

Yvonne Robertson: Let this platinum jubilee year be the last without a Canada-U.K. free trade agreement

Our country seems more concerned with not irking the United States than co-operating with Britain

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stands next to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in London, in March. PHOTO BY LEON NEAL/GETTY IMAGES

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Next month I am honored to be representing Canada, as the owner of a small business, at the platinum jubilee celebrations of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Canada's participation in this event showcases the unique relationship we have with our British cousins.

Yet despite my excitement and gratitude for being invited to help celebrate such a significant historical moment I cannot help but be reminded of a long-standing disappointment: the failure of our two countries to translate our relationship into a mutually beneficial free trade agreement.

As our governments embark on another round of talks aimed at finally securing such a deal, we must not let obfuscation and hardball tactics again lead to failure. The U.K. trade commissioner has signaled her hope to wrap up the talks within a year, but significant creases need to be ironed out before that happens.

Since Brexit, the U.K. has been carving out an independent trade strategy for itself across the world, particularly with traditional allies and commonwealth countries. It recently signed free trade agreements with both New Zealand and Australia. But Canada has been less enthusiastic in supporting Britain as it reinvigorates its global trade relationships. Although the U.K. is our third-largest trading partner, and one

of our most resilient and reliable, our government's unwillingness to secure trade agreements and its unnecessarily combative approach to negotiations have prevented us from reaping the maximum benefits of this relationship.

For owners of small businesses like mine that regularly import and export to Britain, it is perplexing that our country seems more concerned with not irking the United States than co-operating with Britain. As of last year, the U.K. accounted for \$73 billion of foreign direct investment in this country and removing further trade barriers would open up more opportunities for small and large businesses alike.

While there are hopes this round of talks will finally break the dam, we're going to have to change our approach to negotiations and rely less on U.S. direction if that is to happen. So far we have been noncommittal as to whether we would get behind U.K. access to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) as part of a free trade deal. As these current talks get underway, the issue is alive again, raising questions about what British entry would mean for the U.S., which withdrew from CPTPP under Donald Trump and has shown little desire to rejoin under Joe Biden.

In response to our ambiguity, which presumably is for fear of American censure, Britain is less likely to grant us favours where we want them, especially regarding supply management and meat export. Canada wants to be able to export hormone-treated beef to the U.K. but also to protect our market share of dairy and egg production. Boris Johnson, in turn, would like to see more British cheese sold in Canada.

For two countries with such deep historical and cultural ties, these sticking points should be far too trivial to prevent progress. Helping the U.K. gain greater access to foreign markets would win us the goodwill of an important international player and give us more room to achieve our own objectives. After Brexit, getting such access is a big foreign policy priority for the U.K., but rather than help champion that aim we seem more content to be stuck between the rock and hard place of the U.K. and the U.S.

Conciliation rather than confrontation should underpin this year's negotiations with the U.K., just as it has long underpinned the relationship between our two countries, as exemplified by Canadian participation in the Queen's jubilee. Ultimately, it's the best way for Canada's interests to be embodied in the final deal.

The Queen's June 5th jubilee, a celebration of the Commonwealth, is followed a month later by Canada Day, a celebration of our nation's independence and ability to conduct diplomacy on our own terms. It's high time we drew on both these commemorations to stand up for our own interest in securing a free trade deal that benefits both ourselves and our British cousins.

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