

'Trade negotiations in Seattle run off the rails' from The ACP-EU Courier (February-March 2000)

**Caption:** Excerpt from an article on the Commission's participation, with a negotiating mandate provided by the Council, in the WTO ministerial conference in Seattle from 29 November to 3 December 1999.

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## Trade negotiations in Seattle run off the rails

by Kenneth Karl

The ministerial conference on multilateral trade held in Seattle in the United States from 29 November to 3 December will certainly be regarded as one of the most memorable events of the end of the 20th century. The conference was intended to launch a new series of trade negotiations at the start of the new millennium, but discussions between representatives of the 135 member countries of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) came to a sudden end in what was almost unanimously agreed to be failure. In the absence of a consensus, the ministers were barely able to arrive at a text for a final declaration to mark the launch of the new round of negotiations on world trade. And yet it was the anti-globalisation demonstrations, loudly organised by the NGOs and a large proportion of civil society throughout the world, and extensively covered by the media, that grabbed the entire world's attention.

[...]

### Disagreements concerning the agenda

At the end of the Marrakesh conference, the member states of the WTO reached agreement on the timetable to be used to guide the negotiations in Seattle, which was mainly to be devoted to agriculture and services. During the preparatory work, at the request of a number of the member states, new subjects appeared, inevitably lengthening the number of disputes between the countries. These differences in views regarding the agenda of the conference made the negotiations even more complex, especially as last-minute attempts to reach an agreement were unsuccessful.

[...]

### The European Union in unison

Although it was obviously disappointed not to have contributed to the launch of a new round of negotiations that it had wished to be global, the EU returned from Seattle with at least one reason for satisfaction. Unlike at of the Uruguay Round negotiations, which were conducted without a strategy accepted by all the member states of the EU, Europe displayed much greater solidarity and argued much more confidently when defending its huge programme in Seattle. Better prepared than previously, and displaying an intention to take the initiative in certain areas, the EU showed that it has learnt lessons from the past. The Commission attended the third conference of the WTO with a proper negotiating mandate that had been granted to it by the Council and approved by the European Parliament. Under the leadership of Pascal Lamy, the European Commissioner in charge of trade, supported by his counterpart in agriculture Franz Fischler, the European delegation presented its main aims in Seattle:

- To significantly benefit the world economy by liberating trade in goods and services and improving certain rules applicable to it;
- To control globalisation to enable it to benefit everyone. The liberalisation of trade should make it possible to achieve this objective while preserving some legitimate values, such as the environment, culture, protection for consumers etc.;
- To increase the integration of developing countries in the world economy by increasing the cohesion between economics and development.
- To build up the multilateral system of the WTO in order to transform it into a truly universal, equitable and transparent tool for administering international commercial relationships.

Although minor disagreements did arise during the talks in Seattle, as in the case of biotechnology, they did not destroy the cohesion of the EU. Some member states, for example, accused the Commission of having exceeded its mandate in agreeing to a working panel to deal with this matter and turning it into a tactical negotiating element in the eyes of certain members of the delegation. Coming years will doubtless better reveal the ability of the member states of the EU to influence the launch of the new round of negotiations in

the new millennium, equitable to everyone, as specified in its programme.

[...]