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“Waiting for Godot” or Riding the Orient Express? Trade Negotiations and the Global Audience

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Interest in the Doha Round appears to be waning among those who should be its major stakeholders. While the negotiations are still interesting to trade policy professionals, the apparently endless negotiations and increasingly trivial nature of any progress that is announced – at least from the perspective of the business community and others in civil society with an interest in trade policy – may be detrimental to the future effectiveness of the WTO. While officials and trade policy professionals continue to suggest that it is business as usual at the negotiations, stakeholders are increasingly dissatisfied with this explanation. Those actively engaged in the process need to step back from the minutiae of the negotiations and consider the broader ramifications of the drawn-out negotiating process for the long-term effectiveness of multilateral trade institutions.

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Don't let's do anything. It's safer.

Estragon to Vladimir, Act I
Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*,
Tragicomedy in 2 Acts¹

All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of
all ages.

M. Bouc to Hercule Poirot, Chapter 3
Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*.²

I have long since lost count of the conferences I have spoken at since the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations commenced in 2001. Some have been conferences dealing exclusively with international trade matters; others have been general conferences where an explanation of the current state of play in the negotiations was wanted. These meetings tend to follow a well-worn pattern that verges on routine. The days are given to formal presentations, distinguished panels and round-table discussions. At the end of the day, or in the evening after dinner, those whose primary working-life focus is trade policy tend to congregate in small groups in the bar to decode the latest runes coming out of Geneva. These are typically academics, government officials, employees of international organizations, etc. This is the most valuable part of the conference for those who work in trade policy – the negotiations are far from transparent and the sharing of individual information helps in fitting the pieces of the puzzle together. A few others who have a more casual interest in trade policy often come along to share in the beer and company – and sometimes they may hope to learn something.

At a recent conference, one of my former students, who now works for a major multinational corporation that is heavily engaged in international commercial activities, joined a group of us trade policy wonks one evening. He is interested in trade policy, and the Doha outcome, one way or the other, will be important to his firm. His firm had agreed he should attend the conference, and I had seen him two or three times at these types of events since the Doha negotiations commenced. While interested in trade policy, he is no expert, and only a small portion of his job is spent on trade policy. For a while I engaged in conversation with the larger group but found my attention wavering as the discussion on market access focussed in on the various issues surrounding how tariff lines should be counted for purposes of identifying *sensitive products*. I leaned back and struck up a conversation with my former student. After some catching up on what we had respectively been doing, I asked him what he

thought of the Doha Round thus far. He sat for a moment, frowned a bit and asked, “Have you ever seen a performance of *Waiting for Godot*?”

This immediately set off a flashback in my mind – to the first time I had seen Samuel Beckett’s famous play. I was in the second year of my undergraduate degree and I was at the time rather keen on a particularly ravishing and, to my mind, sophisticated co-ed. We had gone out a couple of times and got along well. One day she said she particularly wanted to go to a play that was being staged locally, and did I want to come with her? Although I would have preferred some less uplifting entertainment, like the latest James Bond release, not wishing to appear a total bumpkin I enthusiastically agreed to attend. As an afterthought I asked what the name of the play was. She replied, “*Waiting for Godot*” – which did not register with me at all.

The evening for our attendance arrived and we went along to the play. The performance was well acted, but of course nothing discernible happened – Godot didn’t even show up. It was a far cry from James Bond. At the play we met three other couples who were friends with my date, and it was agreed that we would all meet up at a restaurant for dessert after the performance. The eight of us crowded into a large booth. They were all good fun. The others were all majoring in the humanities or fine arts; I was majoring in international relations. To my amazement, they all joined in a spirited discussion of the play – a discussion where I understood hardly a word. At one point my date, seeing that I was not participating, asked me what I thought. I said something like, “Not much happened.” She laughed and said, “That doesn’t matter – it was just so fascinating,” and turned back to the discussion.

To my former student and, from what I can discern, to many others, multilateral trade negotiations have taken on a *Waiting for Godot*-like appearance. Nothing much seems to be happening although there is lots of dialogue. While there is continual speculation regarding when the Doha Round might conclude, the end never really seems to be much closer. Trade policy wonks, however, continue enthusiastically to dissect every draft coming out of the various negotiating groups – agriculture, non-agricultural market access, rules, etc. In-depth studies are produced on how bracketed clauses might be interpreted. We have become lost in the minutiae of the negotiations. In many ways little has changed since 2005 – I find I have very little new to add to my talks on the negotiations. My impression is that audience numbers at the trade sessions at conferences are waning.

To others who are not part of the trade policy establishment,³ the negotiations are no longer interesting and, even more worrisome, no longer perceived as relevant. Can anything that drags on year after year without any resolution be very important? The

global economy is experiencing a sea of changes, from soaring energy and food prices to dysfunctional financial markets, to the spectre of terrorist attacks, to integration of China into international markets, to global warming. These are problems worthy of an action figure such as James Bond. Meanwhile, the negotiations stagger on, and on, in Geneva.

Trade negotiations that are neither interesting nor perceived to be important by their major constituents are more likely to be influenced by protectionist vested interests – and potentially unable to garner sufficient political support to force a conclusion. The trade policy professionals I know, however, find it difficult to accept failure as a realistic option. They believe the negotiations will ultimately succeed. They have a hard time even thinking about the consequences for the world trading system if negotiations fail to culminate in an agreement.⁴ Others often write about failed negotiations, but members of the trade policy establishment do not – at least in my experience.

Instead of *Waiting for Godot*, members of the trade policy establishment, I suspect, would characterise the negotiations as being more like Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. One does not pick up a murder mystery with the expectation that the murder will remain unsolved. One expects lots of twists and turns, false leads and, in the end, some surprising turn of events that solves the mystery – and in hindsight a pattern the reader should have seen all along. There will also be some unsavoury characters that come to light (such as antidumping) that, while clearly undesirable, are not central to solving the mystery (or reaching an agreement).

In *Murder on the Orient Express* there are a large number of suspects, and almost all of them, in the end, have a part in the murder.⁵ The Doha Round is also very complicated and has a large number of players. In fact, the Doha Round plot is even more complicated than the one devised by Agatha Christie. It is like having the Orient Express heading out from Istanbul on its westward journey in 1986 (at the start of the Uruguay Round) with a lot of spadework having been done by the detective, only to have the train stop in Belgrade (in 1994 and resume its journey in 2001), where all the suspects compare notes, where they make new friendships among each other, and where some previously ignored individuals also become suspects. When the train continues its journey, the detective has to take in all the new information that came to light during the Belgrade break and try to find the pattern in the evidence that will lead to a successful conclusion. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, there is also a snowstorm that delays the train so that the detective does not have to complete his work at a speed that would have to comply with the train's scheduled arrival. Of

course, in the end there is a successful conclusion to the tale. This is a story that trade policy wonks can relate to.

Murder mysteries have one other characteristic: they are relatively short works of literature. As a genre, they are read as quick, light entertainment.⁶ A murder mystery of tome-like proportions would be an unlikely best-seller. Most potential readers would lose interest if the pace were snail-like and the clues were endlessly debated. Such a book would likely be put down and not picked up again as readers moved on to something more in line with their expectations.

The Doha Round, I perceive, has long since reached the stage where many, like my former student, are willing to put it down and not worry if they don't pick it up again. It no longer appears to be relevant and they did not come to watch, nor would they get any joy from, *Waiting for Godot*.

While the analogies between literary genres and trade negotiations may be a bit of a stretch, the sheer length of the Doha negotiations and the minutiae (at least from the perception of the non-expert) being discussed are becoming a serious problem for the multilateral trading system. The assurances by members of the trade policy establishment that the slow pace of the negotiations is simply *business as usual* and that eventually the politics will align to allow a successful conclusion, even if correct, fall on deaf ears when there is no longer any interest in the round. Further, the *business as usual* perspective gives the wrong signal to political decision makers who will, ultimately, collectively decide the fate of the round. The situation has reached the point where trade policy professionals need to start saying that this state of affairs in the negotiations is not *business as usual*, but that the process increasingly appears broken and the time for the necessary political compromises has come. Of course, this is hard to do when, for a professional, the substance of the negotiations is still very interesting. It requires stepping back and thinking about the broader effect on the credibility and efficacy of the multilateral trade institutions of what appear to many stakeholders to be apparently endless negotiations over minutiae.

The long periods of *technical* work that have gone on in Geneva have narrowed the differences among the parties to a sufficient degree that there are unlikely to be any major novel compromises or breakthroughs of a radical nature. While differences remain among the various groupings of members, the parameters within which the final agreement will lie are fairly narrow. This does not mean the economic effects of what might be agreed are not large; in many cases they will be considerable – for example, the number of tariff lines to be allowed for *sensitive* and *special* products as part of market access for agricultural products. It is also evident that the negotiations in other areas such as those dealing with Rules – and specifically antidumping rules –

are unlikely to make much progress. These areas are also not deal-makers or deal-breakers.

There has been considerable discussion regarding the potentially detrimental effect on both the round's political saleability and the reputation of multilateral institutions of having a round conclude that lacks *ambition*.⁷ While a deal with only modest ambition will not be without problems in the political sphere, there seems little prospect that a deal characterized by a high level of ambition can still be achieved. The continuation of negotiations that do not appear to have an endpoint is also likely generating considerable negative externalities for the multilateral trading system. The longer the round continues without progress that can be discerned by stakeholders who see a conclusion of a round as a desirable outcome, the harder it will be to engage them in activities that will assist in concluding the round. This will increasingly leave the field open to protectionists who hope that the round will not be successfully concluded, who have a vested interest in retaining the current rules and who would like to see the existing multilateral institutions weakened.

Comparing the Doha Round negotiations to a performance of *Waiting for Godot*, as my former student did, only serves to underline how far the prestige of multinational trade institutions has already declined. When the World Trade Organization was launched almost a decade and a half ago, expectations were high. The protests at the Seattle Ministerial and subsequent ministerials suggest that even the anti-globalization groups had high expectations regarding the potential efficacy of the WTO. While many of those expectations were clearly unrealistic, the Doha experience may have so lowered expectations that many who should be the WTO's major stakeholders no longer consider it relevant.

The protracted negotiations process is likely producing negative externalities for the future credibility and efficacy of multilateral trade institutions. In 2001 the Doha Round had a global audience. In 2008, who is still watching? Unlike *Godot*, the *Orient Express* (and the Doha Round) actually needs to arrive at its destination. At some point, even if the Doha Round produces an agreement, no one in the global audience may notice.

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Endnotes

1. See Beckett (1956)
2. See Christie (1934)
3. The trade policy establishment includes trade negotiators, their support staff in governments, employees in international organizations, academics who specialize in trade policy, trade lobbyists, trade lawyers and a few others. It typically does not include politicians such as trade ministers. It is a relatively small group. See Kerr (2007) for a discussion of why the trade policy establishment is a small group.
4. For one example where this difficult exercise has been attempted see Gifford et al. (2008).
5. In fact, only one of these suspects does not have a direct part in the murder.
6. The first hardcover edition of *Murder on the Orient Express* was 256 pages – long by the standards of the genre.
7. See, for example, Bouët et al. (2007) and Barshefsky (2005).

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