

Prime Minister Harper urges CARICOM nations to embrace free trade as the path to prosperity

Education called a "key instrument" linking Canada to Caribbean nations

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In a speech to Caribbean government and business leaders today, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the launch of free trade negotiations between Canada and the nations of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

The Prime Minister further bolstered his free trade message by expressing support for the CARICOM Single Market and Economy initiative, calling it the "indispensable foundation on which to build national and regional endeavours which can lead to fair and sustainable growth and prosperity."

Prime Minister Harper said the push for free trade between Canada and the 15 Caribbean countries that are members of CARICOM is driven by his Government's commitment to revive and expand Canadian political and economic engagement in the region. A new economic partnership which will be centered on a trade agreement will take account of the particular circumstances of the region's smaller states.

"Canada is committed to playing a bigger role in the Caribbean and the Americas," the Prime Minister said. He identified strong, sustainable economies, the proliferation of democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law, and better means to cope with crime and natural disasters as Canada's objectives for the region.

"Education should be a key instrument linking Canada and the Caribbean Community," Prime Minister Harper added, noting that there is a long tradition of students from the region obtaining higher education in Canada and then returning home to help build their countries.

The Prime Minister concluded his speech by inviting the CARICOM leaders to meet in Canada in 2008.

Barbados was the third stop on Prime Minister Harper's tour of the Americas this week. He visited Bogotá, Columbia and Santiago, Chile earlier in the week, and will wind up the tour in Haiti on Friday.