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FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE WHEAT FIELDS

by

Silver Donald Cameron

Among the worries which keep Maritimers awake at night, the Harper government's drive to dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board probably doesn't rank very high. But perhaps it should. The issue reveals a great deal about this government.

The CWB was created to solve a problem very familiar to Maritimers: the dictatorial power of monopolistic businesses over primary producers. In the Maritimes, it was the power of local merchant barons and international fishing companies over the fishermen. On the Prairies it was the power of banks and big grain companies over the farmers.

The CWB was created in 1935 by the Conservative government of R.B. Bennett, in response to the utter failure of the "free" market during the Depression. Desperate farmers flooded the market with grain at harvest time, driving prices down. Well-financed corporations bought grain cheap in the fall and sold farming supplies dear in the spring. By the mid-1930s Prairie farmers were going bankrupt in such numbers as to threaten the collapse of provincial governments.

Farmers and governments sought a device to stabilize wheat prices and farm incomes. The result was the Canadian Wheat Board, which is the only legal buyer of Western wheat and barley for human consumption. Ten of its 15 directors are elected by farmers. The CWB pays a fair price for the grain - \$4 billion worth - and adroitly re-sells it on the world market. Over 98% of its revenues go directly to the farmers, who receive \$800 million annually in benefits from the CWB.

The US government and the US farm lobby hate the CWB, but their attempts to challenge it at NAFTA and the WTO have repeatedly failed.

Agribusiness hates it, too, however - and agribusiness has the ear of the Harper government.

"The latest attempt to divert attention from a defective market place, and further weaken the market power of farmers," writes Alberta farmer Ken Larsen, "is Bill C 300, introduced by Conservative Jerry Ritz. It is another attempt by the agri-business sector to take a greater share of the economic pie from those whose power is weakest: the farm producer." Ritz's bill "is cloaked in the rhetoric of freedom and choice. Both fine sentiments, but completely ignoring the imbalance in market power between farmers and the five grain companies that control 80% of the world grain trade."

The objective of C300, says Larsen, is simply "the removal of the collective bargaining rights of farmers."

That's bad enough. But the government's methods are even worse. To begin with, Section 47.1 of the Canadian Wheat Board Act requires a farmer vote authorizing major changes to the Board's powers. It appears that the government simply intends to disregard this legal requirement, and make the changes unilaterally - despite the overwhelming objections of farmers.

One of the CWB's leading supporters is agricultural economist and journalist Wendy Holm. On July 27, Holm travelled from her BC home to Saskatoon, at her own expense, to participate in a rally supporting the CWB. At a subsequent press conference with Minister Stahl, Holm asked some penetrating questions, identifying herself as an opinion columnist for the *Western Producer*, an agricultural newspaper. Within a couple of days her column was cancelled - "in response," she says, "to inappropriate pressure from the Minister's office" and from advertisers opposed to the CWB.

Not so, says the editor. She acted simply out of her concern that Holm's strong views on the issue had damaged the paper's credibility. You are perfectly at liberty to believe the editor. Just swallow hard.

The latest sally in this battle is even cheesier. Last week, an Alberta farmer received an email originating with one Mary-Lynn Charlton, owner of a Regina PR firm, and forwarded by his barley-growers' association.

"It has been suggested to us by government, MPs and others that we must get into the game with letters to the editor in weeklies, dailies and agriculture trade publications as the other side is embarrassing us with their propaganda," Charlton wrote. "Would you mind... asking a wide variety of your members if they would agree to be potential signers of letters? I can then write letters [and] start sending at least 5 letters a week."

Got that? Embarrassed by the widespread opposition to their illegal CWB proposal, "government, MPs and others" are purchasing fake "support" in the form of a bogus letter-writing campaign.

The Harper government floated into office - barely - not on the basis of its policies or its philosophy, but on a rising tide of electoral revulsion at the moral bankruptcy of the Liberals. Its main strength is the hope that its righteous talk about accountability and honesty can be taken seriously.

That's why all Canadians should be carefully watching not only the things that it does, but also the way that it does things - even when the issue seems as distant as a wheat field from a codfish.

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Silver Donald Cameron's grandfather was a Manitoba grain farmer driven into bankruptcy during the Depression. Silver Donald's web site is at www.silverdonaldcameron.ca

Silver Donald Cameron
Box 555, D'Escousse, NS B0E 1K0
(902)226-3165 fax (902)226-1904