

Canadians should care about the wheat board fight

Viewpoint by ALLAN DAWSON

All Canadians have a stake in the future of the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) because it's quite likely a harbinger of things to come from the Harper government — a canary in the nation's political mine shaft.

The federal government says it will eliminate the CWB's single desk selling authority, even though section 47.1 of the Canadian Wheat Board Act clearly states farmers, through a plebiscite, must first approve such a change. Under the act the CWB is the sole agent marketing wheat and barley on behalf of Western Canadian farmers destined for either domestic human consumption or export.

According to the CWB, being the only seller prevents farmers from undercutting each other on price. It also gives the CWB an assured supply and other marketing advantages it says earns farmers premiums they otherwise would not get.

Ten of the 15 directors who govern the CWB are farmers, elected by farmers. Farmers, not government, pay for the CWB's operations. The CWB is farmers, working for farmers.

Some farmers argue even if the single desk provides benefits it's still an unjustified restriction on their economic freedom. The courts have ruled otherwise stating the Canadian government has the right to legislate commerce.

Some argue since government created the CWB, government can change it.

They also note there was no plebiscite when the single desk was created. Both are red herrings.

The former ignores the letter and spirit of the current CWB act the latter ignores the historical fact that the single desk's creation was strongly supported by farmers.

Nonetheless, the CWB Act does give farmers the power, through CWB elections and ultimately a plebiscite, to maintain or scrap the single desk. It's a democratic decision that rests with the majority of farmers.

Regardless, the federal government has decided to overrule farmers.

This is a troubling precedent and why Canadians — not just farmers - need to pay attention. First, if the majority of farmers had wanted to end single desk selling, they would have done so by now since the act allows farmers to make that change.

Second, it's quite clear, based on polls and previous plebiscites, farmers would vote to keep the single desk rather than have an open market. My guess is a majority would also vote for the single desk instead of the so called "dual" market, which advocates claim would give farmers marketing choice, including the CWB. Most farmers now understand, as did Federal Court Justice F. C. Muldoon in 1997 when he upheld the constitutionality of the CWB, that a dual market would be "merely a transitional" market on the way to an open market.

So if most farmers support single desk selling and the law states there must be a plebiscite on the CWB, why does the government insist it will end single desk selling unilaterally?

The answer is ideology. The Conservative government, and especially Prime Minister Harper, opposes the CWB on philosophical grounds. The government is being cheered on by a vocal group of farmers

Western Canadian Growers Association (WGWGA) - an organization that disbanded just a few years ago for a lack of members. But it has powerful friends who oppose the CWB, including Canada's biggest grain company, Agricore United (AU), which is 23 per cent owned by American giant Archer Daniels Midland. AU and the WGWGA have a close connection. One AU director once served as a WGWGA director; another AU director was the WGWGA's manager. The current WGWGA policy manager used to hold the same position with AU and before that was with the WGWGA. By the way, a former AU chair was a senior official in the Reform Party in Alberta.

Ideology is dangerous. It closes minds and is responsible for most the draconian "isms" of modern times — communism, fascism and totalitarianism.

If a minority government is prepared to trample the rights of farmers over the wheat board, what can Canadians expect from a majority? Will supply management be next? The government says it supports it, but the same MPs that oppose the CWB oppose supply management. The two have a lot in common.

What about Medicare? Will health care be privatized, even if most Canadians oppose it?

There's more at stake with the CWB than grain marketing. Canadians would do well to pay attention and be prepared not to let ideology usurp democracy.

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