

# Well Corky – what dance steps do we need to teach you?

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Och, and sure but wasn't it a fine dance we ha' wi' wee Davie?

We knew from his dance card that he'd be good. A native son of William's Lake, a UBC-educated Cariboo rancher (draft horses/cattle) with a Bachelor's degree in Political Science and a Master's in Public Administration (resource management), Zirnhelt was (or should have been) every farmers' dream-date.

Zirnhelt's background was in planning, economic development, urban affairs, education and employment. He came from a strong municipal model — six years service at the regional district and school board level. Respected within the Native community (planning and economic development consultant to a number of Cariboo Indian bands) Zirnhelt also had hands-on experience at the federal level.

(Translation: He can hold his own in Cabinet discussions. He has experience listening to constituents. He understands and is credible at the local government level. He knows his way around Ottawa.)

Personable and bright — arguably one of the best in Clark's stable — Zirnhelt's most important strength for many of us was that he also understands and respects farmers and farming.

So what happened? The music stops, and before you can say dosey-do, we can't see wee Davie for the trees (according to his bio, newly-appointed Forest Minister David Zirnhelt “also practices selective logging on his nearby woodlot”) and in his place stands *The Honourable Corky Evans, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food*.

Comely lad and all, but can he dance? And can our toes withstand it if he can't?

Oh sure, forestry lucks out in the deal. If ever there was a Ministry that needed to understand farming, it's Forestry. The benefits of a farming perspective cannot come quickly enough to a sector who's future wood fibre supply is increasingly dependent on managed, sustainable second-growth stands.

And ranchers sharing Crown range land with forest companies will no doubt also welcome Zirnhelt's perspective on land tenure and management issues.

But for the rest of B.C.'s farm community, Zirnhelt's departure from the agriculture portfolio is sad, indeed.

Sad because — as even farmers who never strayed farther left of centre than Liberal in their vote were quick to acknowledge — David Zirnhelt was the best ag minister this province ever had.

Sadder yet because it is a loss which we largely brought upon ourselves.

Zirnhelt, while he was Minister, laid a truly fine table for B.C.'s farming community. Instead of recognizing what was offered (farmers had finally been invited to the table by someone who could really cook), sitting down and saying “thanks”, B.C.'s commodity groups got into a food fight. In the frenzy, many bit the hand that fed them. We thanked him in private and trashed him in public. Just the opposite of what was needed. We blew it.

Zirnhelt — who must by this time be weary of having his toes so rudely trod upon by big-booted farmers — smiles gratefully when tapped on the shoulder by Forestry.

A quick pirouette and its Hello Corky — The Honourable Corky Evans, former Parliamentary Secretary to the Forests Minister, former Chair of the Select Standing Committee on Forests, Mines and Petroleum Resources, former Minister of Transportation and Highways.

What dance steps do we need to teach this young logger from the Kootenays so that our toes and his temperament remain intact?

A few suggestions for our new Minister:

1. Take the time to learn not only what farmers share in common, but more importantly, what it is that sets them apart. What it is about commodity markets, capital investment, grower structures and the nature of production that, for example, causes the greenhouse guys act so differently from the poultrymen? Or why the cattlemen hate supply management and the dairymen hate NAFTA. Or why orchardists and grape growers, sitting cheek to jowl in the sunny Okanagan, seem to rarely interact? Understand these differences, and you will begin to understand the similarities. Without this, you will never understand the sector.
2. Seek council from your colleague in the Forest portfolio. Leverage his understanding of the issues facing B.C.'s farm community to win support from others at the Cabinet table.
3. Give strong and unequivocal support to farmers as the backbone of economic, environmental and social sustainability within rural communities. As a concrete example of this, use the understanding you gleaned as Chair of the Columbia Basin Trust to support the call on the feds to invite the Americans to join Canada in a reference to the International Joint Commission to determine the manner in which downstream benefits under the Columbia Treaty are assessed and quantified. A call supported by virtually every farm group in the province and increasingly by lead environmental and conservationist groups such as Rivers Canada.
4. Support the creation of a strong and unified voice for B.C.'s farming community. Without it, the bun toss that has characterized farm politics in this province will only continue. And you will inevitably get caught in the cross fire.

If farmers and Ministry field staff can bring our new agriculture minister quickly up to speed, we'll at least have two Ministers around the Cabinet table who understand the issues facing farmers in this province. Small comfort, but it's a start.

And to our outgoing Ag Minister — a tip of the cap, Davie, ya done good... Lang may your lum reek and your pot boil...