seems so obvious. I hope we ultimately figure that out. I don't know

what I would say to my voters and what anyone else would say to their voters if we didn't say we cared.

I guess that wasn't a question. It was just a statement.

Thank you for your time.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Holder.

Do our witnesses have a final comment? No.

Well, thank you again. It's always helpful and useful to see you. We may see you yet again on this matter, and I'm sure on others.

Thank you for your appearance today.

With that, gentlemen, we're adjourned.

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