



Lulled by the spin-cycle?

Attention needs to be paid to Canadian agricultural policies

ON SEPTEMBER 10 AND 12, two events that will shape the future of Canadian agriculture policy quietly occurred. They warrant the attention of all farmers, particularly those in supply-managed sectors...

The first was a ruling by the Federal Court of Canada tossing out a motion (filed jointly by Canada's Attorney General and Canada's Minister of Agriculture in his Capacity as Minister Responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board) to dismiss an Application for Judicial Review filed by The Friends of the Canadian Wheat Board – a group of prairie grain farmers. This means the promise by Canadian Agriculture/Canadian Wheat Board Minister Gerry Ritz to introduce legislation in the fall session to dismantle its single desk authority for non-feed wheat and barley will be subject to judicial review by the Federal Court. Under Section 47.1 of the CWB Act, any such legislation must first be approved by producers through a CWB plebiscite.

Two days later, on September 12, the results of JUST such a plebiscite were released, providing irrefutable evidence of what most already knew: prairie wheat farmers overwhelmingly support – by a majority of 62 percent – retention of the CWB's single desk selling authority for wheat. (Support for barley was a much tighter race at 51 percent). Would seem to take the wind out of Ritz' sails, yes? Not on your life.

That very night, on CBC's As it Happens, Ritz told Carol Off that the plebiscite was "irrelevant". "We control 51 of 56 seats in western Canada," said Ritz. "We certainly weren't shy about campaigning on an open market... This should come as no surprise for anyone."

Clearly we should all be surprised at the arrogance in governance that sees a Minister of the Crown vow he will act ultra vires of legislation. Clearly, all farmers who depend on enabling legislation should care deeply about what is happening here...

Put aside for a moment the comforting vision implanted in your brain by Ottawa's spin-doctors of prancing bureaucrats with "I LOVE SM" buttons dancing rings around the DOHA negotiators in defense of Canada's supply management system. Rest assured, they will keep that vision a'spinnin till the bitter end. After which the messaging will switch to: "the-trade-rules-made-us-do-it" in rural constituencies (a complete fabrication but will be well-spun).

In urban settings, any opposition (we can only hope from those who eat for a living) will be blanketed with the right wing froth of pundits like William Watson (Time to end supply management, Financial Post, April 1, 2011) and Andrew Coyne (The \$25,000 cow. Macleans. August 11, 2011) who are moving the big guns into position.

Watson's column went ga-ga over a recent luncheon speech by John Manley, former industry minister, former finance minister, former foreign minister, former deputy prime minister, current chief executive of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives. According to Watson, Manley argues it's "well past time to begin to phase out supply management, the marketing board system that keeps our production of dairy and poultry products artificially low so their prices can be jacked up artificially high." Claiming Canada's support for SM commodities has resulted in Canada becoming "a outcast" in the evolution of international trade rules, Manley suggests if "a given regulatory regime no longer serves the public interest" the main task is transition measures. Does Watson question any of this? Nope. His conclusion is downright tail-wagging: "... if the spokesman for 150 of the country's biggest companies, representing half its GDP in sales, says it's time to do something about marketing boards, that's encouraging news."

Pointing to Australia and New Zealand, Maclean's Andrew Coyne jumps on Manley's bandwagon, concluding "...the question cannot be avoided: why we should have one set of rules for some farms, and another for the rest; and why, if our aim is to keep farmers on the land, we should have chosen the most inefficient, unjust, counterproductive, and internationally obnoxious way to go about it."

Of course it's aggravating to read such froth. But it is important to understand where this is all heading and not be lulled to sleep by the spin-cycle...

If Ottawa gets away with dismantling the rights of grain farmers, their next target will be supply management. Sure, it will "look" different from the CWB fight. But it will come to the same end.

Consider becoming a Friend of the Canadian Wheat Board (www.friendsofcwb.ca) and putting a few coins in their hat to fight this fight. We all have a stake here...

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