GENERAL AGREEMENT ON TARIFFS AND TRADE

ACCORD GENERAL SUR LES TARIFS DOUANIERS ET LE COMMERCE

TORQUAY CONFERENCE CONCLUDED - SIGNATURE OF THE FINAL ACT

CLOTURE DE LA CONFERENCE DE TORQUAY - SIGNATURE DE L'ACTE FINAL

CORRECTED

Page 6, section (a) : the number of negotiations completed by Norway should read 16, not 15

Page 7, section (a) : le nombre des négociations qui ont été terminées par la Norvège est 16, et non 15.
Address of Mr. L. D. Wilgress, Chairman of the Tariff Negotiations Committee, at the signing of the Final Act of the Torquay Tariff Conference, Torquay, April 21st, 1951.

We have now reached the closing stage of what in future will be known as the Torquay Tariff Conference. A lot has transpired since we gathered together in this same building nearly seven months ago. In the interval, delegations representing over 30 countries have been busily engaged on bilateral negotiations, the results of which are to be embodied in the schedules to the multilateral trade agreement known as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Accordingly, what we are witnessing today is the close of another chapter in the steady progress of that instrument, which has become more familiarly known as the GATT.

I believe that when the history of this experiment in commercial policy comes to be written, the GATT will be singled out for at least two important contributions to the regulation of world trade. One of these contributions will be the technique of multilateral tariff bargaining through the holding of simultaneous bilateral negotiations between pairs of countries, followed by the generalization of the resulting concessions. This technique was first tried out at Geneva in 1947. It was immediately recognized to have great advantages over the old method of numerous separate bilateral negotiations. It is therefore not surprising that this same method was resorted to again at the second round of tariff negotiations held at Annecy in 1949, and at those negotiations which have now been completed at Torquay.

The negotiations at Annecy were for the purpose of enabling 10 new governments to accede to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. The purpose of the Torquay negotiations has been even wider. They have provided an opportunity not only for seven new countries to accede to the General Agreement, but also for the original contracting parties and the governments who acceded at Annecy to negotiate further tariff concessions with one another.

An additional reason for the holding of the third round of tariff negotiations at this time has been the fact that the concessions negotiated at Geneva had an assured life of three years, that is, the concessions were bound only until January 1st, 1951. The Torquay Tariff Conference has given the opportunity for the re-negotiation of such of the Geneva and Annecy concessions as certain governments considered desirable, but the net effect has been to extend the assured life of the tariff concessions negotiated at Geneva and Annecy, subject to such modifications as may have been effected at Torquay, for a further period of three years, or until January 1st, 1954. Thus for this period of three years we have the assurance of stability for a large part of the tariffs of the 38 countries who are now contracting parties to the General Agreement. This is another distinctive contribution of the GATT to the regulation of international trade. Never before has there been such assurance of tariff stability through the instrumentality of one trade agreement. We can readily claim that this is a new factor in the picture of world commerce which has been introduced through the operation of the GATT.
You will see from this that this Torquay Tariff Conference is but an incident in a chain of events surrounding the efforts of some 38 countries to cooperate together for the good of all. The GATT has become the intergovernmental centre for the discussion of tariff problems and for dealing with the whole range of commercial policy questions. It is the chief international forum for the settlement of questions affecting the exchange of goods between countries. That we have made steady progress is evidenced by the gradual increase in numbers, until we now see that there will soon be nearly 40 countries participating as contracting parties to the General Agreement. These countries represent most of the important trading nations and a very large segment of world trade. While, therefore, Torquay represents but a chapter in what I believe will be a very long story, it has been a notable chapter.

The holding of the conference at this time was determined largely by the fact that the Genoa tariff concessions were not assured beyond the end of 1950. It did seem also that we were about to enter a period in which tariffs would become once more the determining factor in the regulation of world trade. While the conference has progressed, however, it has become more and more apparent that we have been entering a new period of severe scarcity and of other inflationary influences, the duration of which is very uncertain. Under these circumstances one can understand that governments have been hesitant about agreeing to substantial reductions in duties and preferences beyond those already included in the schedules to the General Agreement. The results of the Torquay Tariff Conference, therefore, are not as great as many had hoped. Nevertheless the conference has justified once more the technique of negotiating developed at Genoa, and has reinforced the value of the tariff stability conferred by GATT on world trade.

Another advantage which we have derived from the Torquay conference is that the representatives of many different countries have got to know and to understand better the country which for several centuries has played the leading part in setting the pattern of world trade. We have not been surprised at the interest which our labours have aroused in the United Kingdom. We have been greatly appreciative of all that has been done by the United Kingdom Government, and particularly by the Mayor and Corporation and the good people of Torquay, to make our stay here as pleasant as possible. We shall always look back on happy memories of these beautiful surroundings, and particularly of the pleasant friendships we have made here. I extend to His Worship, the Mayor of Torquay, and to the chief representative of the United Kingdom Government, our most grateful thanks.