John Beardsley

The price of freedom of the press



John Beardsley is a freelance journalist and crop specialist with Huron Bay Cooperative.

What do you think of my columns? Do they make you mad; do the: make you think?

I either of these reactions is true, then i have done my job as an opinica columnist. But if you confus d my opinions with the opinion of The Rural Voice, or any of its starf, you would be horribly wrong. Us fortunately people who are trying to s.t public policy seem to have an exwemely thin skin and a bad attitude to opposition or anyone questioning their wisdom.

A case in point is the recent dismissal of Wendy Holm as a columnis: for The Western Producer. The Western Producer is one of those "must-reac" publications in Western Canada, comparable to The Rural Voice or the Ontario Farmer in eastern Cauada.

Not long ago, Wendy Holm used her column to shed some light on the way in which the new Conservative federal government is trying to get rid of the Canadian Wheat Board, Her latest column was written after her participation in a July 27 farmer-led rally in Saskatoon to protest Strahl's same day, closed-door meetings to eliminate the single desk selling authority of the Canadian Wheat Everd. Wendy had traveled back to Saskatoon at her own expense because she felt, as an agrologist, it was important to be there in support of Carada's farmers.

This apparently resulted in a complaint from the Minister's office that her support for the farmers demonstrated a lack of objectivity and impartiality on the part of The Western Producer, At least one farmer also called to express the same concern. Had she been an actual

Western Producer staff reporter sent to cover the rally, the allegation of bias would be valid. Reporters must for good reason - exhibit objectivity and balance. But she is a columnist, not a reporter, and a freelance columnist to boot. I believe . she is being unfairly treated by the anti-CWB forces out west.

Not everyone reading this will know who she is, but several hundred people came out to hear Wendy Holm at the Huron County Federation of Agriculture annual meeting a couple of years ago. Her well-researched analysis of how the Canadian Liberal government (and most provincial governments) had fallen so far short of all the OECD countries (with the 'exception of New Zealand) in support of farmers was well received and inspirational. It was also, may I point out, the most well attended HCFA annual meeting in some time.

The issue is not whether one is pro-wheat board or anti-wheat board. but rather freedom of speech, and coercion by people who disagree, in order to silence dissent. This is an outrageous state of affairs.

The point is not that Wendy supports one side of the CWB debate or the other, but that The Western Producer has bowed to political pressure directly from Chuck Strahl's office. They apparently did not like her informed defense of the wheat board, which she gave as an interested citizen trained in agrology.

There are no doubt many farmers who want to see the board give up its monopoly powers, just as there are farmers in Ontario opposed to supply management. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press should be fought for, tooth and nail, or you will never be free. Free debate must be allowed on issues so hugely important to our future

Wendy is fighting for Ontario farmers too, and we need all the friends we can get!!!!!!

What happened to Wendy is the equivalent of the financial institution calling the loan that it holds on a

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grassroots farmer's mortgage because of his or her political point of view Wake up, people, and smell the coffee: Standing together is more than just going to rallies.

But if we continually allow people who disagree with us to stifle debate and affect people's livelihoods and forums, then we will eventually lose, and the people with the most control of the media will win.

All citizens also have a responsibility to defend the free press and the right to hold and disseminate different points of view. Otherwise the chill of a modern day Spanish inquisition, not based on religion but based on political philosophies, will come and put us in a straitjacket.0

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