

## Wendy Holm

### *Attack on western grain farmers and attack on all farmers*



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Never before has so much aggression been directed at farmers by the Government of Canada.

It began back on July 27, when Canadian Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl held a “roundtable” meeting in Saskatoon on the future of the Canadian Wheat Board to which only those who agreed with abolishing the single desk selling authority of the Board were invited.

That afternoon Strahl told journalists his government would not be bound by Section 47.1 of the Canadian Wheat Board Act, which prohibits any changes to the marketing of grain in western Canada unless supported by a producer vote.

Then there was the September 19 email from Regina-based Charleton Communications to Western Canada Wheat Growers and others claiming “the other side is embarrassing us with their propaganda” and that “government, MPs and others” had suggested “we must get into the game with letters to the editor in weeklies, dailies and agriculture trade publications”. Charleton Communications offered to write letters from farmers to be sent to local and regional papers — “at least five letters a week” — backing government’s position on the CWB. “...this would get us into the propaganda game and save you people time.” Who put Charleton up to this?

There was (and remains) Strahl’s October 5 gag order prohibiting directors and staff of the Canadian Wheat Board from defending the CWB’s role as the single-desk seller of Western Canadian wheat and barley.

Then there was Strahl’s removal this fall of two CWB appointed directors (one fired for supporting the single desk authority of the CWB, one given a plum for stepping down),

replaced by two anti-CWB Directors who are, in the words of Director Art Macklin, “blatant, partisan patronage appointments.”

Next came Strahl’s October 17 order, in the middle of a CBW election, to remove 36 percent of western Canada grain growers — 16,269 farmers — from the list of eligible voters. This year, five directors will be elected in a vote that runs from September 5 to December 1.

Electorate districts have had 25 to 48 percent of eligible voters cut from their lists, now comprised only of those who have sold grain through the CWB in the past 15 months. This has disenfranchised farmers who have been victims of flood, drought, or bad harvest weather, are in the middle of a crop rotation, or still have their crops in the bin. And to make matters worse, Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl is now actively campaigning for/endorsing the anti-CWB Directors.

What Stephen Harper didn’t quite count on was the public backlash his actions would evoke.

On October 25, Bill C-300, a private members bill tabled by Gerry Ritz, Chair of the Agriculture Committee that would have removed the single desk authority of the CWB, went down to defeat (149 to 111) in the House. (To his great credit, Inky Mark, four-term Conservative Member of Parliament for Dauphin-Swan River-Marquette, opposed Harper and voted against the Bill.)

On November 1, the government also lost (121 to 155) an important vote on a motion put forward by the Opposition calling for a producer vote on any changes to the CWB.

Undaunted, Strahl vows to forge ahead, saying what he can’t do with legislation, he will do with regulation.

What could justify flying in the face of such strong political opposition? When in doubt, follow the money: If farmers lose power, who gains power?

Obviously concentrated transnational grain companies will have access to cheaper grain. In preparation for this, the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool just announced its bid to take over Agricore. Archer Daniel Midland

would wind up owning 28 per cent of the new company, which would control of 44 per cent of the grain elevators in Western Canada and the lion’s share of the grain handling facilities at ports. Posted on ADM’s website is the Reuter’s story: “Canada minister upbeat on Saskpool-Agricore deal”. In it, Strahl praises the merger as a “good thing” because it could “create a Canadian grain powerhouse”.

For companies like Monsanto, getting rid of the Canadian Wheat Board would eliminate a strong and vocal farmer advocate that has become a thorn in their side frustrating expansion plans; it was the CWB’s strong intervention that was largely responsible for preventing Canadian registration of Monsanto’s Roundup Ready Wheat.

Then there is always cheap feedstock for ethanol. As large power companies reposition themselves to compete in a non-fossil fuel market, rapid expansion in ethanol production is part of the forecast. Currently, there are over 1,000 retail locations selling ethanol-blended gasoline in Canada. Meeting an Natural Resources Canada-cited target of 35 percent of Canadian gasoline containing 10 percent ethanol by 2010 will require 1.4 billion litres of fuel ethanol per year from 4.2 million tonnes of wheat grown on 3.5 million acres of land at a rate of 11,200 acres a day. This represents 18 per cent of the tonnage and 14 per cent of the acres seeded to wheat in Western Canada in the 2006 crop year.

And that production capacity is already well under way. Under its Ethanol Expansion Program, Natural Resources Canada just funded \$78 million in projects by Suncor, Husky and others to meet this target, adding 750 million litres of annual fuel ethanol capacity and quadrupling Canadian production to almost one billion litres. This capacity alone will require three million tonnes of feed grain from 2.5 million acres at a rate of 8,000 acres of production per day (13 per cent of tonnage and 10 per cent of acres). On November 8, ADM announced they will dominate the global ethanol market.

In any regulated sector, there are always a few dissidents who get a lot of print by insisting their freedoms have been curtailed. Supply management farmers are familiar with this. In the case of grains, the strategy has been to hang an important-sounding name around their neck and to hit the media running. With an estimated membership of under 400, the Western Canada Wheat Growers Association represents less than one percent of grain farmers.

Harper's attack on the rights of western Canadian wheat and barley growers is unprecedented and unacceptable. If government can wreak this policy abuse upon Canada's grain growers, no commodity sector is safe. And if you destroy the future of farmers, you destroy the future of communities.

It's time for the farm community to stand together, flex a few muscles and tell these newcomers in Ottawa that a government that doesn't respect the rights of Canada's farmers does not have the support of Canada's communities. Call your MP. Demand respect for farmers. This is the hill to take or die on. It is about Canada. ◊

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