

No-so-benign dictator attacks wheat board

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by John Beckham

WESTERN Canada is witnessing a totalitarian and brutal process being carried out by the Conservative government against a segment of the population. The rest of the country, if it is even aware of what is going on, watches with an air of bemusement. I refer, of course, to the process of dismantling the Canadian Wheat Board. This venerable institution, which has served farmers for 70-plus years, is under an all out assault from the Harper government.

One of the most troubling aspects of this assault is the disenfranchising of large numbers of Canadian farmers. Thousands of us have voted people into positions as CWB directors. We are now told that if we are supporters of the CWB, we have no say in what happens to it. Only those who, for whatever reason, are foes of the CWB, are to have a voice in its fate. If such a travesty of justice can occur in our case, why not in many others?

What is happening here is the work of a not-so-benign dictatorship. What's to stop it from spreading?

For those not familiar with what is happening, a brief sketch may be required. The Conservatives promised, under duress from their Alberta supporters, that if elected they would take away the single-desk marketing mandate of the CWB, by which mandate the CWB has the sole right to market western Canadian wheat and barley. Shortly after being elected, a cabinet was appointed in which Chuck Strahl became agriculture minister. Shortly thereafter, David Anderson, a rabid opponent of the CWB, was appointed parliamentary secretary to Strahl. Then, in July, a meeting of those opposing the CWB was convened in Saskatoon with the stated purpose of devising ways and means by which the powers of the single desk might be terminated.

No friends of the CWB were allowed to attend this meeting.

The decision-making powers of the CWB lie with its board of directors, 15 in number, 10 of whom were to be farmers, elected by other farmers, and five of whom were to be government appointees, taken from other professions and occupations, to provide a balance to the farmer directors.

But now the government, in a contemptuous slap at the CWB, has appointed another rabid opponent of the board, a farmer from Alberta named Ken Motiuk. Other events are taking place daily, as the government races to make the dismantling of the CWB a fait accompli before any meaningful resistance forms.

What's it all about? Who gains if the CWB loses its mandate? The mantra of the Conservative government and such supporters as the Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association is "choice." They claim that farmers should be given a "choice" as to whom they sell their grain to, or rather, who sells their grain to the world.

The Wheat Growers and others like them are mostly farmers in Saskatchewan and Alberta who farm along the U.S. border and can make little profitable forays over into North Dakota and Montana with the odd semi-load of grain.

These people have made a noise out of all proportion to their importance or numbers. But it is a very welcome noise to open market-oriented politicians. It is even more welcome to the ears of transnational corporations, who hate and fear the CWB. They hate it because it provides the only real competition they face in all the world. And they fear it because it is a pattern that could severely affect their bottom line.

The WTO, at least as far as agriculture is concerned, appears to be dead, if not yet buried. In its place, bilateral trade deals are being entered into. As a new reality begins to take hold in world agriculture, might other countries begin to eye "state trading enterprises" like the CWB?

Canada is a high-profile country, a huge trader, a nation, at least up until now, to be looked up to. If other countries wanted to set up state trading enterprises what better pattern than the 70-year success story of the CWB. Even in the U.S.A. there are those, over the last few years, who have suggested a U.S. wheat board. Such talk would bring terror to the boardrooms of the handful of transnationals who control the world grain trade.

What will we lose if we lose the CWB? Farmers will have lost an organization big enough to challenge the marketing power of the Big Five transnational grain companies. We will have lost the unique place the CWB has made for itself in the grain-importing countries of the world. We will have lost the champion that it has proved itself to be, fighting off unwarranted attacks by protectionist groups in the U.S., and we will have lost an organization that tirelessly promotes Canadian wheat for what it is, the best in the world.

The Conservatives would try to lull us, talking about "choice." But make no mistake, their aim is the destruction of the CWB. And with it, the de facto destruction of a good deal of Canadian democracy.

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