Queen's Institute on Trade Policy

Communicating Clearly in Complexity

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PUBLIC AFFAIRS / GOVERNMENT RELATIONS / RESEARCH COMMUNICATIONS / **STRATEGY** / CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Lessons from CUSMA

Many benefits of focused Maple Charm Offensive

Multi-party, multi-government – and horizontal

25 negotiating 'tables' + sectorial tables + Minister's Advisory
 Council + Formal Canada Gazette + Labour

Communications benefits were largely domestic and took the early edge off

 Canadian exposure to US tax and investment climate also driven home; drove strategy throughout

 The curve ball of US switching to consecutive bilateral negotiations reinforced the vagaries of negotiating with the US under the Trump administration

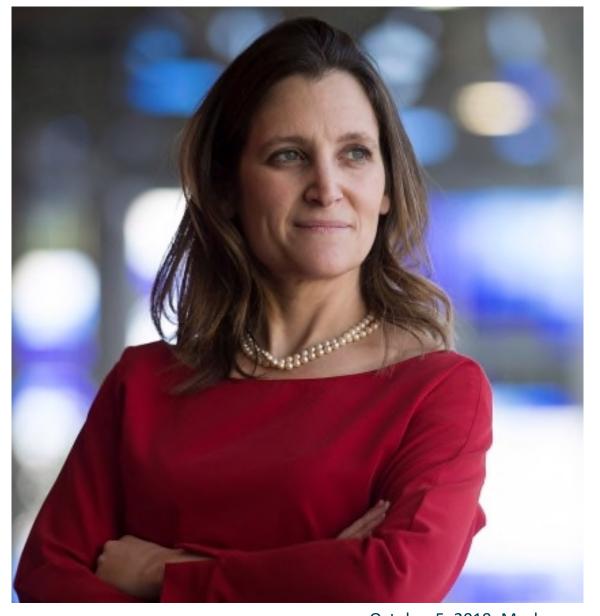
 The complexity and unpredictability of these negotiations allowed victory to be declared in a different way than CETA





The Macro Narrative on CUSMA

You're Welcome Canada



October 5, 2019: Macleans

Rules-Based Trade Context

- Public acceptance of the net benefits of trade as part of economic resilience remains high
- CUSMA proved trade diversification essential for Canada
- Government began mid-mandate to emphasize deeper trade relationships, for particular sectors and SMEs was an extension of and key to domestic economic strategy
- New new trade or rules-based negotiations is largely for trade policy insiders
- Highly complex from a communications POV. Likely requires a re-frame of benefits and objectives in trade agendas, including collaboration between political and officials

Textbook Communications Context

- Managing communications and consultation processes are often the key to policy and political success
- Narrative has become the driver of political persuasion tactics
 - The battle for narrative control characterizes most controversial issues
 - In much the same way that control of the "ballot question" often dictates vote choice – as we are seeing in the current federal election
- Control of narrative or "framing" allows governments to position an initiative in a way that promotes public acceptance, if not approval
- Once a frame is "set", it becomes hard to change for either side in a debate
 - Further discussion is often ignored as routine "noise" of government
- Sometimes not communicating avoids the wrong frame settling in
 - Deprives debate of concrete substance and hence real "oxygen"

The Narrative Framework

- Many stages that require 'narrative' management
 - The decision to seek an agreement and the launch of negotiations
 - The ongoing domestic consultations with "Insider" stakeholders
 - The final stages of negotiations with the potential treaty partner(s)
 - The announcement of an agreement in principle
 - Drafting of the final text
 - Final approval and ratification (including political process)
 - Implementation
- Each involves careful consultations and communications planning
 - With differing "key messaging" or main narrative constructs
 - Different information requirements and stakeholder outreach



CETA – Week One Headlines

Framing of CETA from the outset was positive

"We have a deal with Europe. Let's not blow it"

- The Globe and Mail

"Harper's huge EU free trade deal justifies lawmakers' hyperbole"

- John Ivison, National Post

"European free trade deal is a big win for Stephen Harper"

- Vancouver Sun

"CETA benefits Western Canada"

- The Star Phoenix

"EU trade deal could bring higher drug costs"

- Toronto Star

"Feds consider compensation for dairy farmers hurt by EU deal"

- CTV

Spheres of Interest

- There are multiple domestic spheres of interest and influence to be considered in the trade negotiation context
 - With varying degrees of access to consultation, input and information
- The insiders (consult and influence):
 - Government policy makers and decision makers
 - Provinces
 - Sectoral voices
 - Industry associations and increasingly, individual companies
 - Labour, Indigenous, civil society (environment, women +++)
- Outside stakeholders (inform and communicate):
 - Adhoc coalitions/alliances for interests
 - Permanently oppositional voices
 - Media
 - "Involved Canadians"
 - The general population

Crossing the Threshold

- Where policy crosses into the public sphere, government no longer has control of the narrative
- Politics are relevant (especially with election dynamics)
- Macro story lines define public space
 - Broader context matters
 - Define your narrative before it defines you
 - Pace of interest and need for response changes
 - Better if pre-positioned to understand underlying issues or tradeoffs
- Third parties become more influential, particularly with social media, requires coordination within government
- Scope of the issue and other external factors will define the duration of the communications window

Additional Observations

- Communications and consultation are core to strategy, not an afterthought
- CETA offered textbook lessons for a regional deal, pitched throughout and at announcement. Won in the first week.
- USMCA/NAFTA was defined in protectionist terms and largely won in the same way
- Managing the range of stakeholders and new factors being driven into trade agreements (progressive agenda, environment/trade) means more complexity early
- More than ever, trade negotiators and communicators need to collaborate early in the process to understand
- Time to update and re-frame the overall benefits of trade in new context of CETA, CUSMA and China in 2020

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