

Politicians already in that “high twitchiness” mode.

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Over the next several months, communities across the province will go to the polls to elect a provincial government. After all is said and done, the good people of British Columbia will have turned over to a relative handful of men and women parading under the same silks the authority to govern this province for the next five years.

Some might argue we spend more care and attention selecting a pair of running shoes than we do our political leaders. Some might respond that's because we still expect something from the running shoes.

When we believe in possibility, things move within our virtual grasp. But widespread disillusionment, as any magician will tell you, spells game over for the show. Governance is no exception.

Oh, how quickly we have moved from one extreme to the other.

In the 1970's, farmers expected, and got, everything they wanted from the system. (Which, as some of us observed at the time, was far less than they deserved 'cause even then the continentalist's view was clear in the pictographs — see George Parkin Grant's seminal 1963 work *Lament for a Nation*.)

We knew that competitive wind was *most certainly* goin' to blow square in the faces of Canada's farmers when borders and tariffs eventually fell to the (some might argue false) alters of market efficiency.

Would Canada's politicians be up to the challenge — suddenly developing that which most bull calves lose come springtime — to actually *defend* the interests of agriculture at the international trading table?

We feared not... And we were right.

Why are our politicians at times so inadequate? In part, because we manage them so poorly. Agriculture does not have a united and principled voice. Politicians are torn by diverse interest groups clamoring for advantage and examined and harassed by scandal-seeking media. The more we see of government, the less we believe in statesmen; a vicious circle which quickly becomes self-fulfilling.

And so here we find ourselves, on the threshold of a provincial election. Unity amongst B.C.'s farm commodity groups has never been more important, nor more elusive. The B.C. Federation of Agriculture no longer speaks for B.C.'s cattlemen. Nor does it speak for the producers of many field and greenhouse crops organized under the umbrella of the B.C. Horticultural Council.

Such fragmentation is not limited to the West Coast. Across the Prairies, a farmer who wants to truck his grain across the border and sell it in the U.S. is suing the wheat pool. Ag economists, giving evidence in the case, release a study comparing prices received by farmers over time to those available on the market; concluding farmers' income *is* improved by the operation of the pool.

Across Canada, farmers of supply-managed commodities have learned a new word: **TARIFFIED**. They hear this word a lot as they watch what amounts to the expropriation of their quota values by recent trade agreements.

At a recent agribusiness conference, an academic speaker quipped that farmers should stop arguing about their evaporating quota values and instead view themselves as simply having capitalized their quota investment over 7 years or so. While one can appreciate his point, I wonder what his response would be if his university tenure rights as a full professor were similarly expropriated and a large sum of money subtracted from his balance sheet?

And while we're on the subject of trade, which of the bureaucrats sitting at NAFTA's subsidy-definition table is busy summoning the arguments to target on behalf of Canada's farmers the blatant failure of the U.S. government to enforce their own immigration laws — thus supporting a steady flow of illegal farm workers from Mexico and a massive labour subsidy to American farmers?

Quota was not the only capital devalued when cast upon the alter of borderless markets. The political capital of farmers has fallen to its lowest level in decades.

Agriculture has to quickly pull together around key principles. Then put them forward strongly in the upcoming election. Gimme, gimme never gets. But together, ah, that's another story.

Like the little red hen might have said: *Who will speak for agriculture in the upcoming election?*

If the vision for B.C. agriculture is an economically robust, fleet-footed, competitive and highly sustainable farm and agri-business community characterized by skilled and independent farm operators, well-developed niche and value-added markets and solid partnerships with other stakeholders (e.g. consumers, Delta Farm Land and Wildlife Trust, etc.), what are the issues which must be addressed to deliver this vision? What are the sustainability priorities? What are the impediments?

Who has the time, as the warming sun begins to awaken the land, to even get together to formulate the questions never mind demand answers from politicians already in "high-twitchiness" mode — standing in the starting box, nervous and easily distracted, impatiently awaiting the bell and the crop?

How do we get across to them the simple lesson that farmers are the true Rapunzel's of today's economy — spinning soil and water and sunshine into primary products (food) and economic growth. The trick is to accomplish this in manner which productively sustains all elements in the process, including the farmer.

That's the opening premise of an upcoming workshop I'm leading in early March on the inclusion of agriculture as a topic area to be examined and potentially incorporated in the Fraser Basin Management Board's '96 Report Card.

I'm betting that the results of that workshop may just hold some answers of interest to us all.

Canada's position that Americans must allow GATT-imposed tariffication under NAFTA becomes somewhat ironic when one notes that the wording of NAFTA's Canada-Mexico section fully contemplates and incorporates tariffication. Yet in the Canada-U.S. section, no such clarity of wording appears. Why? Canadian bureaucrats claimed they couldn't do anything that might be seen to contemplate the demise of GATT Article IX[2](b). What rubbish.