

Wheat Board ordered not to sow discontent

Cabinet directive bans organization from buying ads to argue against end to monopoly

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JOE FRIESEN

WINNIPEG -- The Conservative government has banned the Canadian Wheat Board from advocating its continued existence as the monopoly seller of Western Canadian wheat and barley, adding fuel to a growing political fire.

In a cabinet directive issued late last week, the government ordered the board not to directly or indirectly spend money on advertising, publishing or market research that would enable them to argue for the retention of the monopoly.

Ken Ritter, the Wheat Board's elected chair, yesterday called the move "unprecedented in law" and an unfair attack on freedom of speech. Opposition critics described it as "anti-democratic."

"I'd expect to see this in a tin-pot dictatorship, not in Canada," said federal Liberal agriculture critic Wayne Easter. "This is no longer a farm issue. What we're seeing is the fundamentals of a democracy being undermined."

The ban is the latest development in the battle over the Wheat Board's future. The Conservative government has promised to end the board's monopoly, but it's far from clear whether a majority of farmers supports that position and the government has refused to commit to a plebiscite on the issue.

Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl was in China yesterday but issued a statement through his office.

"The CWB reports to Parliament through me, and should not be attempting to undermine this government's policy objectives," Mr. Strahl said. "Farmers should be debating the future of the CWB, and I'm always interested in hearing from farmers. However, the CWB should use its resources and energy to market grain for farmers."

Adrian Measner, the Wheat Board's chief executive officer, said it's unfair to silence the organization at a crucial juncture in its history.

"It does create an unlevel playing field in the country, and I think that's the issue," Mr. Measner said. "We're being asked to be silent on our vision and our direction . . . while at the same time the government will be promoting their vision of opening up this marketplace."

He said the Wheat Board will respect the directive, but it will affect the organization's plans to communicate with farmers. Board members will still be able to speak their minds on the issue, but communications staff who discuss the possible impact of an end to the monopoly may risk repercussions.

The government made the order under a little-used section of the Canadian Wheat Board Act invoked only twice in recent memory, including once to forbid the sale of wheat to the Soviet Union after its invasion of Afghanistan. The Wheat Board is a quasi-governmental agency that is not funded by government but has billions of dollars in loans guaranteed by the federal treasury.

David Anderson, the parliamentary secretary to the Agriculture Minister, said farmers have told him they're opposed to the Wheat Board using their money to advocate a position they disagree with.

"We're serious about giving farmers a choice," Mr. Anderson said. "The directive is to have [the board] move to a neutral position on the issue and the farmers will have the discussion, organizations will have the discussion."

NDP MP Pat Martin accused the government of acting like fascists, and

said they were abusing their power to silence their enemies.

"I think this is absolutely unprecedented in Canadian history," Mr. Martin said. "This is an issue of constitutional proportions. . . . To silence your opposition is so jack-booted, so heavy-handed. Canadians won't tolerate it."

A seven-member task force is to present its recommendations on how to create an open market for wheat and barley at some point in the next few weeks.