

Crean gives trade pacts a big push

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Trade Minister Simon Crean has raised the possibility of seeking a free-trade agreement with the European Union, at the same time urging China and Japan to intensify their FTA negotiations with Australia.

In a major speech reviewing Australia's trade strategy, Mr Crean made it clear that seeking new opportunities for FTAs and intensifying efforts to conclude negotiations under way would be given high priority by Australia as the Doha round of multilateral trade negotiations continued to stall.

Challenging the view of some trade analysts that free-trade agreements undermined the World Trade Organisation's rules-based multilateral trading system, Mr Crean said the Rudd government believed that there was a complementary relationship between multilateral, regional and bilateral free-trade agreements. He called the three-tiered approach "the cascade effect".

Mr Crean insisted that Australia was still strongly committed to successfully concluding the Doha round of trade negotiations and to playing a key, activist role.

But he said the success of FTAs with New Zealand, the United States and the Association of South-East Asian Nations proved the importance of "non-preferential" FTAs.

Mr Crean said progress being made in FTA negotiations with Korea was also pleasing and he was



Simon Crean . . . 'Australia is looking for new trade opportunities, particularly in Europe and Africa'.

Photo: BEN RUSHTON

optimistic about the prospects for a Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, with negotiations involving the US, New Zealand, Singapore, Chile, Brunei, Peru and Vietnam due to start next month.

But in remarks referring to the good progress in FTA negotiations with Korea, compared with the slow progress in negotiations with Japan and China, Mr Crean said: "There's a lot of horses in the race that we're backing and it will be interesting to see who gets over the line first."

Mr Crean argued that FTAs with Japan and China offered the chance for Australia's economic relationships to be "deepened and diversified even further".

Speaking to the Foreign Correspondents' Association in Sydney

yesterday, he said Australia's belief in the value of FTAs encouraged it to look for new opportunities – particularly in Europe and Africa – which he described as "two missing links" in boosting Australia's trade relationships.

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He said Africa, with almost a billion people, was ignored by the Howard government for a decade and the Rudd government was now seeking to change that. Australian mining companies,

with \$20 billion in projects in 35 African nations, had tapped into the potential of Africa.

And he indicated that the decades of hostility between Australia and the European Union over EU farm subsidies had subsided to the point where the EU could be seen as a potential free-trade partner.

Mr Crean said the EU, which as a bloc was Australia's largest trade and investment partner, appeared to have changed its longstanding policy of entering FTAs only with developing countries.

It had signalled its interest in an FTA with Canada.

He said Australia had noted this "with interest" and had sought clarification about whether this was indeed a different approach.

were among 1013 from Melbourne universities who completed a survey last July following increasing incidences of violence against foreign students. The survey was done by Victoria University for the Community Safety of International Students in Melbourne: A Scoping Study. AAP

Keneally cleared

NSW Premier Kristina Keneally has been cleared of breaching the whistleblower protection laws, but the NSW opposition says it's a technical victory, not a moral one. Ms Keneally was accused of trying to intimidate a whistleblower at the centre of a corruption scandal involving Penrith MP Kerry Paluzzano, after the Premier described the complaint as "vexatious". Her comments were referred to the anti-corruption agency by Nationals leader Andrew Stoner, who said the Premier had breached the Protected Disclosures Act. Yesterday the Independent Commission Against Corruption said Ms Keneally's comments did not "constitute a reprisal against a person making a protected disclosure". AAP

Price of progress

Victorian households will be hit this year with charges for "smart" electricity meters that could take up to three years to be installed. The meters have been mandated by the state government. Earlier this month Victorian Energy Minister Peter Batchelor ordered a review of the scheme in light of new pricing structures in which consumers pay at least \$86.10 a year to cover the cost of the infrastructure and the new meters. The charge replaces old metering charges and will rise to \$93.83 in 2011. A spokeswoman for Mr Batchelor said a moratorium on the new tariffs until the review by the Essential Services Commission was completed remained under