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Chair

Mr. Lee Richardson

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Lee Richardson (Calgary Centre, CPC)): Welcome to the eleventh meeting of this session of the Standing Committee on International Trade.

Today we are beginning our review, pursuant to the order of reference of Monday, of the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the Republic of Colombia, the Agreement on the Environment between Canada and the Republic of Colombia, and the Agreement on Labour Cooperation between Canada and the Republic of Colombia.

We're going to begin the study of this bill with a briefing from witnesses from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Department of Finance, and the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development.

I think we'll begin right away and deal with other business when the witnesses have completed their testimony and questioning.

To begin with, we have David Plunkett back. Mr. Plunkett is the chief trade negotiator for bilateral and regional relations with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Also from the department, we have Alexandra Bugailiskis, the assistant deputy minister of Latin America and the Caribbean, who has been with us before; and Matthew Kronby, the director general of the trade law bureau.

Visiting with us again, from the Department of Finance, is the director of the international trade policy division, Carol Nelder-Corvari. Thank you for coming back.

From the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, we have the director of bilateral and regional labour affairs, Pierre Bouchard. Welcome, Pierre.

Who's going to begin?

Mr. Plunkett will begin with an opening statement, perhaps followed by some brief remarks.

Mr. David Plunkett (Chief Trade Negotiator, Bilateral and Regional Relations, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for this opportunity to appear before this committee and speak to Bill C-2, an act to implement the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement and the parallel agreements on labour cooperation and the environment.

[Translation]

This Bill implements the legal framework and legislative amendments required to deepen the economic and social relationship between Colombia and Canada.

[English]

You've already identified my colleagues who are with me. As you may be aware, Carol Nelder-Corvari is also our chief negotiator for this deal.

Canada and Colombia currently have a significant commercial relationship, with trade in excess of \$1.3 billion and hundreds of Canadian companies doing business with Colombia. Key Canadian products such as cereals, including wheat and barley, machinery, pulse crops, paper, and motor vehicles are key exports to Colombia, and ensuring their continued competitiveness was a key reason for pursuing an agreement with Colombia.

Under this free trade agreement, Colombia will eliminate tariffs on nearly all Canadian exports. Their removal is important for Canadian exporters, particularly given that Colombia has concluded other trade agreements with key Canadian competitors such as the United States and Europe. By implementing this agreement, our exporters will have a competitive advantage to continue to grow in this market, particularly if Canada's agreement is implemented before the United States and Europe implement their own deals.

Before turning to other benefits for Canadian businesses, it is important to highlight a recent market access development. On April 9, 2010, ministers Van Loan and Ritz announced that Colombia had reopened its market to Canadian cattle. This announcement followed Colombia's January 2010 decision to reopen its market to Canadian beef. Canadian beef and cattle exports had previously been banned from the Colombian market due to BSE. Canadian industry has responded very positively to Colombia's decision to resume trade, and this development will complement the tariff reductions negotiated by Carol and her team in this agreement.

Moving beyond trade in goods, this agreement will lead to new commercial opportunities for our investors and service providers. Over 50 Canadian companies have invested in Colombia, principally in the mining, oil and gas exploration, and manufacturing sectors. In 2009, the stock of Canadian investment in Colombia reached approximately \$773 million. These investments are leading the way for exports of Canadian-made machinery such as mining equipment and heavy transportation equipment. Once the FTA is implemented, a stable legal framework will be in place for Canadian investors in Colombia.

Canadian services exports to Colombia are in the area of \$40 million to \$50 million a year and are concentrated in the financial, mining, engineering, and petroleum extraction sectors. Upon implementation, Canadian service providers will be treated the same as Colombian service providers and will enjoy a secure, predictable, transparent, and rules-based trading system. Moreover, Canada obtained the same level of market access from Colombia as they provided to the United States. As a result, Canadian service suppliers will be on a level playing field with their American counterparts in Colombia.

• (1540)

[Translation]

As a comprehensive free trade agreement, obligations are also contained in the agreement on a wide variety of other subjects including financial services, government procurement, electronic commerce, telecommunications, and temporary entry of business persons. While these subjects may not be in the forefront of discussions regarding the benefits of the trade agreement, they are important components to ensuring that Canadian businesses are able to operate efficiently and competitively in the Colombian market.

[English]

As you are aware, in keeping with Canada's approach to free trade agreements, environmental and labour aspects of the economic integration were addressed through agreements on labour and environment. These important agreements contain strong obligations and clearly demonstrate that for Canada and Colombia, trade liberalization does not come at the expense of labour rights and the environment.

To conclude my part, Canadian businesses are not alone in recognizing opportunities in Colombia. In a World Bank study, *Doing Business 2010*, Colombia ranks as one of the top 10 business environment reformers. It ranked 37th in the category of "ease of doing business", and it also ranked fifth out of 183 countries with regard to its ability to protect investor rights through the application of the rule of law. Clearly this is a country where opportunities for businesses are only going to increase.

Overall, the free trade agreement will strengthen our bilateral commercial relationship. This agreement has the support of key exporters and investors across Canada, many of whom have appeared before this committee. This is a high-quality and comprehensive trade agreement, and it will allow Canadian businesses to compete and excel in the Colombian market.

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis (Assistant Deputy Minister, Latin America and the Caribbean, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to add to the remarks of my colleague and to provide some insight on Canada's broader engagement in Colombia.

Canada has a long-standing, rich, and diverse connection to Colombia that includes a broad range of academic, cultural, and civil society exchanges. As we have reiterated over the course of this debate, we believe that trade and investment relationships serve to broaden this exchange in promoting shared values and best practices and creating new opportunities for people and communities to thrive and prosper.

Colombia has made important strides and shown great resilience toward mitigating the effects of the conflict that has plagued the country for decades. While annual statistics on human rights violations may fluctuate year to year, what we need to focus on is the overall trends, where from 2002 to 2009 Colombia has, according to most sources, including the United Nations and well-respected civil society organizations, greatly improved its performance in important areas such as the general security situation, violence towards unionists and community leaders, homicides, and kidnappings. This progress has been recognized by the international community and international organizations that are present in Colombia.

[Translation]

Colombia has an established democracy, a growing economy, strong institutions, and well organized and extensive civil society. The Government of Colombia has demonstrated its commitment to meeting the challenges it faces through transparent engagement and partnership with the international community. Colombia was the first Latin American country to invite the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights to establish a field presence in the country. It has been present in the country since 1997. They have gone further and extended an open invitation to UN Special Procedures. As a result, in 2009 alone, Colombia received four UN Special Rapporteurs: one on extrajudicial executions, one on human rights defenders, one on the independence of the judiciary and one on indigenous peoples. This transparency and openness on the part of the Colombian government to evaluation is unprecedented.

• (1545)

[English]

Canada has a close working relationship with both the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, also present in Colombia. We receive regular updates on the human rights situation, and over the last three years, through CIDA, we have contributed to strengthening the capacity of the state and civil society to respond to the plight of internally displaced people. This includes helping to improve government policies and services to better respond to the needs of Colombia's most vulnerable and improving access to relevant and effective programs, while also strengthening mechanisms for the protection and realization of constitutionally enshrined rights.

United Nations agencies are convinced that real progress in this regard is being made by Colombia's national government, and this is thanks in part to Canadian support.

[Translation]

Though many challenges remain, Canada, the UN, the OAS and many other international partners are supporting Colombia's efforts to meet these challenges. Pursuing increased trade relations is only part of this process.

In addition to our efforts to promote greater prosperity and opportunity for Colombians, Canada has substantial development and peace and security programming activities through our Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force, which in turn complements the programs provided by CIDA. Canada's efforts in Colombia aim to reduce inequality and poverty and to strengthen peace-building efforts and respect for human rights. These efforts have amounted to \$18 million since 2006.

These programs have helped promote peace and reconciliation in Colombia and the region, protect victims' rights and strengthen the country's transitional justice system. Projects also provide vital support to protect the rights of vulnerable groups including women, indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians.

[English]

In recent years we've seen that the Government of Colombia has taken positive steps that demonstrate its continued efforts to curb violence against trade unionists and fight impunity for the perpetrators of such crimes. Indeed, after her visit to Colombia in October 2008, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, while expressing her ongoing concern for the vulnerability of trade unionists, said she was impressed by the increased expenditure on government programs to protect and support vulnerable groups.

One of our current projects, through our stabilization and reconstruction task force, is a program coordinated by the United Nations development program. It will present recommendations to help minimize the impact of violence against union leaders and organized union members and seek improvements to the legislation protecting them. The project, which involves the participation of government, unions, and the international community, consists of a series of studies conducted by six reputable NGOs and peer-reviewed by the National University of Colombia on the nature of violence against trade union members in Colombia. Recommendations for public policy and protection programs for unionists will then be derived from these studies.

[Translation]

Canada is also supporting Colombia through the implementation of labour-related technical assistance projects to promote and enforce internationally recognized labour standards, particularly in the areas of labour inspection, social dialogue, enforcement of labour rights and occupational safety and health.

We also seek to partner with likeminded countries who have an interest in Colombia, to better leverage our efforts. To that end, Canada is an active member of the Group of 24, a group of countries which encourages and facilitates dialogue between the Government of Colombia and international and national civil society organizations working in the country. Within this group, Canada also actively participates in the human rights sub-committee, which focuses on improving conditions for human rights defenders and engaging with other sectors that have been directly affected by violence.

[English]

I've mentioned in the past to the committee the importance and the level of dialogue we're able to have with the Colombians on human rights issues. Not only does our embassy in Colombia closely monitor the human rights situation on the ground, but we also

regularly raise issues concerning human rights in meetings with Colombian officials at the very highest levels. Most recently in December of 2009 the Minister of State for the Americas, Peter Kent, met with Colombia's foreign minister, Jaime Bermúdez, at which time they discussed human rights. That same month, our deputy minister of foreign affairs, Len Edwards, also travelled to Colombia for political-level consultations.

Whenever Canadian officials meet with their Colombian counterparts, we endeavour to ensure that human rights are on the agenda. The mature relationship Canada has with Colombia allows us to maintain this open and frank dialogue on human rights with the Colombian government at the most senior levels. As you know, our first successful round of bilateral human rights consultations took place last July, and we're currently exploring dates for this year's consultations. Both Canada and Colombia are committed to holding these consultations on an annual basis.

I'd like to close by saying that there remain great challenges to peace, security, and human rights in Colombia. We continue to monitor the situation closely and react immediately when violations take place. However, we recognize that the Government of Colombia is making efforts to improve the situation, and Canada wants to support those efforts. A strong social and economic foundation and respect for human rights are goals that Canada will continue to help reinforce in Colombia.

Thank you.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you. That's a very good update and précis, and with some very interesting new material. I appreciate it.

We're going to begin our questioning this time with Mr. Cannis, the vice-chairman.

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome to all our guests.

Mr. Chairman, I'm going to take maybe two minutes for my opening remarks, and Mr. Brison will take the rest.

I listened very carefully to both statements. I want to say that about a month and a half ago, we were able to meet with a minister from Colombia. I think her name was Minister Mejia. She was very thorough in giving us actual data on some of the progress that's been made, which you touched upon today. I thank you for confirming this.

I really have one question for both Mr. Plunkett and Ms. Bugailiskis.

You said, sir, to conclude your statement, that "Canadian businesses are not alone in recognizing the opportunities in Colombia."

In your statement as well, ma'am, you said, "to partner with likeminded countries".

Well, "to partner with likeminded countries": should we be delaying ratification of this agreement, would we be losing the opportunity, or that edge, to partner with like-minded countries to progress positively forward?

And to you, Mr. Plunkett, should we be delaying the ratification of this agreement, would Canada be losing some kind of edge, some kind of opportunity?

I'm trying to tie it together in a way similar to the way we lost the competitive edge, if I can use those words, when it came to CAFTA. We didn't ratify it; the United States ratified it by, I think, one vote; now we are, I think, trying to get back to the table. But we lost that competitiveness, if you will...or that, "Hey, we've got the Americans onside now, let's keep talking with the Canadians, and we'll see."

We know that the Colombians are moving positively forward with other trade agreements. Should they be ratifying with Europe and other countries, once those agreements are ratified, how will our position be going to the table as a country?

Mr. David Plunkett: I'm dredging my memory here, but soon after I took on this position, as I recall this committee put out a report about Canada's free trade agenda more generally. One of the recommendations the committee put forward was that we needed to be pursuing an aggressive trade policy on a bilateral front to make sure we weren't being disadvantaged and that we were taking advantages where they were. This particular case and that of Peru, I think—again from my memory—were being used at the time as examples of where the Americans were ahead of us and we needed to get on with it and try to catch up.

In that regard, I think we are fulfilling the committee's own recommendations, and it certainly is consistent with the approach the government has been pushing for some time now.

There are going to be instances where we're actually ahead of our competition. For example, in the EFTA deal, which we brought in a few months ago, we're ahead of the Americans. That gives our producers a bit of a competitive edge. At other times, we are trying to level the playing field, etc.

So it depends on each market, but where there are opportunities for which business is pushing us to get into a given market—in this case, Colombia—we think it's important that we push forward.

• (1555)

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I don't have much to add to what my colleague has already stated, but we are aware intensely of the U. S. interest in completing its free trade agreement with Colombia. In fact, Defense Secretary Gates just made an announcement yesterday about continued support for Colombia, not only in the area of security but, obviously in what he thinks is helpful as well, on the trade process. The EU is also in consultations.

I wouldn't look at it necessarily from a total economic point of view, but I would think that movement on a free trade agreement is extremely helpful just in that level of engagement and the ability to formalize what is already a very fruitful broad exchange and being able to institutionalize some of the dialogues as well.

The Chair: Mr. Brison.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I thank you very much for being with us today. Whenever we have you here, it reminds us of the tremendously high quality of public service we have in Canada and the quality of people we have in our foreign service.

I want to recognize Ambassador des Rivières, who has been a tremendous partner to members of this committee, for her work as well.

As you know, there will be an amendment tabled at this committee. The government has agreed to support a Liberal amendment that will require a prior written agreement between the governments of Canada and Colombia whereby each country, both Canada and Colombia, will provide annual reports to their respective parliaments on the impact of this FTA on human rights in both Canada and Colombia. Just to make it clear, both countries will be reporting on human rights in both Colombia and Canada.

Your former deputy minister of foreign affairs, Peter Harder, has said the amendment is a

significant innovation in free trade agreements in that it provides both the Colombian and Canadian legislatures the opportunity to annually review and assess the human rights implications of the agreement. I expect that future parliaments will build on this precedent when they consider proposed free trade agreements.

It has also received support from civil society leaders in Colombia and union and labour leaders in Colombia.

I'd like to ask you about the capacity within DFAIT to research, to gather information, and to report on that information respecting human rights in other countries, in countries particularly with whom we have free trade agreements and as it would pertain to Colombia.

I'd also like to ask about the degree to which you work with civil society and NGOs in the collection and gathering of that information, because we want to make sure that NGOs and civil society have an opportunity to feed into and to provide information that helps shape these reports.

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Thank you very much for that question.

We take very seriously our obligations, whether in Colombia or in other parts of the region: the necessity to monitor, survey, report, and more importantly, I think, to build capacity within civil society to ensure that they're able to keep their countries fresh and very solidly democratic.

Our embassy in Colombia is a good-sized mission. The total Canadian staff is about 23. We have about 68 of what we call locally engaged staff. They're already extremely involved and busy with regard to monitoring the human rights situation.

I can show you this book, which is full, from just the past few months, of the reports that we receive.

They are very much engaged with non-governmental organizations, Canadian, international, and local. I asked the other day what the latest tally was. I have a very extensive list here of organizations that they meet with on a regular basis. In the last 13 months, they told me, they had 371 meetings with NGOs. That would be more than one a day, I would suspect. So they're extremely active.

We're also reorganizing within the department to be able to put even more emphasis on democratic reporting. We've established within the region what we call the Andean unit for democracy. It's located in Lima, but it's a regional resource. It's an ability to bring greater expertise to bear and to assist missions in their efforts to monitor human rights, and more importantly to look for niches in which Canada can be helpful. In my presentation I was pointing out some of the excellent programming that I think we're doing with the Colombian government.

I'm very confident in the ability of the embassy to continue to play a very active role in engagement in monitoring themselves personally, but also of course in collecting information from the various organizations, civil society as well as international.

• (1600)

Hon. Scott Brison: When this report is tabled to Parliament on an annual basis, it will come to committees—perhaps to this committee on trade, or to the human rights committee—and at that time we will probably have you back as the public servants who would have been involved in the shaping of that report. We'll also hear from some of the NGOs about that report. It will give us an opportunity on an annual basis to discuss human rights in Colombia both in Parliament and at the committee level, so I think it's important that there be good, solid engagement of the NGO community during the writing of those reports. We don't want to see a significant delta between the NGO community's views on this and the government's views on it. To the extent that it's possible to bring together a consensus, I think it's going to be very important for the credibility of that reporting as we go forward.

One question I have on human rights in Venezuela—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brison. That's 10 minutes.

Hon. Scott Brison: Oh, I'm sorry. Thank you.

The Chair: Monsieur Laforest.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for coming here to share information with us.

Getting back to what Mr. Brison said, it corresponds to the first question I had in mind. It has to do with the amendment he said he was planning to move. He indicated that he would be putting forward to the committee an amendment having to do with an evaluation that the minister would present every year to the House. I would like to know how the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade can carry out this evaluation while being as impartial as possible.

Will you consult with the unions on these matters? Do you evaluate the level of control that the Colombian government has over the paramilitary forces? Do you assess the overall situation and any improvements that may have occurred? Does someone travel to the country? Would you also be open to recommendations from the committee as to the persons who should be consulted in Colombia or will you merely be providing us with a list of persons that you will be selecting? Would you be open to the idea of the committee providing you with a list of persons that should be consulted?

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I can answer the part of your question that concerns our ability and our contacts with NGOs, but I'm not in a position to comment on...

[*English*]

I'm sorry, I don't know the word for "amendment".

At any rate, I'm certainly aware of the conversations that have taken place in the House, but there has been no formal tabling of an amendment, so I'm not in a position to be able to comment directly. I don't know what that amendment would pertain to.

But I can give you reassurances with regard to—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: Therefore, I would assume that if the amendment is adopted, we can have you back to find out more about matters that will concern the department. Because what you are telling us today is that you cannot answer this question. No doubt then we will require additional information later.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: We have always been very open with this committee with regard to the contacts we have in Colombia, with regard to the various unions as well as NGOs. We are happy to share those lists with you.

We have to be very careful about giving any commentary on the various organizations, because we would not want to bias in any way.... We can certainly tell you their reputation, I guess, within the country, but we would not want to be subjective in giving our assessment; we think it's important for the committee to meet all measures of organizations.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: Regarding the human rights issue that you yourself raised earlier, we know that the current President of Colombia has made some commitments in this area. I would imagine that that you are going to do an evaluation, since you mentioned it. This is one of the recommendations that you are making.

Has the President passed any laws and taken any concrete steps since last fall, or has he merely made some promises? Have you evaluated the situation?

• (1605)

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: If I understand the question correctly, you are asking if the new President and the new Government of Colombia will respect the commitments...

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: ...that he himself made. To date, has he taken any concrete steps in this direction?

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I cannot speak for the Government of Colombia, but I do know that all parties in Colombia have signed on to the democratic security policy.

[*English*]

The democratic security policy of President Uribe is engagement with the international community to monitor the human rights situation. All opposition parties have agreed to accept that policy. Therefore, we are very confident that any new government in Colombia would certainly follow the same.

[*Translation*]

Isn't that what you were asking?

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: No, it's fine. You stated that all parties were on board. My NDP colleague is signalling to me that he disagrees with that statement.

Would you care to comment about the situation? To date, have any laws been passed to translate these commitments into action? During the election campaign, the President of Colombia made a number of commitments with respect to human rights. I would image that to uphold these commitments, some concrete action is required.

Your department was responsible for negotiating this free trade agreement with the Government of Colombia. Now that the agreement has been finalized, I'd like to know what steps you are taking to ensure that the commitments that were made are being met. Or, are we merely observers of a situation that has not evolved?

[*English*]

Mr. David Plunkett: In general terms, when agreements come into effect and a treaty is concluded with a country, inevitably there are going to be changes of government on potentially both sides. These agreements always will have an institutional clause that says if one party or the other wishes to terminate an agreement, there are procedures set in place to do so.

But as far as I'm aware, at least within my realm of activities, these treaties simply carry on after a change of government. We have no reason to believe otherwise.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: That's not really what I was asking, unfortunately. Not at all.

I was asking you if you had observed any changes since last fall, in the wake of the commitments made by President Uribe Vélez. Has he taken any concrete steps to follow through on the promises that he made? How would you assess the steps that have been taken in Colombia?

[*English*]

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: We have seen enormous engagement by the Colombian government on a number of international agreements, as well as bilateral. Yes, we believe that largely they have been respected and followed through. There have been occasional setbacks where they have not been able to complete agreements on as timely a basis as we would have liked. That's when our dialogue and our engagement definitely increase. We raise this at every juncture and at the highest level, including with the minister. Overall, though, I think the performance is a very strong one. It's not

easy in a country like Colombia that's still struggling with an internal civil conflict.

• (1610)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: If it's so difficult, why then was the government so determined to negotiate a free trade agreement? You have just admitted that the process is not that easy in a country like Colombia. That is precisely what we dislike about this agreement. It was negotiated in a climate in which there is no regard for human rights. You have just admitted that in so many words.

[*English*]

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: What we look at, sir, is the trend line that...the movement has been very positive. What I'm saying—I'm just being realistic—is that there are sometimes setbacks, but the conviction of the Colombian government to move forward, to open its doors to international scrutiny, is very clear and has been very strong. We have seen, as I said in my presentation, real improvements with regard to the general security situation, and even a decrease in the homicide rates.

So yes, there is substantial, concrete evidence of that conviction.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Monsieur Laforest.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming forward, but I must admit that I'm more disturbed now than I was before you started your presentation.

If the amendment calls upon the Government of Canada to accept whatever reporting mechanism Colombia puts into place to monitor human rights organizations, what we see is the monitoring taking place currently. I must say that I'm deeply disappointed in what is a whitewashing of your presentation.

The number of disappearances has increased; the number of false positives—which are killings, as you know—of mainly Afro-Colombians and aboriginal Colombians who were massacred by the Colombian military, often with rewards and incentives, has increased; and the sexual torture of Colombian women has increased. Yet none of that is reflected in your presentation today.

I think that's unfortunate, because if the debate is whether or not the Colombian government reporting on itself or having some oversight from the federal government would improve the human rights situation, one would have expected that there would have been ongoing monitoring. And nothing of what human rights organizations are saying is reflected in this presentation today.

Now, of course there will be human rights organizations here. Many of them have already indicated that they want to come before committee, so they will have a chance to rebut. But if this is an example of how the Canadian government reports on Colombian human rights violations, I must say that it certainly underscores the argument that an amendment where the Colombian government reports on itself or the Canadian government simply rubber-stamps that report.... I think those concerns will increase after the presentation today.

I'm going to ask you two questions. The first question is around the amendment, and whether you've seen it. I think you've already responded to Mr. Laforest that—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Julian.

We haven't seen an amendment yet. The amendment has not been tabled; what you're talking about is hypothetical. If you have other questions to ask, do that, but I don't think we need to talk about an amendment we haven't even seen yet.

Hon. Scott Brison: Just for clarity, Mr. Chair, the amendment requires each country, both the Canadian government and the Colombian government, to write independent reports on human rights in both countries. I would urge my colleague—

The Chair: I'm sure we'll get to this discussion, Mr. Brison, thank you. But we haven't seen it yet, so I'm not going to have a discussion on the amendment at this time.

Hon. Scott Brison: —not to impugn the reputations of our public servants and to accuse them of pre-emptively rubber-stamping a report written in another country, because that would not be consistent with the proposed amendment.

Mr. Peter Julian: I think, Mr. Chair, what Mr. Brison said is that there is an amendment, and I would expect, given that there has been a number of letters coming in and e-mails from human rights organizations wanting to comment on this, that he would table it—I would hope in the next day or two.

Obviously there is an amendment. Mr. Brison has just stated that.

The Chair: No, no, we are aware that one is coming. We just haven't seen it yet. It's a little premature to have that debate.

Mr. Peter Julian: I must say, Mr. Chair, given that we're having these discussions, given that Mr. Brison asked questions around his amendment, it's perfectly in order for me to make comments about whether or not—

The Chair: Well, I'm sorry, but it is not. I'm the chair, and I'm saying it's not in order. If you want to challenge the chair, challenge the chair. Otherwise, you can proceed with other questions.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, we've had Mr. Brison make comments about his amendment. You did not rule him out of order. I'm sorry, but you have to be consistent.

The Chair: Well, I'm ruling you out of order.

Mr. Peter Julian: Well, I think very clearly there'd be a lack of consistency there.

•(1615)

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Chair, if I can help bring peace—

The Chair: No, thanks. No, we're not going to—

Hon. Scott Brison: —I don't have a difficulty with Mr. Julian speaking about my amendment; I just wish he'd tell the truth about it.

Mr. Peter Julian: Well, hopefully we'll see it soon.

Mr. Chair, I will go on to another subject.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Peter Julian: However, I do think it's in order to discuss the other element, and that's the question of the elections.

We've had, from independent monitoring, very clear concerns raised about fear and intimidation, coercion and fraud, all linked to the current Colombian elections. These are reports that are available from reputable human rights organizations and from election monitoring.

That's not reflected in your presentation today. Are you aware, then, of the concerns around the Colombian elections, and has there been a case in the past where Canada has moved to try to implement legislation that a government or a regime wants at a time when there are concerns about whether free and fair elections can take place?

I certainly cannot think of an example. Normally, Canada steps back during an election process to monitor and ensure that the election takes place in a free and fair manner. I cannot think of a single example of where in the past Canada has moved forward at a time when there are concerns about whether those elections are free and fair, whether there is coercion and fear, whether there is fraud and intimidation taking place during the electoral process, which, as you all know, ends on May 30.

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: It is a regular part of any embassy's job to monitor very closely, particularly during electoral periods. They're doing that at the moment. You will recall that Colombia is probably one of the longest-standing democratic regimes in the region, and from what we have seen in past elections, the electoral process, which is observed by international observers, is very transparent and clean.

Mr. Peter Julian: But you haven't read any of those reports. The observers are down there and they are releasing these reports.

Are you unaware of any of the concerns around the Colombian elections?

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: There are always concerns raised during electoral periods, just by the nature of its being an electoral period. Yes, we are, and we do have reports, but the overall assessment is not of the nature that you are indicating at the moment.

Mr. Peter Julian: According to the independent monitors, it certainly is, but I'll let the independent human rights organizations speak to that.

I want to talk about the business case. In many cases when we've signed bilateral agreements, our exports to those markets have actually gone down. Costa Rica is a notable example. We're talking constant dollars, because otherwise we're talking apples and oranges. Our exports before signing were \$77 million in constant dollars; and now, eight years after ratification of Costa Rica, they're \$73 million. So we signed this bilateral; there would have been similar comments made before the trade agreement that, "My goodness, there's going to be incredible prosperity for Canadian exports." But our exports have gone down. In all of the five bilaterals that have been signed, including EFTA, we've actually seen a decrease of \$832 million in Canadian exports to those markets since those agreements were signed in 2009.

Since the business case clearly isn't there, what are we doing wrong? What do we have to change? Even in the example of the Colombian market, if we put aside this idea of rewarding the regime when egregious human rights violations are a daily or weekly occurrence, what is the government actually doing for product promotion in Colombia?

Mr. David Plunkett: Your question is somewhat multi-pronged. I'll deal with part of it and then ask my colleagues to weigh in.

In terms of some of the other agreements that we have done, particularly most recently, I think it's important to keep in mind that the EFTA and the Peru deals, which are the two that have just come into effect, have not even been in effect a year yet. I think it's too early to make a judgment on their impact in terms of real numbers, because we haven't even got a full year's statistics yet.

In addition, you're looking at numbers during one of the most difficult economic periods of the last century. There can be all sorts of reasons for numbers to go in any direction.

In terms of Costa Rica, frankly, I don't know. Our job is to build an architecture to try to improve opportunities for Canadian business. We cannot force Canadian business to take advantage of what may or may not be there. So I can't make a judgment as to why Costa Rica is or isn't....

Let me speak to Carol, because she is closer to this particular deal. She can identify some of the specifics as to where we think this will be of benefit to us.

•(1620)

Mr. Peter Julian: Just in the interests of time, the question was on what we are actually spending for product promotion in Colombia.

As I understand, then, there are no real discussions within DFAIT as to why, when we sign these bilaterals, our exports actually go down.

Mr. David Plunkett: That's not what I—

Mr. Peter Julian: That's something that hopefully my Conservative partners around the table will be concerned with.

Mr. David Plunkett: That's actually not what I said. Plus, I would ask...and Alex can address the promotion issue separately.

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Whenever we negotiate an FTA, we put together a package to be able to market the trade agreement, to be able to make sure that Canadian companies are informed and are

activated. We're doing that right at the moment with the Peru free trade agreement, and we will do the same, of course, should the Colombian free trade agreement be approved.

You can't force companies to engage. I mean, there's—

Mr. Peter Julian: I'm sorry, but question was this: what is the budget for Canadian product promotion in Colombia?

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Ah; product promotion.

I don't know if I have that on me right now, sir. I know that we have a budget of about \$400,000 for the operation of the whole trade and general relations section of the embassy. Of course part of that will be devoted...but really, much of it comes out of headquarters. That's why I wouldn't necessarily have it.

Mr. Peter Julian: Could you provide it?

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I would be able to provide that to you.

The Chair: Thank you.

That was only nine minutes. That was a pretty good start—with time out for other discussions.

We're moving now to Mr. Keddy.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to our witnesses, and thank you.

I just have a short statement, because it needs to go on the record, Mr. Chair.

Part of the difficulty of listening to the allegations of human rights abuses from Mr. Julian is the difficulty that he had come to this committee at one point and made accusations of two separate incidents of indigenous peoples being massacred in the jungle, that it was government forces that did it. When we investigated those reports, it turned out that it was actually the FARC who had massacred those two families of people.

Mr. Peter Julian: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Mr. Chair, that points needs to be made: the testimony has to be in order—

The Chair: Do you have a point of order, Mr. Julian?

Mr. Peter Julian: Well, the parliamentary secretary is—

Mr. Gerald Keddy: And you've never apologized, so it would be a good time.

The Chair: Mr. Keddy, Mr. Julian has a point of order.

Is this a point of order, Mr. Julian?

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes.

Mr. Chair, I think you're trying to keep us on track, and this has clearly nothing to do with the presentation that was made.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Keddy.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Again, anytime Mr. Julian wants to apologize for deliberately misleading the committee on that, I'd be happy to accept it.

Mr. Peter Julian: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, that's unparliamentary language. I'd ask him to withdraw.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: No, I will not withdraw. It's not unparliamentary, and you know better.

• (1625)

Mr. Peter Julian: It's unparliamentary.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: To our witnesses, I very much appreciate your coming in. I know you have a difficult job. I echo Mr. Brison's words that we have a first-class, top-quality bureaucracy in the members of the foreign service and members of international trade working throughout the world on our behalf and on behalf of our companies. So thank you for that.

The other point I want to raise is that this is the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. Every country in the world has seen a decrease in their trade balances. It only makes sense that Colombia would see a decrease in their trade balances.

But I'd like to add one other point, and I'd like to get your opinion on it. One of the reasons is that this bill has been held up in our Parliament for far too long. It's been held up for, I believe, the wrong reasons, and many of our companies, rather than pay 15% duty to do business in Colombia, have started doing business through Mexican sub-companies that they own. That business now is being certified and goes on Mexico's balance sheet instead of Canada's balance sheet. I can certainly produce witnesses who are looking at doing business in Mexico right now rather than building equipment in Canada and shipping it into Colombia, because we have not been able to ratify this free trade agreement.

Would anyone like to comment on that fact? And are you aware that this is occurring?

Ms. Carol Nelder-Corvari (Director, International Trade Policy Division, Department of Finance): Thank you for that question.

When I was preparing to come before this committee, I was thinking back; it's been two years since negotiations have been completed. Part of the reason this FTA was aggressively negotiated was due to the recommendations of this committee to undertake defensive FTAs to ensure that we don't become uncompetitive in markets in which our trading partners are negotiating FTAs.

The U.S., of course, has negotiated with Colombia. They have just completed negotiations with the EU as well. We're facing tariffs from 10% to over 100%, so I don't know how the elimination of those tariffs would lead to a decline in exports. Of course, the economic recession has seriously undermined trade around the world.

We have an opportunity here. It's a very strong agreement. There is broad-based support among industry across Canada and among agricultural producers.

Now is the time to move to creating an advantage for Canada, which is what we're trying to do with this agreement and our global commerce strategy in general.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: I'd like to make another comment, because I think it bears repeating. It has been said at this committee before. When the committee was in Colombia, we met with President Uribe. I'd like to tell you that I was extremely impressed by both President Uribe and his cabinet. They're accused of being a right-wing government, but I would call them a coalition government.

There were people within Mr. Uribe's cabinet from every persuasion, from the far left to the far right to centre-right to centre-left. People who had been kidnapped by FARC are now in cabinet, and people who had been kidnapped by paramilitaries are now in cabinet. To me, they had one unifying detail, and it stood out among them all: they all wanted to pursue a better Colombia, a Colombia that, although steeped in democratic traditions, had faced serious obstacles in the last 20-year period.

They saw themselves coming out of this period. They had safety and the ability to travel. They've not had that for many years in Colombia. No one is saying that the situation is perfect there, but I cannot understand how anyone could say that Colombia has not improved. Colombia, by every standard, has improved in every single area that I can use to mark their progress, from human rights to labour laws to abolition of child labour to a better understanding and protection of the environment, and on and on in every category.

I know you folks have travelled in Colombia and I know you understand what this trade agreement does. I'd like your take on the fact that, yes, there is work to be done, but Colombia is moving in the right direction.

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Thank you very much, Mr. Keddy.

I can only concur with your assessment. It's always difficult when you're dealing with statistics. I mean, you cannot look at a photo stop; you have to look at the trend lines.

As I said in my opening remarks, that is what we've monitored, and that's what we're hearing reported by very reputable UN organizations, that the trend lines are very positive. There continue to be challenges, but what you have in Colombia is a government that's willing to take on those challenges and to be able to continue to improve.

The reason we're interested in a trade agreement is that we think this is one of many tools in our toolbox that we can use to help the Colombian people to have a much stronger future, to have alternatives, to have greater opportunities, to have prosperity and security in their country, and to become even a better member of our neighbourhood.

Thank you.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: If there's any time left—

The Chair: There is no time. There will be time if we do an extra round, so I think we will. We have other business to do today, but if we could keep it to five minutes, I would be happy to entertain a quick round.

We'll start with Mr. Silva for a five-minute round.

• (1630)

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): I'll be very brief, because I think I want to share my time with Mr. Brison.

I would like some clarification, and maybe you could help us clarify things. I've been trying to follow the elections in Colombia. My understanding is that the two front-running candidates were former ministers in the Uribe government and that the third one is the former mayor of Bogotá.

I believe all of them are pretty much on the same page on a lot of security issues and also on trade, but I wanted to know whether departments on the ground have learned whether there is disagreement among them on the issue of the trade agreement we're looking at.

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I'm not aware of any disagreements among the major parties that are contesting the election with regard to moving forward on a free trade agreement with Canada or with regard to the general agreement on moving forward on the security and democracy policy that has, as I said, engendered this greater participation and monitoring by the international community. There seems to be bipartisan agreement moving forward.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you.

I'm not sure if the chair will allow me to ask my other question, but you were at the subcommittee before, talking about Venezuela. There is an issue of concern, that a dual Canadian-Colombian, Dr. Cossio, in fact has been charged with espionage in Venezuela.

What is the department doing about this particular human rights situation? Are you looking at monitoring the situation?

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I think, Mr. Silva, you're very aware that I'm unable to comment on such cases because of the privacy requirements.

Mr. Mario Silva: I thought I would ask.

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Yes.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you.

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: But we are aware, and we are very much engaged.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Brison, quickly.

Hon. Scott Brison: The broader question, besides the case of Dr. Cossio.... Dr. Cossio and seven members of his family were arrested by the Venezuelan police on April 1. Foreign Affairs Minister Bermúdez in Colombia has spoken out on this, and is loudly protesting this before the UN, the OAS, and other international fora. That's one specific human rights issue that we're concerned about with Venezuela.

But in terms of the broader risk that the Chavez regime represents in the Andean region, given the threats of Chavez to close the border to Colombian goods—I believe the Venezuelan market represents about 40% of Colombian exports now—and given the fact that FARC is increasingly basing itself in Venezuela and is being harboured by Chavez, in terms of the geopolitical aspects and the geopolitical stability of the Andean region, how important is this agreement to fortifying Colombia in the face of the threat that Chavez represents?

Could you speak to the human rights situation in Venezuela and compare the trend line with Colombia's in recent years? We know that civil society, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech don't

exist in Venezuela, as an example, but I'd be interested in your thoughts and observations based on your analysis on the ground.

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Thank you very much.

I would need to be a bit cautious, given the public nature of the forum. I would say, though, that we lead by example. What I mean is that our interest in engagement on a dialogue on human rights, whether it's with Colombia or Venezuela, or on a free trade agreement in the case of Colombia, is really led by our values—our adherence to open markets and to opportunity. It is not part of a larger geopolitical agenda. I think the best way to promote greater peace, security, and prosperity in the region is really through those three pillars of our engagement policy on democracy, on security, and on prosperity.

The impact, I would think, would be a positive one. I believe very much that when Canada puts forward it best—its values and its principles—it can only help to improve conditions. When countries like Chile, with which we have a free trade agreement, continue to thrive both economically and democratically, it's an example that can speak better than any other speech about the benefits of open trade and democracy.

With regard to a comparison, I would prefer to defer, because I think it's very difficult when you get into the realm of statistics and comparisons. No two countries are ever exactly alike. Their constitutions differ and change.

I just gave testimony earlier today at the Subcommittee on International Human Rights with regard to Venezuela, where the trend line is very disturbing. We are seeing a greater concentration of power. We are seeing—not only us, but also organizations such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights—decreasing space for opposition, commentary, and freedom of expression. At the same time, the security situation has very much worsened. I think it might be surprising to find out that the homicide rate in Venezuela is actually far higher than it is in Colombia.

•(1635)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brison.

We're going to have to move on to Mr. Trost.

Mr. Brad Trost (Saskatoon—Humboldt, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

From my perspective, this is quite a timely report. A couple of weeks ago I was down in Bogotá and Cali. I have a sister-in-law from Cali, so I was down there on some family business. I've been there before, and it's an absolutely beautiful and spectacular country. We drove an hour outside of Cali in the countryside.

I think the thing that would surprise a lot of people who haven't been there is how secure it is. I didn't see a single police officer, with the exception of a couple of highway cops checking for speeders, as they would in Saskatoon, and I only saw one soldier the whole way. The public image of the country and the reality on the ground are quite different.

I want to follow up on something Mr. Plunkett spoke to, and Mr. Cannis was going this way in some of his earlier questioning: Canada's advantage in ratifying the treaty earlier, relative to the EU and the United States.

I was wondering, Mr. Plunkett, if you and perhaps other witnesses could elaborate in more detail on the advantages Canadian businesses would get if we went earlier. Could you give some specific examples, such as the auto industry—where apparently tariffs in Colombia are dropping 35%—or agriculture and so on?

What are our advantages—speaking very specifically—by getting this done sooner?

Ms. Carol Nelder-Corvari: Thank you.

As I indicated, this is a very robust market access agreement. Most Colombian tariffs will be eliminated on most Canadian exports immediately upon implementation of this agreement, and that includes wheat, pulses—which are key exports—a variety of paper products, machinery, and equipment.

I think you're thinking of some off-road motor vehicles that are being exported from Canada. Those, I think, are being phased out over a five-year period; I'm not sure, so I'd have to check specifically on that. But for most of our exports, the tariffs will be eliminated immediately, and those tariffs range from 10% to over 100%, depending on what the products are. The rest—

Mr. Brad Trost: In some of these products we compete directly with the Americans in selling to the Colombian market. Is that correct?

Ms. Carol Nelder-Corvari: Absolutely, and our wheat exports in particular compete head-on with the United States. I would say that in all categories we're competing with the United States. In paper products, machinery, and equipment, that is certainly the case. So yes, this agreement provides an important advantage to our exporters.

Mr. Brad Trost: On certain crops—you named pulses, wheat, barley, etc.—the tariffs will be vanishing, but the Colombians chose not to eliminate all the tariffs on all the agriculture crops. On beans, for example, I believe the average tariff is going to be around 60% going forward.

From your perspective, what was the Colombian reasoning? Why were they very free and open on certain crops, but protective on a couple of specific crops? What was their reasoning behind total elimination in some agricultural products and high protection in others?

Ms. Carol Nelder-Corvari: In these types of negotiations, the negotiations focus on areas where there are sensitivities, and in those areas where Colombia had domestic sensitivities, they'd be demanding to phase the tariff out over a period of time to allow for adjustment. Those sensitivities are accommodated by these longer phase-outs.

In the case of beans, I believe there was a tariff rate quota, a free—

• (1640)

Mr. Brad Trost: There's a basic amount that's allowed tariff-free, and then the tariff goes up.

Ms. Carol Nelder-Corvari: Yes, that's right. In that case, we look at Canadian traditional exports to Colombia, we look at growth, and we say that at a minimum—

Mr. Brad Trost: Let me follow up.

The explanation that I got down there was that the crops that went to zero were by and large crops that would be competing against Chile, the United States, and the EU. The crops on which they maintained a high tariff were crops from what we would call almost subsistence farmers, people with one or two acres. In that way the trade agreement did not disadvantage the poor farmers, but at the same time it would help to lower food costs for the broader consuming public, particularly the poor. Bakeries all across the country, of course, would watch their flour costs go down.

Would what I'm saying here be consistent with what you gathered in your more technical language, in terms of what the Colombians were doing and what their reasoning was to protect their poor while at the same time lowering food costs for their overall population?

Ms. Carol Nelder-Corvari: There is always preferential treatment given in any trade negotiations we have with a developing country, so we would be looking for them to phase out tariffs over a longer period of time than Canada would. Our tariffs were phased out either immediately or over three to seven years, whereas Colombia would phase theirs out over a five- to ten-year period. Those concerns are always balanced in arriving at the principles of the negotiations at the outset.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Monsieur Guimond.

[*Translation*]

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

Good day to the witnesses.

My question is for Mrs. Bugailiskis. On page one of your statement, you note that conditions have greatly improved. You refer to the country's performance in important areas such as the general security situation and violence toward unionists and community leaders.

I've been listening to you say for a while now that there is not a lot of data available and that this data is also somewhat unreliable. Yet, you do make a number of statements, one of which is that conditions have vastly improved.

How can you really say that conditions in Colombia have improved if you consider the data that you have to be somewhat unreliable?

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Thank you for your question. Let me clarify something for you.

[*English*]

What I want to be careful about is comparing my data with other data. I'm very certain and confident in my data because I know where I've collected it and I know it comes from reputable sources, from UN organizations and from our embassy. What I'm very careful about is when I start to compare other people's data, sources of which I'm not aware of. That's what I'm just making clear.

I'm very confident the Colombian government takes very good data, but we don't just rely on Colombian sources. We rely very much on international organizations like the UN and as well through NGOs and through our embassy, so I have utmost confidence. I don't want to get into actual percentages and points, but I can tell you that overall, the trend line is very positive. And as I've said, there are occasional fluctuations, there are incidences that happen, which we follow up immediately, but the overall trend line—and the UN organizations will support us in that view—is very positive.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Guimond: Despite the fact that conditions are improving, it is also fair to say that there are still a number of problems.

My NDP colleague often talks about the fact that he receives many e-mails from NGOs that are quite worried about the free trade agreement. I also receive many such e-mails. I have a stack of mail in my office sent by certain NGOs that are very concerned about conditions in Colombia. Most of these NGOs point out that in 2008, the committee unanimously recommended that an independent review of human rights in Colombia be conducted.

Why the reluctance to hold this independent review that would give parliamentarians an opportunity to make an enlightened assessment, based on concrete, independent findings, of conditions in Colombia?

• (1645)

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Do you not think that the UN is an independent body?

Mr. Claude Guimond: A impact assessment study has already been prepared and witnesses seated at this very table have recommended a number of models to us. Several consultants or interested parties could report back on the tangible impacts. You can rest assured that I am not calling the United Nations into question.

Let me clarify my question. What would you say if a group of independent experts were to conduct an impact assessment study of the proposed free trade legislation currently under review by the committee? The impact of every single component of the agreement could be measured. Why the reluctance to go ahead with an assessment of this nature?

[*English*]

The Chair: I think that question is asking for an opinion that it's not up to the department to provide. You were asking for policy, for political opinions. That's not something you want to ask of the department officials. You could ask that of the minister, I'm sure.

I'm not going to ask you to respond to that question.

That does wrap up your time, Mr. Guimond.

We're going to close with Mr. Holder, for five minutes.

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

I'd like to thank our guests for coming today. It's nice to have you back to give us updates on what is going on in our relationship, our negotiations with Colombia. And I'm really delighted it's back here in committee so that it can be dealt with appropriately and we go forward.

Mr. Plunkett, you made some reference in your testimony that we had great news. You indicated that just a couple of weeks ago—not even, on April 9—Colombia had reopened its market to Canadian cattle. You acknowledge the work of ministers Van Loan and Ritz in doing this, and we appreciate that thoughtful comment.

Members around this table will understand the importance of exporting cattle around the world, and now that this has reopened, do you have any sense of what the potential is for that, and the timing, what it's going to take to truly get our exports going to Colombia? What would that process be? They obviously can't turn it over on short notice, but can you give us some sense of that, please?

Mr. David Plunkett: The best I can do with what I have available is that the Canadian Beef Export Federation estimates that the Colombian market could be worth around \$6 million, so they will be pleased to see this market opening. Now, this is an estimate, obviously.

The other important thing is that, as you know, we have had challenges globally in trying to deal with this BSE issue and trying to get our markets open. Each time we get a positive result by way of a country opening its market again, we can use that in lobbying other markets to indicate that Canadian products are safe and that country X should be opening its market as Colombia has.

Mr. Ed Holder: I'd like to quote Colombian Foreign Affairs Minister Jaime Bermúdez Merizalde, who said last year that “every inch that we open up to legitimate trade, for legitimate investment, for legitimate tourism, etc., is an inch that we Colombia take away from narco-trafficking and terrorist activities, which is a key issue for Colombia, for the region and for the entire continent”.

We have these discussions, sir, about human rights, and there isn't anyone around this table who doesn't care about that as a significant issue. Why do you believe that strengthening the economy of Colombia through free trade will improve human rights?

Mr. David Plunkett: I would share the view that Alex has put forward a couple of times before the committee, which is that economic growth through liberalized rules-based trade and investment can contribute to alleviating poverty and create new wealth and employment opportunities for, in this case, Colombian citizens. We think that is a valuable tool, both from an economic perspective and in terms of governance and the broader issues that Alex has referred to before.

• (1650)

Mr. Ed Holder: I'd like to add to that, if I can. Last year we heard testimony from Professor Daniel Mejia. He's a respected professor and researcher from the faculty of economics at Los Andes University in Bogotá. He talked about increased protection of unionists, among other things. He provided some very good statistics-based measures from 2002 to 2009 about dramatic decreases in killings, dramatic decreases in kidnappings, and dramatic decreases in serious violence. I would like to give the government of President Uribe credit for that.

Here's my practical question. President Uribe's term is coming to a close, and he is not seeking re-election. What is the sense of U.S. trade officials in terms of the ability of this agreement to carry on legitimately and to do what it was intended to do? This may well be opinion. Would a change of government impact those strong intentions? As we go forward with this free trade deal and put it into play, obviously political considerations in Colombia would be of some concern to us.

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Perhaps I can respond to that, sir.

President Uribe has a very high degree of popularity. Now, that's the individual, but even more important has been the policy. The Colombian people have made great strides in the recent past, as Mr. Trost said earlier. To be able to walk freely and to drive outside the capital into the countryside are huge improvements. They do not want to lose those, and within the election period you see in all parties a bipartisan agreement to continue along with that policy. Moving forward, there would be a high degree of agreement to respect and build upon that legacy.

Ultimately it really is with the people of Colombia, and I think that in the coming election their voices will show that they want to continue with this very positive change.

Mr. Ed Holder: Have I one last question, sir?

The Chair: You have a short one.

Mr. Ed Holder: Mr. Plunkett, you mentioned that total trade between both countries in 2009 was in excess of \$1 billion, specifically \$1.3 billion. What is rather interesting is that from 2005 to 2009, Canada's exports grew. There have been some fluctuations, but exports to Colombia have grown by about 35%, and that can only be good for Canadian farmers and businesses.

What I see in terms of agricultural products is the removal of a 16.6% average tariff on beef, pork, wheat, barley, and pulses. That's partly what Mr. Trost has talked about, and I would think that

provinces all across the country have the farmers who are impacted by that. On industrial goods an average reduction of 12% will affect mining, newspapers, machinery, and equipment. That is all good news for Canadian exports.

Although we have increased our exports to Colombia in the last five years by some 35%, have you done any projections as to growth in Canadian exports to Colombia once we have completed the free trade deal? I will acknowledge that some of those tariffs are gradual, although many of them are immediately eliminated.

Ms. Carol Nelder-Corvari: Just on that, I don't have any projections. There has been steady growth, as you're saying, in our exports to Colombia. We know that if the Colombian economy is going to continue to grow at the pace it has been growing over the last several years, pre-recession, then they will have to make major investments in infrastructure. This is part of what's of major interest to Canadian companies, and to the Colombian government as well. They'll be looking for competitive services and goods to help build that infrastructure, which is vital to their prosperity.

Mr. Ed Holder: And you think we might have some procurement opportunities, which is always good.

Ms. Carol Nelder-Corvari: Absolutely. That's part of this agreement.

Mr. Ed Holder: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thanks to our witnesses. We kept you a little longer than usual. I appreciate your responses and the excellent briefing that you provided at the outset.

With that, I'm going to have to move on to committee business.

I'll say adieu. Thank you for coming.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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