

# *A window of opportunity for farmers' message.*

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The early scent of toast and coffee slips through the last few fragments of your pre-dawn dream like a lariat across a steer's back, sending them skittering out of your head like so many spring calves. *Wait... Wait... Ah, shoot. So much for finding out what it would have been like to...*

The door opens, then closes. Footsteps. The sound of a robe being dropped to the floor. The feather quilt drawn back, then forward. The mattress adjusts. "Are you ready?" whispers a voice so close to you right ear, it's tone becomes positively invitational.

Opening your eyes just a crack, you roll over (gingerly — have to get that left shoulder checked) and peer across the pillow at what you surely hope will be a familiar and welcoming face. One that sparks your imagination and understands your dreams.

The morning after. New faces in Victoria's Legislative Assembly. Same old faces (mostly) in the Ministry. And B.C. farmers faced with unprecedented challenge.

"This better be good" you vow under your breath as you prepare once again for the embrace of a government in the first year of it's (re) new(ed) mandate. The year when campaign promises are put in motion and directions clearly set. The one year during each administration's life when the civil servants might actually get some marching orders from the politicians. Proactive ones, that is. (Like fireflies caught in a jar, the actual influence which politicians wield over bureaucrats dims steadily over the life of their mandate...)

Because agriculture is at such a turning point, the evidence left by that embrace will be felt for generations. Traditional safety nets have fallen. New, global pressures threaten domestic and international market shares. Consumers facing dwindling purchasing power brag about the *cents per whatever* they save buying groceries across the line. Big bucks paid for 5 to 10 acre country estate lots result in a permanent withdrawal from the inventory of productive land available to farming and inflate the price of surrounding farmland well above farm values.

In this — North America's most north-westerly — region of rugged mountains, sudden valleys and rapid growth, stakeholders (farm, forestry, aboriginal, environment, community) are increasingly fighting over the same piece of pie (funding, water, land-use, etc.). Sometimes, it's farm groups themselves doing the scrapping; often, over the very same issues.

Shame on both farmers and politicians for failing to make *agriculture/farming/the production of food* a front and centre issue in the past provincial election campaign.

Rest assured, whether or not the governing party in Victoria has changed as a result of the past election, *we do indeed have a new government in this province*. And this means a window of opportunity for farmers to get their message across to politicians. With some hope that it might actually trickle down to the Ministry level.

What might such a message entail? My "quickie" list (considering I am my normal eye's blink from column deadline) would include the following:

- i. Formal recognition, backed up by full policy support across all Ministries, of farming as a fundamental and essential pillar of community economic, social and environmental sustainability.
- ii. Formal recognition, backed up by full policy support across all Ministries, that the clear thinking that went into the creation of the agricultural land reserve is only part of the answer;

without similarly clear thinking aimed at supporting and enhancing the sustainability of farmers, “there just ain’t no show.”

iii. Formal recognition, backed up by full policy support across all Ministries, that when government does something which, whether by design or default, gives rise to events which subsequently impede the competitiveness of B.C.’s farmers, it assumes full responsibility for same— not by hand-outs that do little but put money in the pockets of the jeans of grand-kids living in a high-rise in Burnaby but through government’s strategic support for industry-led competitiveness-enhancing initiatives (e.g. the call for pan-agricultural Competitiveness Fund to compensate for the irrigation benefits to American farmers under the Columbia Treaty).

How can such a message be delivered?

Farmers have to get *their* act together before they have any hope of getting *Victoria’s* act together. This will require the construction of a vehicle which enables effective:

networking — of issues across commodity groups;  
future-proofing — enhancing the ability of farmers to respond to change;  
lobbying — speaking in one strategically-positioned voice to the pols; and  
initiating/delivering — of programs consistent with a pan-commodity mandate.

The only fuel that can deliver a truly operational vehicle is communication. Laced with understanding. Commodity groups need to understand not only why they are alike but also to respect why they are different. If farmers continue to define and divide themselves along commodity lines — e.g. viewing someone as “a dairyman” vs. “a farmer who happens to be running a dairy” — then many farmers will never understand why, for example, some approaches (such as supply management) work well for some commodities but would be the death-knell for others. Or the very real structural/leadership challenges faced by some commodity cooperatives when, for example, three out of four of their members are non-commercial.

(And no offense to the good skills of some at the table, but the only thing that could effectively put sand in the gas tank of such a vehicle would be any attempt to have elected commodity leaders run it...)

It’s your choice. Wake up and smell the coffee perking. Or wake up and smell the toast burning. So nice to have all options under one’s control, isn’t it?

Next Month: Teaching Politicians to Dance...