

October 19, 2006

PAGE: D12 (CALGARY BUSINESS)

Opposition fights for wheat board

Tories accused of 'ideological madness'

Calgary Herald

CanWest News Service

Tory plans to make good on their Canadian Wheat Board election promise faced an all-party attack Wednesday as the Liberals, NDP and Bloc Quebecois ganged up on the Harper government in a bid to save the board's marketing monopoly.

For more than two hours in the Commons, an often passionate debate raged as the opposition pushed for a motion requiring the government to hold a plebiscite among Prairie farmers on the key change experts believe would essentially kill the Winnipeg-based marketer of wheat and barley.

"What will the Conservatives not do to destroy single desk selling under the Canadian Wheat Board?" asked Liberal agriculture critic Wayne Easter, who moved the motion.

"What will it not do to take power away from primary producers and give that power to the international grain trade? What will it not do to tear down a marketing institution that has become renowned around the world for how it maximizes returns back to primary producers? What will the Conservative government not do in terms of catering to its American friends in the grain trade who have challenged the Canadian Wheat Board 11 times and have lost every time under international trade law?

"From its actions to date, it would appear that the government is prepared to use any device up to the very line of legality in an effort to undermine the Canadian Wheat Board."

Said New Democrat MP Pat Martin, whose Winnipeg Centre riding is home to the board's headquarters: "There is no business case for abolishing the Canadian Wheat Board -- it is pure ideological madness."

The debate over the future of the wheat board has been moving rapidly up the national agenda, fuelled in part by a gag order the cabinet slapped on the board preventing it from defending its marketing monopoly. As well, the opposition has alleged the Tories are tampering in the election of its directors by striking 16,000 farmers from the voter list.

However, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl continued to refuse to commit to a plebiscite before moving ahead on their campaign promise.

"The government will do what farmers have always wanted, which is to have a range of marketing choices, including the wheat board," Harper said.

"We are never going to be afraid to consult western farmers because the last time we did it, like so many times when we had done it in this country, they did not return a single Liberal MP, and they never will."

Strahl said Easter's motion was "ridiculous" and shot back at Bloc agriculture critic Andre Bellavance's defence of the wheat board by painting him as a hypocrite.

"When is the honourable member for the Bloc going to bring in the motion to expand the wheat board to make sure that it covers Quebec? He will not do that. Do you know why?" Strahl asked.

"It is because he does not want the wheat board. He does not want the wheat board to affect his business in his province."