

# TPP Talks Shrouded in Secrecy



by **Scott Harris**

The first high-level round of negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) ever held in Canada wrapped up on July 12 in Ottawa, with negotiators sneaking out the back door to avoid notice, just as they had quietly slinked into the city 10 days earlier.

Even by the standards of the TPP's closed-door, reveal-nothing approach to negotiations, the Ottawa round of talks was extreme in its secrecy. University of Auckland Professor Jane Kelsey, who has attended more than a dozen TPP meetings as a registered stakeholder or observer, and who travelled to Ottawa for the round, called the July 3-12 meetings "the most opaque round of talks on the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement to date."

Given the wide-ranging impacts the TPP would have on Canada if the deal is ever successfully concluded, you'd think the Canadian government might let citizens know what happened in Ottawa. Unfortunately, you'd be wrong. There was no stakeholder engagement process at all during the round. No access or briefings offered to media (except for the Japanese government, which offered updates to Japanese media). No briefing before, during or after the negotiations by lead negotiators. No press release at the end of the talks.

All that was offered was a terse 138-word statement posted on the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Develop-



The Council of Canadians used a giant arrow banner to point to the location of secret TPP trade talks in Ottawa in July.

ment (DFATD) website, which offered an incomplete laundry list of who met and when, but offered nothing about what was discussed, what progress was made, or where the talks go from here.

The dearth of information about where the negotiations stand is troubling given how advanced negotiations are. With U.S. President Barack Obama publicly suggesting that he envisions some significant progress by the time he travels to Asia in November for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and G20 leaders' meetings (conveniently scheduled for after the U.S. mid-term elections), TPP negotiations are clearly at a critical stage.

While there have been rumours that chief negotiators will follow up on the Ottawa round with another meeting sometime in September, followed by a ministerial meeting in October, in order to have something in November to show progress after five years of negotiations, all the information DFATD offered at the conclusion of the round was this: "At this time, dates and location for the next officials' meeting have not been confirmed. A Ministerial meeting has not been scheduled at this time."

But despite the Harper government's secrecy, despite the 11th hour, 4500-kilometre venue shift from Vancouver to Ottawa, despite Harper not even officially acknowledging the meetings were in Ottawa until a week before they started, Canadian civil society groups and their

allies from a number of other TPP countries were able to shine some light on the Ottawa negotiations.

The Council of Canadians kicked things off by revealing the Delta Hotel as the location of the secret talks with a 40-foot-long banner. Experts on a range of negotiating areas travelled to Ottawa to hold briefings with interested negotiators and to deliver messages from concerned citizens. A number of groups protested outside the hotel during the negotiations, and the NDP opposition added its voice to the growing number of critiques about TPP secrecy.

In the end, those collective efforts shifted the Harper Conservatives from pretending the negotiations weren't happening at all to lashing out with the same tired rhetoric at critics of its latest corporate rights agreement.

Between rounds and during rounds, the TPP continues to face stiff and growing opposition in all 12 TPP countries. With serious disagreements on some of the TPP's most contentious elements still standing in the way of a final deal, resistance in the U.S. to granting President Obama the fast-track trade authority he needs, and little chance of anything more than a face-saving announcement in November, the fight against the TPP is far from over.

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