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War of words over trade barriers

By **NEIL WAUGH**, EDMONTON SUN

QUEBEC CITY -- A meeting code-named Quadrant took place 65 years ago in the Chateau Frontenac - the very same hotel the Council of the Federation gab fest is being held this week.

It's the spot where Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt basically cut the D-Day deal to invade Adolf Hitler's Fortress Europe.

The 2008 Preem Fest is not exactly in the same league as that eventful get-together that changed the course of history.

But the premiers managed to unleash a war of words by agreeing in principle to a deal on full labour mobility, including a mechanism for resolving disputes.

Any discussion on inter-provincial trade barriers at similar events was seen by reporters as a sure cure for insomnia.

Now, the thermonuclear rhetoric is coming from leaders of the country's provincial labour organizations, who are holding their own gab fest here. They object to the dispute resolution mechanism.

"It's not in the public interest, it's anti-democratic," complained Alberta Federation of Labour prez Gil McGowan. "Decisions about public policy should be made by elected, accountable officials."

Quebec federation president Michael Arsenault picked up where Gil left off.

"It's the end of democracy if we allow a private tribunal to make the decisions regarding the law of the land," Arsenault snapped.

He warned that Quebec's rock-bottom hydro rates and subsidized daycare could be under threat. Then he demanded the premiers "back off."

'DIRTY DEAL'

Ontario Federation of Labour honcho Wayne Samuelson branded the dirty deal "disgraceful," which puts workers "at the beck and call of the business elite."

"When politicians start talking about free trade," he blasted, "if you are a worker in Ontario, you better duck."

He also complained about a "crisis in the economy" after 45,000 Ontario jobs were lost in the last month.

Meanwhile, a labour press release said the agreement was negotiated in a "culture of secrecy."

Adding to the union guys' overreaction was a letter from Canadian Chamber of Commerce president Perrin Beatty and other business booster outfits, which urged the premiers to beef up the agreement with an "effective and enforceable" dispute resolution mechanism "to bring parties into compliance."

The union bosses charged this will "open the door for corporations who might want to challenge a province or municipality's laws and regulations if they are deemed a barrier to trade."

It sounds a whole lot different than the simple labour mobility agreement - where trade tickets and other

qualifications are recognized across the country - that the premiers were spinning it to be yesterday.

"The sad part of this issue," Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach shot back, "is there's a fair amount of misinformation."

But the deal clearly has teeth: The tribunal will have the power to impose fines up to \$5 million for non-compliance.

LABOUR MOBILITY

"This brings some common sense to labour mobility," Stelmach said. "In Alberta, we're greatly short of people."

But he did admit "there are some details to work out."

It didn't get any better for the Alberta Tories when it was revealed that taxpayers could be stung for up to \$6.5 million to pay Calgary Health Region CEO Jack Davis's settlement after the unelected authority was disbanded.

Meanwhile, Stelmach goes into the final showdown over greenhouse gas reduction later today with a poll that shows he's got a majority of Canadians on his side.

And premiers like Ontario's Dalton McGuinty and Quebec's Jean Charest are on the outside looking in when it comes to the dubious carbon-cap-and-trade scheme they want to impose on Canada's energy provinces.

The Innovative Research Group survey found Alberta's plan to capture and store carbon dioxide in rock formations received a "more positive initial response," with 54% of Canadians for it. Only 46% backed the McGuinty/Charest deal, which Stelmach calls a sneaky "wealth transfer."

Churchill and Roosevelt have no fear of being upstaged by these guys.