

## **WTO Chairs Programme: Launch of the Singapore Chair**

**Singapore, 4 October 2011**

Comments by Patrick Low, Chief Economist, WTO

Prof Tommy Koh, Dean Tan Cheng Han, Ambassadors, Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At a meeting in Geneva on 21 June this year, the Director General of the WTO, Pascal Lamy, welcomed the NUS as the fifteenth university in the WTO Chairs Programme. I feel greatly honoured to be here with you today to participate in the official launch of the WTO Chairs Programme in Singapore

The WTO is fortunate in having such a good friend of the multilateral trading system as Singapore has consistently proven to be. This has been apparent in so many ways since the birth of the WTO in 1995, and is no less true of the old GATT days. As noted by Dean Tan, Singapore was the host of the first WTO Ministerial Meeting in 1996, almost fifteen years ago, setting a very high standard in organization and hospitality. And what could be more symbolic of

the relationship between Singapore and the WTO than the fact that the logo designed for the first WTO Ministerial Meeting, which was Singapore's intellectual property, was donated to the WTO after the meeting, and has been with us ever since?

Our close relationship with NUS began in 2007 when we brought the Regional Trade Policy course to Singapore. This was an excellent decision, justified by four years of highly fruitful cooperation in the cause of providing training in trade policy for government officials from across the Asian region. In addition to all the support we received from senior academics and the administration of NUS in organizing and running the RTPC, I should also like to acknowledge in particular the two academic coordinators for the programme with whom we worked -- Locknie Hsu for the first year, and Margaret Liang for the remaining three. They provided consistent, high quality support that contributed immensely to the success of the programme.

It was a very natural sequel to the RTPC that we agreed to joining forces in a new partnership -- the one we are to celebrate today -- through the establishment of the WTO Chair at NUS. This is, in the first instance, a four-year programme of academic cooperation with the university, aimed at promoting research, teaching and public debate on trade, trade policy and

international trade cooperation, particularly but not exclusively through the multilateral trading system.

The Chair is co-located at the Faculty of Law and the Centre for International Law, NUS, a university-level research centre devoted to multi-disciplinary research. Apart from the many other good things that could be said about NUS, NUS' multidisciplinary orientation is ideally suited to understanding all the complexities underlying international trade relations.

We are fortunate too, in the person of the Chair-holder. I have come to know Associate Professor Michael Ewing-Chow quite well in recent years, starting with the pre-establishment phase of the RTPC. Michael is serious, committed and energetic, full of ideas about how to make the most of our partnership. I hope we can measure up to his standards and those of the institution that backs him. I should also mention, speaking entirely personally, that Michael is a great companion on the occasional night out in Singapore and he was also good enough to introduce me to his tailor.

One of Michael's earliest initiatives was to bring CIL in, along with the Faculty of Law at NUS, to host the region-wide policy dialogue we are undertaking over the next three days on the state-of-play in the Doha Negotiations. Another good idea was to invite the Chair-holders from the Asian regional to participate in

this event and in the Dialogue starting tomorrow. I would like to offer words of welcome from the WTO to Professor Zhang Lei from China, Professor Riza Noer Arfani from Indonesia, and Professor Vu Quoc Huy from Viet Nam, from whom you will be hearing in a moment.

Allow me to say a little about the WTO Chairs Programme and what the WTO's thinking is behind it. The WTO has been engaged in technical cooperation and capacity-building activities since its inception, and on a considerably enhanced scale than was the case in the GATT days. With the launch of the Doha negotiations in 2001, programme activities were extended across a broader set of activities than before, and we became more ambitious. In many ways, this was a response to the language in the Doha Ministerial Declaration that emphasizes development as a *sine qua non* of beneficial engagement in international trade.

One thing is the volume of activities in which we engage in the context of technical cooperation and capacity-building. Another is the quality. There is always room for improvement. But one thing we have been emphasizing increasingly is partnerships. First with the RTPCs and now even more so with the Chairs Programme we are seeking to establish partnerships with the scholarly communities in the regions where we are active. This is advantageous on at least two levels.

First, it takes us away from the "us" and "them" context of standard activities, where WTO officials travel to the countries concerned as the source of knowledge to interact with government officials, who are the putative beneficiaries. When scholars from the target countries or regions become partners, the "us" and "them" become the "us, you and them". With the "you" -- the academics from the regions -- providing invaluable insights and context not generally available in Geneva. Not only do the government officials benefit from this additional input, but I believe the resource persons also enjoy a mutually beneficial interactive experience. So the resulting capacity building is deeper, more useful and multi-faceted.

Secondly, these partnerships impart a legitimacy frequently lacking in the "them and us" scenario. Long gone are the days when the effortless and highly dubious assumption was made that foreign is always simply better than local. Or at least I hope the days of this manifestly unsustainable assumption are gone, and if the attitude lingers in some places we must chase it away.

The institutions and chair-holders in the WTO Chairs Programme are firmly in the driver's seat. They determine the nature of the activities they intend to undertake within the rubric of the programme, and they decide the mix between the research, didactic and communication components of their programmes.

We in the Secretariat stand ready to help and participate, upon invitation. But the financial support the WTO provides does not come entirely without strings. There is an important reporting obligation, and reports are transmitted to the Members, who after all are the owners of the WTO. Additionally, there will be an independent evaluation and audit of each programme in the life of this phase of the project.

With that, I should like to thank my hosts, and repeat how honoured I feel to be here to participate in the launch of the Singapore Chair. It only remains for me to hand over a plaque to Michael to commemorate this event.

Thank you very much.