



FASTFACTS



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Attack on Wheat Board Exposes Authoritarian Predisposition of Harper Government

In Canada it is not often we get to see the naked power of the state unleashed against an internal foe, perceived or real. Usually Canadians observe this happening in other countries, where the civilian or military ruler uses the state's civil service to suppress free and open public discussion and dissent to the regime's policies.

In these kinds of authoritarian states, political power brokering takes place within the confines of the party itself. In Alberta, the real provincial election is now being debated within the confines of the Conservative Party leadership contest to replace Ralph Klein. As in most authoritarian states, in Alberta any elected opposition members of the Legislature are banned from all Government committees.

Canadians as a whole are now witnessing the same sort of spectacle in our national politics. The Harper Conservatives have identified an internal enemy that does not fit their ideology. Using their power as the government, they have started a campaign of suppression and disruption supported by a flood of propaganda and misinformation, utilizing the federal bureaucracy.

The target of this attack, an organization 100% funded and democratically controlled by its mem-

bers, has been permanently stripped of its right to free speech by Ministerial order. Their organization is also the subject of Harper government propaganda attacks on an almost weekly basis and it is restricted by a Governor in Council (Harper Cabinet) directive from expending any corporate resources in defending itself. These attacks come in the middle of this organization's democratic elections for membership to its board of directors.

Part of the Harper attack was a Ministerial order attempting to rig the election by removing almost 40% of the organization's members from automatically receiving a ballot. Worse, the Minister deliberately issued the order in the middle of the election so the organization's members had to incur additional costs to send out over 16,000 letters to those bounced from the electoral rolls in an effort to reinstate eligible voters. The Harper regime is also attacking the organization from within by using its power to fire appointed directors and replace them with government puppets.

Who could this fearsome foe be, and how did we go so many years without recognizing this menace from within? The object of this attack is none other than the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB), the marketing arm of the wheat and barley producers of western Canada, the organization that enables farmers



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to have some power in the global grain market.

To follow up on this election tampering, the Harper Government issued a task force report from a group of hand picked appointees from the transnational grain trade. As directed, the task force report lays out a detailed plan for the dismantling of the CWB. The only odd thing about the report was its blunt statement that a 'dual-market' was impossible in the real world.

For years the Alberta Government and the private grain trade have insisted that they don't want to bury the CWB, they just want a 'dual-market' where the CWB would work alongside the private market. The one silver lining to the miasma of the Harper attack on the CWB is that this myth is now well and truly dead, killed by its own backers. Farmers now have a clear choice: a CWB or no CWB, which is exactly what the CWB management proposed in great detail to the Harper task force two months ago.

The Harper government has even stooped to delaying approval of payments to farmers of their own money from grain sales. Commodity markets are rising fast, yet Harper is ignoring CWB calls to approve its increased initial payments and he is refusing to follow the CWB's direction on making timely interim payments on grain sales already made.

How did Stephen Harper come to see this internal menace and why is he expending so much of his meager political capital on its destruction? He can hardly be pandering to his western power base. As Manitoba Conservative MP Inky Mark observed just last week, at least two thirds of farmers want to keep the Wheat Board just as is.

In his tenure at the National Citizens Coalition, Harper had almost unlimited funding from undisclosed sources to attack the CWB, which he did with vigor and stealth. Over the last 30 years, the Alberta government has also pitched in with generous funding to bogus farm groups attacking the CWB.

The CWB returns 98% of the revenue it gets from the global grain market directly to the farmers who produce the grain. This amounts to \$4.5 to \$6 billion per year. That is a tempting revenue stream which

the big five transnational grain companies, who already control 80% of the world grain market, would love to acquire. In Canada grain farmers recognized this could never be a level playing field and banded together through marketing boards to take on these giant grain privateers. The vast majority of farmers have always understood that there is no future in the proposition that they would do better for themselves by selling out the collective interests of all farmers.

These farmers know that the Wheat Board is the only protection they have for their livelihoods and their communities from the predatory practices of the transnational grain companies.

Prime Minister Harper appears determined to eliminate farmer market power, and so far his methods have been less than democratic. The farmers who were not removed from the CWB voting list will indicate their decision on how the CWB runs when they complete voting for the CWB Board of Directors this December 1st. If they vote true to form, Prime Minister Harper and his supine Agriculture Minister can expect a stern rebuke in the form of a slate of farmer directors ready to defend the CWB. If Harper is true to form, we can expect more dirty tricks, propaganda, and autocratic efforts to sandbag the interests of farmers.

- Ken Larson

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