

Beware a Conservative majority

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WATERSHED ELECTION — "a campaign that decides the course of politics for decades; one that is especially memorable, or that proves to be a dividing line between historical periods. The political meaning comes from both the nourishing meaning (of the vital water-holding uplands) and the epochal meaning (a line between two areas, or a moment between two eras). Safire's New Political Dictionary, Random House

The next federal election will be a watershed for Canadian agriculture, and dairy farmers have a huge stake in its outcome. Harper's agenda for supply management is philosophically twinned to his agenda on grain. Indeed, Canada's support for SM at the WTO is already eroding. If government can wreck such policy abuse on Canada's grain growers, no commodity sector is safe. In January 2006, Stephen Harper formed a government with the weakest mandate (36% of the vote, 40.3% of the MPs) in Canadian political history.

Front and centre in the Conservative campaign was destruction of the Canadian Wheat Board, an organization that has served the interests of western grain farmers since 1935 and today - since the fall of cooperatively owned prairie grain pools - is the only thing standing between farmers and the interests of powerful multinational grain conglomerates.

As promised, Ottawa's attack on the interests of prairie farmers has been unrelenting. Using tactics that would make a tin-pot dictator blush, the Government of Canada's assault on prairie grain farmers included the muzzling of journalists, a gag order prohibiting Directors and staff of the Canadian Wheat Board from defending their role as the single-desk seller, replacement of two (of the five) government appointed Directors who supported the wheat board with two who opposed it, removal of 36 per cent of western Canada grain growers — 16,269 farmers — from the list of eligible voters in the middle of a CWB election, and active campaigning and endorsement by then-Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl of anti-CWB candidates.

(Despite this, farmers solidly supported the CWB, returning pro-CWB Directors in four out of five Districts; presently eight of the 10 elected directors support the CWB.)

Next came the firing of respected CWB CEO Adrian Messner. Followed quickly by a barley plebiscite that didn't ask a clear question, didn't have a guarantee of ballot secrecy, imposed no controls on election spending and didn't say in advance what would happen if no group had a clear majority.

Not surprisingly, the plebiscite passed; although only 13.8 per



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Conservative Majority
Western Dairy
Farmer
This column is as
relevant today as when
it was first published
last year. It competed
against 217 entries
submitted in 14 award
categories.

cent opposed the CWB and more farmers (37.8%) supported the CWB than supported the Harper government in the last election.

Who has the most to gain by destruction of the single desk authority of the CWB? Clearly, the grain companies. This June, the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool finalized its take over of Agricore United, making Archer Daniel Midland the largest single shareholder of the merged company.

In addition to cheap grain for export, ADM's stated goal is to dominate the global ethanol market. Canada's target of 35 per cent of Canadian gasoline containing 10 per cent ethanol by 2010 requires 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.

And there is no indication that Madam Justice Dolores Hansen's July 31, 2007 ruling that no changes can be made to the Canadian Wheat Board's mandate without a vote in the House has slowed him down much.

Two days following the Supreme Court decision, Harper said "Canadian farmers want to see this barley market opened. So I hope the wheat board will start working with the government to make sure this is going to happen. Because it's going to happen one way or the other."

Enter Gerry Ritz, who replaced Strahl as Federal Agriculture Minister.

Outspoken critic of the CWB and former Chair of the Conservative's Agriculture Committee, Ritz was the author of Bill C-300, a private members bill that went down to defeat in the House of Commons (149 to 111) last November that would have removed the CWB's single desk sales authority. With the Opposition parties solidly backing the farmers, the Conservatives need a majority in the House to make it happen. This election will be a watershed for Canadian farm policy. Those with the most to lose are farmers.

It is time farmers again stood together, across commodity lines, and put this government in its place. Dairy farmers — blessed with a strong organization and strong voice — have a particularly critical role to play. It's time to stand up for Canada.

What better rallying cry than the words of William Jennings Bryan (1896):

Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic, but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country."

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