

GENERAL AGREEMENT ON TARIFFS AND TRADE

INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE 1960-61 TARIFF CONFERENCE

1 SEPTEMBER 1960

Address delivered by Sir Richard Powell,
Permanent Secretary of the Board of Trade,
representing the President of the Board of Trade

It is with mixed feelings that I make my first appearance in these surroundings. On the one hand I feel honour and pleasure being privileged to represent the Government of the United Kingdom and the President of the Board of Trade at the opening of a conference which, in my country, is generally regarded as of very special importance. With that is mixed diffidence at appearing at a gathering where, in spite of what Mr. Randall has just said, I have no doubt that everyone is more expert than I am, to whom GATT has hitherto been one of the major mysteries of life. However, I have come here to be educated and despite the handicaps from which I suffer I will, if I may, venture upon a few brief comments.

The United Kingdom as a great trading nation - a nation whose very life depends on trade - has always taken a close interest in the General Agreement, has participated fully in all its activities and has given strong support to its broad objective of freeing international trade from limitations and restrictions. This interest and support has been further marked by the appointment this year of a Permanent Representative at the seat of the GATT with the rank of Ambassador, in the person of Sir Edgar Cohen who is here with me today and who will lead the United Kingdom team in the forthcoming negotiations.

The United Kingdom Government has made clear its attitude to this conference in various statements in Parliament in the last two or three months. In June, the Minister of State, the Board of Trade, stressed our intention to play our full part in the negotiations and our willingness to make important reductions in our tariffs, provided that we can obtain in return adequate concessions. It is our intention throughout to work in close touch with our partners in the Commonwealth and in the European Free Trade Association. We have always in the past worked very closely with our long-standing partners in the Commonwealth and now we have new and valued partners in the European Free Trade Association with whom we hope to work very closely throughout this conference. The views expressed by the Minister of State were further reinforced during the important debate in the House of Commons on European economic affairs on 25 July last by Mr. Selwyn Lloyd, who was then Foreign Secretary and is now the Chancellor of the Exchequer and as such perhaps even more closely concerned with these matters than before, and by the President of the Board of Trade, to whose remarks I will return a little later. The United Kingdom Government regards this as the most important conference since the original Tariff Conference in 1947, both because the scope for fruitful action seems greater

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than at any time since then and because of the new and important developments in the organization of trading groups that have taken place in the past two or three years. Progress made since 1947 has indeed been remarkable. The steps taken from time to time may perhaps have seemed modest in themselves but their cumulative effect has been very great and, with the end of the era of quantitative restrictions on industrial manufactures and of European dependence on aid, a new chapter seems to be opening.

This conference has been called at the initiative of the United States. Though their delegation's power to bargain is not unlimited it seems to have greater scope for action than ever before and we hope that it will be possible to use the powers to the full whenever reductions in tariffs can help to expand international trade. The United States clearly has a key role to play in this conference and I need not underline in this gathering the vital importance to the rest of the world of the liberal policies which they have been pursuing and which we are confident that they will continue to pursue. There is a new factor in the situation to which Mr. Randall has of course already referred and Mr. Wahlen - the European Economic Community - which takes the floor for the first time at a tariff conference. The success of the second stage of this conference will depend to a large extent on the outcome of the first and the rest of us will be watching with a benevolent but nonetheless keen interest their approach to the complex new problems which the establishment of the Community has introduced into the affairs of GATT.

We hope for great things but, without wishing to introduce any note of discord into what we hope and expect will be harmonious proceedings, I would like to recall the words of the President of the Board of Trade in the debate on 25 July that the lowering of tariffs cannot be a solution to the problems created by the economic division of Europe. It is a palliative, a useful palliative. We shall therefore continue, as Mr. Wahlen said in his opening address, to seek by other means a broader and more far-reaching solution to these problems which carry with them the risk of political divisions and weaknesses which have been recently recognized in the communiqués issued after the visit of the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary to Bonn and the Lord Privy Seal's subsequent visit to Rome. I need hardly say at this assembly that such a solution must obviously be consistent with the obligations which the United Kingdom has assumed in GATT. Nonetheless we attach great hopes to the outcome of this conference. I do not think that I should be overstepping the mark if I said that Great Britain will be in a forthcoming mood and if this is reciprocated there should be results of value not only to the United Kingdom but to the rest of the trading world assembled here in Geneva. We must wish the negotiators well and hope that they will stay the course in the long, laborious but fruitful task on which they are now embarking.