

R NATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Jeffrey Simpson

LUNCH WITH THE AWARD-WINNING CANADIAN JOURNALIST

There was an atmosphere of good humour at the CCCJ's Roppongi Hills Club luncheon on April 16 when Jeffrey Simpson, national affairs columnist at *The Globe and Mail* and recipient of several prestigious awards including the Governor-General's award for non-fiction book writing, took the stage for an informal talk.

Among the CCCJ members present were Murase Haruo (Chairman, Committee on Canada, Keidanren) and Sadaaki Numata, former Japanese Ambassador to Canada and Chairman, H.B.A., CCCJ. Other prominent figures included government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan (MOFA) and the Embassy of Canada to Tokyo, as well as representatives from the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec.

The event started with a brief introduction by CCCJ President Wilf Wakely, followed by a few words by Ambassador Numata. Simpson then proceeded with his address, beginning with a friendly anecdote concerning Numata's unusual music ability.

"How many Japanese can actually sing 18th and 19th century French Canadian folk songs in impeccable French?" he asked, in a near-native Quebec accent. Although on vacation, the media icon happily agreed to discuss Canada's foreign, trade and energy policies and forthcoming election.

On Canada-Japan relations, Simpson stressed that,

as consistently shown by Pew Research Center surveys, "attitudes in Canada towards Japan have been very positive for a long period of time." This bodes well for further cooperation between the two countries and the currently unfolding Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiation. As Simpson put it: "If a Canadian government wanted to do something forcible and aggressive with Japan in a positive way, the wind [...] would be at that government's back."

He warned, however, that despite Canada's strong ties with Japan, the Canadian government would need to pay more attention to the country—and its particular attitudes—if it wishes to expand its Asian trade and market opportunities.

Conversely, too much attention is paid to China, though prevailing Canadian public attitudes towards the People's Republic are generally unfavourable, as revealed by Pew surveys. So it comes as no surprise, said Simpson, "that our government's attitude towards China has waxed and waned." When the Chinese proposed the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiative, "the Americans were quick to lobby their traditional allies not to join." Japan declined, but Canada still hasn't issued a clear opinion, which in Simpson's view means "no"—without actually meaning no in a formal way.

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On the free-trade agreement with Korea, brought into force last January, Simpson maintained Canada was “late for the party,” owing to the auto industry’s lobbying against its implementation. The Americans got there first, he said, though Canada did eventually strike a deal with South Korea, now the country’s seventh biggest trading partner and its third largest in Asia.

Simpson also touched on the signing of other agreements, such as the Canada-European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)—the latter of which has yet to be ratified.

A more serious negotiation, according to Simpson, is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Despite the U.S. push for a TPP conclusion, Simpson believes the Canadian

government’s tactic in the lead-up to the October election is to “rag the puck.” He mentioned that the similar challenges Japan and Canada are facing with regards to supply management are attributable to the sensitivity of a few agricultural products, namely rice (for the Japanese) and dairy products and poultry for Canadians.

“Whether we’re able to carve these exemptions out within the TPP is something I’m sure is desired by both governments.” He added he doesn’t know whether the TPP will come to a head or not before the election.

Simpson also identified some of the energy challenges facing our government and explained that, while finding markets isn’t a problem, satisfying environmental regulations and aspirations is a major national issue. With the onset of climate change, the matter has taken on an international dimension.

If the country’s natural resources abound, Simpson asserted “[interest and environmental] groups can make life very difficult for any project to go forward.” So, while there may not be a supply shortage, getting bitumen oil to the coasts or building liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipelines to the coast of B.C. remains a challenge.

Even as more chiefs are opening up to the idea of building coastal pipelines, Simpson cautioned that many still would rather lead a more traditional way of life and subsist on a marginal economy. He added that, notwithstanding strong political support, potential lawsuits and injunctions from aboriginals, environmental groups and others rebuffing development are bound to decelerate progress in the energy sector. Nevertheless, out of 19 projects, a couple are forecast to commence in 2021 and 2023, though no final investment decisions have been made yet by the principals.

“The question for us is: Do we have time?” he asked, pointing out that there are other keen suppliers, like Australia and Russia. “The world isn’t sitting there waiting for Canada to decide; the world *will* decide. And then, we’ll see whether Canada has decided if it’s time to be part of the decisions.”

When asked to divulge his winning predictions about Canada’s 42nd general election coming up on October 19, with a hint of humour Simpson declared: “I can summarize the situation very simply by saying: I haven’t got a clue who’ll win.” While he the Conservatives currently hold a majority, he thinks they’ll need about 40 per cent of the vote to win. He also believes the Liberals are likely to make gains, though perhaps not substantial enough to become the number two party.

From his perspective, if the Conservatives *are* re-elected to a minority government, they’ll have to give careful consideration as to how they’re going to engage with other parties. He said our current political system doesn’t encourage opposition parties to discuss how to work together to form a coalition government.

“That,” he concluded, “adds an element of uncertainty to the situation.”