NOTES ON THE GATT

(GENERAL AGREEMENT ON TARIFFS AND TRADE)

FOR THE ISMUN EUROPEAN STUDY CONFERENCE,
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TEN SHORT POINTS ABOUT GATT

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TEN SHORT POINTS ABOUT GATT

1. The essential element of the GATT story is that since World War Two, for the first time in history, countries have co-operated in lowering trade barriers between themselves and in accepting a code of practical rules for fair trading in international commerce. This co-operation has been on a world-wide, not a regional basis.

2. The GATT is an international trade agreement whose objectives are:
   (a) to help raise standards of living;
   (b) to achieve full employment;
   (c) to develop the world's resources;
   (d) to expand production and exchange of goods;
   (e) to promote economic development.

3. Through belonging to the GATT the thirty-five member countries are pledged to work towards the above common objectives. The member countries include all the world's leading trading nations. Together they account for 80 per cent of world trade. Thus the GATT code of rules applies to four-fifths of world trade.

4. In order to achieve the above objectives the member countries of GATT have bent their efforts towards reducing existing barriers to trade. In particular they have attacked tariff barriers. As a result of four tariff bargaining conferences which have been held between 1947 and 1956 customs duties on tens of thousands of products, traded across the frontiers, have been reduced. When customs duties are reduced more goods can be exchanged, prices can be lowered and there may be more choice of goods for the buyer. GATT member countries have also "frozen" customs duties over a wide area of trade so as to prevent them being increased suddenly; this has given the business world encouragement for expanding trade and developing markets.

5. Working with the International Monetary Fund the GATT has helped break down the network of governmental restrictions and prohibitions, which have stifled the natural flow of imports and exports since the war. Under GATT
rules countries that have no foreign exchange shortages must get rid of their restrictions on imports. In particular GATT has helped to break down restrictions on trade that discriminate against a particular country or group of countries.

6. GATT is contributing towards the development of the economies of the less developed countries by offering them special trade rules. These countries can encourage their new industries by temporarily restricting imports in ways which would not normally be permitted under GATT rules.

7. GATT provides for each member country to give the other members fair and equal treatment in trade and not to discriminate against any of them. This provision removes one of the major sources of discord among nations.

8. The GATT countries, when they meet, provide a forum where governments can discuss their trade problems and submit complaints arising from alleged breaches of the GATT rules. The GATT rules provide a code of fair practices in international trade. If a member country infringes the code the party claiming injury can ask for a hearing and the other GATT countries will examine the complaint in a round-table hearing and recommend a solution. This is a new development in international trade relations and in the ten years of GATT's experience many complaints have been settled in this way which in earlier days would have ended in more restrictions on trade or other forms of economic warfare.

9. GATT has helped traders by reducing the "paper barriers" to trade. Rules have been drawn up to cut down the unnecessary filling of forms and other tiresome and expensive customs formalities which some governments insist on when goods are exported or imported. A Convention sponsored by GATT has made it simpler for merchants to send samples from one country to another.

10. GATT is a logical development of the post-war planning in the economic sphere through the UN and the Specialized Agencies. Today GATT is the only instrument which provides a set of rules for international trade, applicable on a world-wide basis.
Origin and Background

In the nineteen-thirties, when the world was suffering from an intense economic depression, many governments attempted to shelter behind various kinds of protective trade barriers: high tariff protection, quota restrictions on imports and exports, exchange controls, and so on. It became evident during the Second World War that these restrictions might become permanently fastened upon the world unless a resolute attempt was made to re-establish as soon as possible the pre-depression pattern of multilateral trading between nations. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade is today the major result of the efforts which were made in this direction.

The starting point of the story is in the Atlantic Charter and in the Lend-Lease Agreements in which the wartime allies bound themselves to seek together a world trading system based on non-discrimination and aimed at higher standards of living to be achieved through fair, full and free exchange of goods and services. In pursuit of this aim, long before the end of the war the United States, the United Kingdom and other important trading countries among the United Nations discussed the establishment of international organizations to tackle the post-war problems of currency, investment and trade. The International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development were established at Bretton Woods Conference before the end of the war. But for various reasons, including its wide range and its complexity, the Charter for the International Trade Organization, which was intended to be the third agency to operate in a specialized field of economic affairs, was not completed until March 1948.

While the Charter for the ITO was being worked out, the governments that formed the Preparatory Committee (appointed by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations to draft the Charter) agreed to sponsor negotiations
aimed at lowering tariffs and reducing other trade restrictions among themselves without waiting for the Trade Organization itself to come into being.

This was encouraging evidence of the seriousness of purpose of the countries engaged in drafting the ITO Charter and a constructive step towards carrying out one of its main purposes. Thus the first tariff negotiations were held at Geneva in 1947, side by side with the labours of the Committee which was preparing the ITO Charter. The tariff concessions resulting from these negotiations were embodied in the multilateral trade agreement which is called the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or GATT. It was signed on 30 October 1947 at Geneva and came into force on 1 January 1948. Originally the GATT was accepted by 23 countries. At the end of 1955 there were 35 member countries.

By the end of 1950 it became evident that no acceptances of the Charter for the ITO - the Havana Charter - could be expected until the position of the United States towards the establishment of the ITO was made clear. With the indication in December 1950 that the Charter would not be submitted again to the United States Congress, the attempt to establish the International Trade Organization was abandoned.

The GATT was intended as a stop-gap arrangement, pending the creation of the International Trade Organization. But, as events have worked out, GATT has stood alone during seven years as the only accepted international instrument that lays down the rules of conduct for trade on a worldwide basis, and which has been accepted by a high proportion of the leading trading nations.

The GATT is administered by a small group of experts under an Executive Secretary, Mr. Eric Wyndham White. This secretariat was originally established in 1948, after the Havana Conference, to prepare for the International Trade Organization, but for the last six years it has been wholly engaged on work for the governments which comprise the Contracting Parties to the General Agreement.

Between November 1954 and March 1955 the member governments undertook a very thorough examination of the General Agreement in the light of seven years experience. They reaffirmed its basic objectives and obligations and they
reshaped some of its provisions to meet present and future needs. These revisions will come into force when governments have accepted them. The member governments also drew up an agreement which—when it has been accepted by countries with a high proportion of world trade—will establish a permanent organization to administer the GATT, thus taking the place of the present informal arrangements. The new agency will be known as the Organization for Trade Cooperation.

The Structure of the GATT

The tariff concessions, as we have said, resulting from the 1947 Geneva negotiations were embodied in the GATT. But it would be a mistake to think of GATT only in terms of tariffs. It is an agreement on tariffs and trade.

First of all there are the Articles dealing directly with tariffs—Article I with the Most-Favoured-Nation obligation and Article II, the basic tariff Articles incorporating the schedules of tariff concessions resulting from the three major tariff conferences, (the Geneva Conference in 1947, the Annecy Conference in 1949 and the Torquay Conference in 1950-1951). Through these three conferences some 58,000 tariff rates have been reduced or "bound" (i.e. stabilized) among countries representing nearly four-fifths of world trade. This is perhaps the most significant result of GATT's operation so far, especially for the trading community.

Article III provides agreed rules regarding the application of internal taxes, guaranteeing that foreign goods will be given equal treatment with domestic products. Articles IV to X—known as the technical articles—are general rules and principles relating to transit trade, to anti-dumping duties, to customs valuation, customs formalities, and marks of origin. Articles XI to XV deal with quantitative restrictions on imports and exports: Article XI formally outlaws quantitative restrictions; the remainder of these Articles are qualifications to this general rule where balance-of-payment difficulties make necessary such departures. The facts relating to the balance-of-payments and monetary reserves are determined by the International Monetary Fund which the GATT countries are required to consult when balance-of-payment questions arise in the GATT.
There are further Articles dealing with state trading, subsidies and economic development, and finally, there are provisions for joint discussion and settlement of differences arising out of the application of the GATT. This aspect of GATT's work is referred to below, under Settlement of Complaints.

Such is the structure of the GATT. In fact, all its provisions are linked to and stem from the tariff concessions, because these tariff concessions would be of doubtful value if the parties to the Agreement were to have their hands free in all other fields of commercial policy; for, given such freedom, it would be possible entirely to nullify the benefits accruing from concessions made in tariff rates. The result has been to create a code of commercial policy rules generally accepted and generally binding. It is therefore not surprising that the periodic sessions of the governments which are contracting parties to the GATT have become a valued piece of international machinery for the discussion of commercial policy. In this connection the remarks of the Chairman of the Eighth Session can be quoted: "The GATT is not a list of restraints and prohibitions reluctantly accepted by governments, but a set of principles and rules which all of us accept because they are in the common long-run interest."

Sessions of the Contracting Parties: Settlement of Complaints

So far, ten sessions of the Contracting Parties have been held and the eleventh is due to convene in Geneva in October 1956. What kind of problems come before these regular sessions? Among the most significant are the trade disputes which have been brought before the Contracting Parties under the Article XXIII procedures, which enable complaints to be made that benefits under the Agreement are being nullified or impaired. (A contracting party which considers that a benefit which should accrue to it is being nullified or impaired or that the attainment of any objective of the Agreement is being impeded may seek consultations with the parties concerned. If, after consultations, no satisfactory adjustment is reached a complaint may be lodged and the Contracting Parties are then required to carry out prompt investigations, to make recommendations or to give rulings.)
A technique for dealing with complaints has been established by which a panel of neutral assessors i.e. representatives of countries which have no direct interest in the case, examine all aspects of the complaint impartially and report their findings and recommendations to the Contracting Parties as a whole. Of course not all the complaints reach the point of being brought before a Session because they may be settled 'out of court', so to speak, through direct consultations between governments either during the Session, or through normal diplomatic channels.

Great and small countries have been involved in these applications, both as complainants and as defendants. For example, in 1950 a complaint was made to the Contracting Parties that the British system of Purchase Tax so operated as to discriminate in favour of domestic products and against similar imported goods. The United Kingdom Government admitted that the tax did have this discriminatory effect, though unintentionally. They agreed to amend the system so as to eliminate the element of discrimination and thus bring the operation of the tax into conformity with the obligations of the United Kingdom under the Agreement. In 1952 this pledge was fulfilled.

The United States and Canada complained that Belgium was imposing discriminatory import restrictions aimed against imports requiring payment in dollars, although Belgium was not in balance-of-payment difficulties. Belgium undertook progressively to eliminate this discrimination and reported in 1954 that all exchange restrictions on dollar imports had been abolished. Complaints by Chile against Australia, by Norway against Germany, by the United Kingdom and France against Greece have been successfully dealt with. In 1952 India brought before the Contracting Parties a complaint against Pakistan about the levying of discriminatory taxes on exports of jute to India. The Contracting Parties felt that this question might be more easily resolved if it were considered together with other trading difficulties between the two Governments, including the conditions under which coal was supplied by India to Pakistan. Therefore they invited the two governments to consult together with a view to finding a solution along these lines. These consultations were concluded successfully when the two governments signed a long-term trade pact and agreed to drop the discriminatory levies in question. More recently, a French tax on
imports and exports, which was intended to provide a social assurance fund for agricultural workers, was the subject of complaint as an infringement of the GATT. The French Government undertook to remove the tax and this was done at the end of 1954.

Other complaints successfully dealt with in 1954 included the suppression of a discriminatory tax levied on imports by the Belgian authorities, and the lessening of restrictions on American coal imported into Germany. In another type of case, Sweden undertook to remove the cause of a complaint by Italy that Swedish anti-dumping duties on Italian nylon stockings were being applied unfairly. In another, following a complaint by Czechoslovakia, trade between that country and Peru, which was previously stopped by the Peruvian Government, was restored. A complaint by Italy about Turkish import taxes and export subsidies was settled 'out of court'.

In 1955, it is significant to note, a number of the complaints which were put on the agenda were settled - or postponed for further discussions between governments - without resort to the complaints machinery. In fact, the Panel on Complaints was not called on to deal with a single item.

Not all disputes have been resolved successfully through the GATT machinery. Probably the most serious has been the complaint by a number of countries against the United States import restrictions on dairy products. At successive sessions the Contracting Parties stated clearly that these were a violation of the Agreement. The United States Administration agreed that this was so, but their efforts to remove the restrictions by legislative means have been unsuccessful. For four years in succession the Contracting Parties have authorized one affected country, namely the Netherlands, to limit imports of United States flour by way of compensation. The Contracting Parties have always recognized, however, that retaliation is no solution to a problem of this kind, and in the course of the review of the Agreement in 1955, they granted a waiver to the United States recognizing the right of the United States Administration to impose import restrictions where it has to do so.
under the terms of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. At the same time the rights of injured countries to have recourse to the GATT complaints machinery is preserved and the Contracting Parties will review each year the action taken by the United States under this legislation. At the first such review, in November 1955, it was recognized that a number of contracting parties were seriously concerned about the prospects for the removal of these restrictions, particularly in view of the very large stocks of some of the products concerned.

Another complaint of more recent origin, which has not yet been solved, concerns the compensation tax imposed on many French imports which have been freed from quota restrictions when imported from the member countries of the OEEC. At the Ninth Session in 1954 this was recognized as a breach of GATT obligations and the French Government undertook to remove the tax as soon as possible. At the Tenth Session the Contracting Parties reviewed the steps taken so far to remove the tax and urged the French Government to accelerate the process of reduction and abolition.

The Removal of Quantitative Restrictions

The principle of non-discrimination in trade and the general prohibition (with specified exceptions) on the use of quantitative restrictions on imports had always been one of the basic principles of the General Agreement. The main exception is the use of quantitative restrictions to safeguard the balance of payments situation, and, in certain circumstances, the use of such restrictions in a discriminatory way. The GATT requires countries resorting to the discriminatory application of the restrictions to consult from time to time with the Contracting Parties and also whenever restrictions are substantially intensified. The purpose of consultations on discriminatory restrictions, which are held at each annual Session, is to afford an opportunity for the exchange of views on the problems facing the countries following this practice and the difficulties which are thus created for exporting countries. The Contracting Parties accept the findings of the International Monetary Fund on the financial basis for the restrictions and discuss the policy and administration of the restrictions.
In the course of their consultations the Contracting Parties have been very much concerned with the incidental protective effects of import restrictions. Governments applying restrictions have acknowledged that the protective effects should be reduced to a minimum, but in fact most quantitative restrictions, whether intentionally or not, are performing two functions, one financial and the other protective. There is, therefore, an ever present danger that the protectionist factor may become a guiding consideration in determining which products are to be subject to import restrictions. Many enterprises have not had to compete with imported products in substantial quantities for fifteen years or more, and young industries which have grown up or become established since the Second World War have never had to face the full impact of competition with imports. The consultations under the Agreement have thus had a valuable psychological influence in that they keep constantly in the foreground the fact that quantitative restrictions on imports are not permanent and that the incidental protection they offer to domestic industry is also not permanent.

In the review of the GATT in 1954-1955 the basic principle that quantitative restrictions must be eliminated as soon as they are no longer justified for balance-of-payments reasons was reaffirmed. In order to adapt this principle to the period when major currencies are expected to become convertible, the emphasis in the future (i.e. after the revised GATT becomes operative) will be put on annual consultations in which countries still applying this type of restriction on imports will be required to justify them. In addition, in the course of the Review, it was recognized that some countries may have difficulty in dismantling the so called 'hard core' of these restrictions, and subject to the concurrence of the Contracting Parties in each case, a country will be allowed to retain for a strictly limited period restrictions originally imposed for balance of payments purposes but no longer justified on that account.
At the Tenth Session, in 1955, the first case of this type was examined, namely, an application by Belgium to maintain, temporarily, import restrictions on some agricultural products. A formula was agreed under which Belgium will progressively reduce the restrictions on a limited list of products and will eliminate them completely by the end of 1962.

The Reduction of Tariffs

The reduction of tariffs is laid down in the General Agreement as one of the principal means of attaining its broad objectives. As stated above, in the three tariff negotiations conferences in 1947, 1949 and 1951 the tariff rates for some 58,000 items were reduced or bound against increase. About 80 per cent of the United States import trade is today covered by rates of duty bound under the GATT, and it has been estimated that if the GATT bindings were withdrawn the increase in rates of United States duties on such items would average at least 65 per cent. The GATT is, in effect, the most comprehensive undertaking for reducing and stabilizing rates of customs duties ever brought into operation.

A fourth tariff conference was held at Geneva in 1956, in which twenty-two of the GATT member countries completed negotiations. The tariff concessions granted at this conference made further reductions in the general level of tariffs and extended the area of trade covered by tariff bindings. The total import trade of the negotiating countries in the items affected by concessions granted in those negotiations was estimated at about $2.5 billion.

The Assured Life of the Tariff Concessions

The tariff concessions contained in the original schedules annexed to the General Agreement entered into force in 1948 with an assured life of three years, until the end of 1950. After that time a contracting party could modify or withdraw any concession by negotiation and agreement with the government with which it had been negotiated. Governments involved in such negotiations were to endeavour to maintain a level of concessions not less favourable to trade than those originally provided for in the schedules. If no agreement could
be reached on compensatory adjustments on other products, the contracting party would, nevertheless, be free to modify or withdraw the concession and, in that event, the other contracting party could withdraw equivalent concessions.

Thus, there has always been the possibility that after the period of binding, extensive renegotiation and possibly withdrawal of items might ensue, with the danger of a gradual or even speedy unravelling of the network of concessions. To prevent this eventuality the assured life of the schedules was extended for a second period of three years until the end of 1953. At their Eighth Session the Contracting Parties agreed to a further extension until July 1955, and in the course of the review of the GATT, in 1955, it was agreed that the assured life of the schedules should be further prolonged to 31 December 1957. In addition, a new principle was introduced envisaging the automatic extension of the assured life for successive periods of three years, with suitable opportunities for individual adjustments of tariff rates.

Regional Arrangements

Although one of the objectives of the General Agreement is "the elimination of discriminatory treatment in international commerce", the Agreement is designed not to prevent the formation of economic or customs unions involving the removal of tariffs and other trade barriers between participating countries. Therefore, if a project for union, through establishing an interim preferential régime, is expected to lead to the removal of all barriers between the participating countries - i.e. to a customs union or free-trade area - it can be condoned and even encouraged.

While the Agreement provides for interim agreements leading to the formation of customs unions and free-trade areas, no provision is made for the formation of unions limited to sectors of trade such as the Coal and Steel Community in Western Europe. Therefore the plans of the Governments of Belgium, Luxemburg, France, Netherlands, Germany and Italy to create a common market throughout their territories for coal and steel were submitted to the Contracting Parties who were requested to grant a waiver of certain obligations. At their 1952 Session the Contracting Parties examined the Treaty constituting the European Coal and Steel Community and its annexed Convention and found that the
objectives of the Community were broadly consistent with those of the General Agreement.

In November 1952, the Contracting Parties granted the required waiver authorizing the six governments to eliminate within the Community import and export duties and quantitative restrictions on the products covered by the Treaty. During the five years of the transition period provided in the Convention the Contracting Parties are concerned to see, first, that the single market is operating consistently with the conditions laid down in the waiver and, secondly, that the tariffs and restrictions imposed by the six governments on imports of coal and steel from other contracting parties are made no more restrictive than those in force when the waiver was granted.

At their Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Sessions the Contracting Parties examined the first three reports from the six member countries of the Community with great care, in view of the assurances of these countries that they would follow a liberal policy and take account of the interests of third countries both as consumers and suppliers of coal and steel products.

The Reduction of Administrative Barriers to Trade

For the past five years the Contracting Parties have been tackling customs formalities and various administrative barriers to trade, stage by stage. In 1950 they drew up a code of standard practices for the administration, by governments, of imports and export restrictions and exchange controls. In 1952 they adopted a code of standard practices for documents which are required for importation and they made several recommendations which envisage the elimination of consular visas and formalities as soon as possible. They also drew up and opened for signature (in February 1953) the International Convention to Facilitate the Importation of Samples and Advertising Material the broad purpose of which is to minimize the costs and reduce the formalities and delays which traders and merchants have to face in sending samples and advertising material from one country to another. Following the adherence of fifteen governments the Convention entered into force in November 1955.
The Contracting Parties are also studying the possibility of drawing up uniform rules for the nationality of imported goods and at the Tenth Session they formulated a draft of a resolution which recommends governments to eliminate measures in the field of transport insurance which have a restrictive effect on trade. This will be studied further at the Eleventh Session.

Special Problems

Accession of Japan

Following tariff negotiations with a number of contracting parties Japan became a contracting party to the GATT on 10 September 1955. At that time fourteen contracting parties invoked Article XXXV, thereby signifying their intention not to undertake GATT obligations towards Japan. This situation and the position in which the Japanese Government thus found itself were discussed at the Tenth Session. It was agreed that the informal discussions between some contracting parties and Japan which were undertaken during the Session should continue and that the matter should be kept under continuous review by the Contracting Parties.

Waivers granted to the United Kingdom

(a) Article I

In October 1953, at the Eighth Session, the United Kingdom obtained a waiver from the rules of Article I regarding tariff preferences to relieve the United Kingdom of the need to impose duties on duty-free goods from the Commonwealth as and when the United Kingdom may have occasion to increase duties on foreign goods. In March 1955 the scope of the waiver was somewhat extended. Under the terms of this waiver the United Kingdom has raised its customs duties on a number of horticultural items and has made changes in duties affecting a few other items.

(b) Dependent Overseas Territories

The Contracting Parties, by a Decision (5 March 1955), extended to the United Kingdom the right to give special assistance to the products of its colonial territories which depend largely on the United Kingdom market,
through actions which would otherwise be inconsistent with the provisions of the Agreement. These rights apply only to cases where the industry or branch of agriculture of the colonial territory would be benefited, but not industry or agriculture in the United Kingdom or any other country. The United Kingdom undertook to report annually to the Contracting Parties on any such measures adopted. The United Kingdom Government reported at the Tenth Session that it had so far taken no action under the terms of the Decision.
Thirty-five Contracting Parties to the General Agreement

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Chairman of the Contracting Parties .......... Mr. L. Dana Wilgress (Canada)
First Vice-Chairman .......................... Mr. Fernando Garcia Oldini (Chile)
Second Vice-Chairman .......................... Mr. Paul Koht (Norway)

Executive Secretary ............................ Mr. Eric Wyndham White (U.K.)
Deputy Executive Secretary ..................... M. Jean Royer (France)

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