

Getting respect.

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The bureaucrats can hang all the labels they want on it: International commodity markets. Economies of scale. New trading arrangements. Globalization. The reason we have a farm crisis in Canada is twofold:

#1. Government's lack of policy respect for farmers. While they may get ad hoc support payments when political pressure to do so becomes extreme, Canadian farmers get little policy respect from government. Over the past decade, while other nations rushed to construct "green" subsidies for farmers, Canada cut its farm policy supports quicker and harder than any other OECD nation in the world (except New Zealand and Australia). As a result, no matter how you slice it (per hectare, per Canadian or per farmer) Canada's farmers - world leaders in sustainable agriculture - are at the bottom of the heap. An example?

Total transfers associated with agricultural policies
— as estimated by the countries themselves —
1996, in US Dollars (Source: OECD)

	Per Ha	Per Capita	Per farmer
Canada	\$66	\$161	\$11,225
United States	\$161	\$259	\$27,240
European Union	\$825	\$322	\$20,000
Japan	\$15,107	\$617	\$30,091
Norway	\$3,287	\$767	\$40,362
Switzerland	\$4,213	\$935	\$42,701

#2 Decapitalization of the farm sector through margin capture by concentrated buyers and sellers. Over the past decade, the sectors that supply inputs to the farm community and process its products have become dominated by large multinational conglomerates (oligopsonists and oligopolists in economic parlance) with the power to leach economic margins legitimately belonging to the stewards of the land.

For many farmers — also watching once-strong cooperative structures falter and facing a chorus of bleating bureaucrats chanting "value-added", "strategic alliances", "business plans", "agri-tourism" and "venture-capital" — disbelief is slowly being replaced by defeat. Why continue? The kids'll never be able to make a go of it the way things are anyway... Farmers just aren't respected any more.

One of the most remarkable things witnessed by Canadian farmers when they visit the fields of Cuba is the obvious status enjoyed by Cuba's farmers. They are RESPECTED. They routinely make more than doctors. Farmer's Day is a national holiday. Farm extension is a government priority. When the farmers speak, Fidel listens. Why?

In part, the reason is historic: It could be said that the Revolution drew much of its strength from the strong shoulders and broad backs of Cuba's farmers. When Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and others camped in the majestic Sierra Maestra mountains plotting the overthrow of the corrupt Batista dictatorship, it was Cuba's farmers they relied on to support Fidel's underground, open farms and larders to his soldiers and, when necessary, join him in arms. And they did. From his launch in Santiago de Cuba in 1957 to his victory in Havana in 1959, Fidel was strongly supported by Cuban "Campesinos". In 1959, Cuba's first Agrarian Reform Law gave 35,000 hectares of

farmland to the 400,000 men and women who had worked the land for foreign corporations. The relationship between farmers and government has remained a strong one.

In part, the reason is economic. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Cuba lost 60% of her food supply. By the early 1990's, persistent hunger was a reality for the 80% of Cuban adults who lived in cities. Farmers who learned to grow food without chemicals in less than a decade became heroes. If it weren't for the country's farmers, Cubans would have starved.

In part, the reason is political All of Cuba's small private farmers — including those organized into cooperatives — are members of ANAP, a national association of small Cuban farmers with big political clout. Today, ANAP consists of over 200,000 members; 3,400 are independent farmers who contribute 50 percent of all the vegetables and grain production sold by ANAP. The rest are grouped in more than 1,100 agricultural cooperatives. ANAP members are responsible for 84 percent of tobacco production, 42.4 percent of cattle production and grow 60 percent of the island's vegetables. When ANAP speaks, Fidel listens.

In part, the reason is structural! During the last decade, most of the State farms have been converted to farmer cooperatives, increasing the political clout of the farm sector. Prior to 1993, 75% of Cuba's farmland was held by the State. In 1993, under reforms intended to increase the efficiency and productivity of Cuba's agricultural sector, much of the land farmed by the state was turned over to the farmers that worked it and credit was extended to allow them to purchase the necessary machinery, warehouse and irrigation systems. Land was also distributed in the coffee (mountains) and tobacco growing areas. Cubans who asked for non-used land were given 0.2 hectares for their personal use. As a result of the 1993 agrarian reforms, 75% of Cuba's farmland is now held by farmer cooperatives who purchase supplies from the government and sell back the bulk (75%) of their production at a contract price set yearly. The balance is consumed by the co-op or — since 1994 — sold at government-operated Agricultural Markets.

In part, the reason is cultural. As an urban Cuban shopping for dinner, you are never far removed from the farmer. There are three options: go to the state store to see what's available from your ration book (*very* low prices, often limited availability), buy fresh vegetables and (soon) small meats (e.g. rabbit) at a nearby "Organoponica" (lush green raised-bed urban organic gardens that dot Cuba's cities), or buy direct from area farmers at the local Agricultural Market. Further, every Cuban student spends a month a year working on a farm to understand the importance of growing food.

Is there a lesson here for Canada's farmers? Obviously, we are not going to swap our system of government for that of Cuba. Nor are we likely to shoulder a hero-led Revolution from the Canadian Rockies (hmmmm....). But there is something very exhilarating about being in a country where farmers are so obviously respected. Maybe, just maybe, THIS is the "strategic alliance" we've been waiting for.

Out of sheer necessity, Cuba's farmers just happen to have washed up on the golden shore of large scale organic production. (Global leaders, actually. Cuba won the Swedish Parliament's Right Livelihood Award for excellence in organic agriculture). Hitched to a partner with capital and expertise in processing, labeling, packaging and marketing, the alliance would be unbeatable, running global rings around competitors for the lucrative non-GMO organic market.

Why shouldn't that "partner" be Canadian farmers?

Come to Cuba. See for yourself. Look for the ad in this issue. Farmers/ farm family members (of *course* including ranchers, orchardists, greenhouse operators) welcome.