

Conservatives renege on agreement to study impact of free trade on human rights in Colombia

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A little report, issued quietly in the middle of June, marked the moment when the Conservatives renege on an agreement to study how a free-trade deal in Colombia might affect human rights.

It's an odd blind spot for the Tories, who, after all, like to argue that trade is good for ordinary people in developing countries. The Harper government has recently started pushing aid projects aimed at showing that the mining industry can bring a better life to people in Africa and Latin America – and Canada-Colombia business, after all, is dominated by mining.

Back in 2010, when the Conservative government was trying to push a free-trade deal with Colombia through a minority Parliament, Stephen Harper's Tories cut a deal: every year, they would report on how trade is affecting human rights in the Latin American nation.

But now, the Harper government cannot be bothered to take that seriously.

A few weeks ago, the government quietly issued the report, the first one that was supposed to take a real look at how human rights in Colombia might be affected by doing more business with Canada. The conclusion was simple: no one knows. In fact, it's so hard to find the answers there's not much point in looking.

On one level, you might be tempted to have some sympathy for the poor officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. After all, it is true that it isn't easy to detail the links between one country's trade and another's human rights.

But look a little closer at the history, and it's clear it was just an exercise in evasion.

The free-trade deal with Colombia went into effect in August, 2011, so when the deadline came six months later for the first report on human rights, the DFAIT officials said there wasn't enough time for a real study.

But that first report promised a real study would come this year. They said they would report in 2013 on any noticeable changes in the human rights in the sectors of the economy most

affected by the trade deal with Canada – agriculture and mining, among others. It would include “baseline information” about human rights and trade in Colombia before the deal with Canada, and then every year they would “update and analyze any changes in trade and in the human rights situation in the most active economic sectors.”

This year, however, they didn’t bother with any of that. In a few paragraphs, they decided it’s “not possible” to establish a direct link between Canadian trade and human rights. The rest of the promised information was missing.

Maybe it’s not surprising. Groups like Amnesty International that tried to ask government officials about their efforts to track human rights in Colombia were given the silent treatment. “Many of the e-mails went unanswered,” said Kathy Price, an Amnesty Colombia campaigner.

But there are certainly reasons to why reporting – simple information – seems worthwhile. Colombia’s human rights situation appears to have improved generally. But rights groups, and UN-appointed experts, say there are still serious cases of intimidation and assassination.

Notably, one big problem they report is in remote areas, often mining areas, where indigenous people and Afro-Colombians are forced off their lands – sometimes so they can be handed over to commercial interests like mines. Ms. Price argues that Canadian companies, for one, should know as much as possible about those issues, so they don’t get caught up in it.

The Conservatives never wanted to link human rights to the free-trade deal. Mr. Harper signed the free-trade deal with the government of former President Alvaro Uribe in 2008 because he wanted to cut some bilateral trade agreements in Latin American, and sympathized with the Colombian president’s efforts to promote a free-market economy and increase security in a country long beset by violence.

But these were the days of minority Parliament, and it became a focal point for opposition from unions and human-rights groups. The NDP was against it, and a lot of Liberals weren’t happy about it either.

Colombia, after all, had a long history of human rights abuses, and amid clashes between leftist rebels and the military, there were also abuses by paramilitary groups linked to government figures, assassinations, intimidation, and people forced off their land. Mr. Uribe’s government insisted it was changing that, but not everyone was convinced.



But the Liberals, offered a deal dreamt up by MP Scott Brison – they’d vote to ratify the trade deal if the government agreed to report on human rights.

Mr. Brison, a big believer in free trade with Colombia, said he thinks the Tories have reneged. The report could be a tool to nudge forward improvement in the rights situation, as well as trade, he argued. “This is an opportunity for Canada to help shape our relationship with Colombia around good corporate social responsibility,” he said.

Campbell Clark covers foreign affairs in Ottawa.