

Editorial: Read the entire TPP text? No way. That's Parliament's job

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U.S. President Barack Obama made a suggestion to the American people this week: Go online and read the text of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact before making up your mind about it. Chrystia Freeland, Canada's Minister of International Trade, has said the Liberal government is "committed to reviewing the agreement... and, crucially, to giving Canadians a chance to read it and to respond to it."

Okay, listen. Really? Canadian and American citizens are going to read a 6,000-page legal document that contains two million words and, in paper form, weighs 45 kilograms? It's a noble goal – no question of that. But come on.

To read the TPP and understand it would require legal training and the experience in international trade to place the proposed deal in the context of current agreements. You'd need to be a student of Canada's economy, with a specialty in its marketing boards, its exports and its tariff structure. You'd have to bone up on our laws on intellectual property, banks, labour and telecommunications. A familiarity with Vietnam's tariffs on "meat of horses, asses, mules or hinnies, fresh, chilled or frozen" wouldn't hurt either, not to mention knowing what a hinny is in the first place.

While we have faith in the intellectual capacity of Canadians, we doubt they have the time and patience to wade through so complex and long a document. But that's what is disingenuously being asked of them in this new era of selective governmental "transparency," to use Mr. Obama's word, in which deals like these are posted on the Internet so that politicians can boast that they didn't hide anything from the public, while other critical documents of equal public interest are classified or kept out of easy reach by bureaucratic firewalls.

It's all too much to ask of Canadians and Americans. Politicians are telling them to read *War and Peace* four times in a row, which they might as well do in the original Russian for all the average person will get out of it. And they will have to absorb the deal's implications over the din of interest groups and politicians squawking for their attention and support.

This isn't fair or right. The duty to dissect the deal's implications doesn't fall on average Canadians, even if it behooves them to inform themselves. The responsibility for analyzing the benefits and downsides falls on their elected representatives. In Canada's case, that is the job of Parliament.

For Parliament to fulfill its duty in the best way possible, the Liberals need to break the pact down into its various parts and send those parts to the relevant Commons or Senate committee.

The TPP, it must be admitted by all parties, is a more than just a free-trade agreement. It contains many requirements on sovereign governments to change their laws in order to make them uniform with those of the other countries in the deal. This is not just about eliminating tariffs any more.

One of the bigger examples of that is the requirement for all signatories to keep copyrighted material out of the public domain for 70 years after the death of the author. In Canada, the protected period is 50 years. What will the implication be if Canadian companies suddenly have to pay royalties on works for an additional 20 years? Some have argued it will cost our economy hundreds of millions of dollars.

The TPP contains similar language in many areas, including the Internet, the environment and the protection of trade secrets. Canada

would be obliged to change its laws, including the Criminal Code, or adopt new ones, in order to benefit from lower or eliminated tariffs on its exports.

Is it worth the tradeoff? Agreements that liberalize trade are good for Canada's economy. For the most part, the TPP does just that.

But if Ms. Freeland and her party are serious about making sure Canadians understand its implications, they will have to give Parliamentary committees the time and resources to go over it section by section and hear testimony from neutral experts. Parliament will have to report back to Canadians in plain language about what they are getting and what they are giving up. And then the government will have to make an argument for ratification,

or demand further negotiations to protect Canada's interests.

There is no rush. The deal needs to be ratified by a partisan, electioneering Congress, and Mr. Obama is facing an uphill battle on that front. That's part of the reason he is appealing directly to the American people to read the TPP, in the hope they will see its appeal and pressure their representatives to ratify it.

It doesn't have to work that way in Canada. The defeat of the Harper government – a government that reduced Parliament to a rubber stamp – is solid evidence that Canadians want their representatives to do the job they were elected to do. That is, protect Canadians' interests in an informed, non-partisan manner. The TPP debate is the place to start.