

10 points to raise with political wanna-be's.

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As this column is written, we are on the eve of another election in BC. Provincial, this time. As if it makes much difference. It seems no matter how many critical issues are on the table going into an election, they all turn to mush when the spin doctors get hold of them during the course of the campaign. Cub reporters, who long ago replaced seasoned journalists at what-once-was-but-no-longer-is the Canadian free press, burble on about who won which debate (optics) and interview political pundits (read political hacks) for the "in-depth" analysis.

What a load of horse-feathers.

The one who's taken for a ride every time is the voter. New governments — brazened by their highly-trumpeted "new mandate" — proceed to dole out promised goodies to promised ridings and carry on: business as usual.

Take farming. With all due respect to Senator Herb Sparrow, soil erosion ain't nothing compared to the erosion in the political position of Canada's farmers over the past 15 years. And no politician will address it.

In a March 20th editorial entitled "The case for eliminating all farm subsidies" the National Post trots out University of Guelph agricultural economics professor George Brinkman to explain what would happen "if Canada decided to go cold turkey and eliminated all farm subsidies":

Would such a decision mark the end of farming in this country? Not a chance. Could it be done?... "Absolutely yes," says Brinkman. "From a purely economic perspective... the industry today makes no sense...Canada's farmers have paid too much for their land... Without subsidies, less-efficient farmers would go out of business... but a new generation of farmers would emerge, who would have a lower cost structure and who would be more competitive."

On the elimination of supply management, Brinkman argues "you can produce all the chickens we consume in Canada in Arkansas".

The Globe and Mail, in its Editorial entitled "The end of farming?" (Friday March 16th), delivers much the same message:

We can't continue to pay Canadian farmers to stay in business, says agricultural specialist David Roberts... There are too many farmers in Canada still clinging to the antiquated notion... that a nation must protect its domestic food supply... Ottawa's unstated agricultural agenda is for marginal farmers to get out of the business entirely. If this is Mr. Vanclief's secret policy, it is not a bad one.... It may now be time Canadian taxpayers began paying farmers to quit farming...

What unmitigated rubbish.

As a baby economist, freshly anointed with my Master of Science in agricultural economics from the University of British Columbia, I trotted off to Ottawa in 1974 with similar prejudices. The mantra of the market ("public policy is best served when competitive market forces are allowed to adjust price and supply to the benefit of efficiency") had been ingrained in my education. Indeed, honours marks meant regurgitating this mantra verbatim. The real world problem is that competitive markets — in the way classical economics perceived them — no longer exist. Particularly in agriculture, a sector dominated by concentrated multinational interests at the processing and input levels.

For the Globe and the Post to suggest that protection of a nation's domestic food supply is an antiquated notion is absurd. Aside from the competitive effect of local production on the price of imported products; aside from issues of consumer choice related to freshness, quality, reduced or no-pesticide production; aside from the importance of active farming to community economic, social and environmental sustainability, there are issues such as full cost accounting (the inevitable tax shift that will make the chicken hauled up from factory farms in Georgia bear the cost of fossil fuels extracted to transport it and environmental costs to rear it) and health concerns associated with pharmaceuticals use in factory production (growth hormones, disease suppressants, etc.).

Here are ten points any politician looking for the farm vote — indeed the vote of anyone who eats for a living - should embrace with passion.

#1 Like education, health care and the environment, farming is not a sector that can be abandoned to the forces of markets. It is critically dependent on good public policy. This is the role of government. Financial support for sustainable farming practices (through the purchase or lease of easements against farmland titles as is done in the US, Europe and other enlightened jurisdictions) must be an immediate policy priority. Supply management must be defended.

#2 British Columbia may be small, but it is a critically important farming province. Because of the diversity of our bio-geo-climatic zones, we have the capacity to produce virtually all the products British Columbians consume. Farming is our resource of the future. Agriculture must be elevated to a senior ministry.

#3 Water is critical to farming. Volume-based water rights must be deeded to all ALR land in perpetuity and the mandate of all regional water boards extended to ensure an adequate and affordable supply of water to farm acreages in perpetuity.

#4 In the short term, the ALR must remain a matter of provincial, not regional, jurisdiction; in the longer term, this must be entrenched through the purchase of agricultural covenants against title for all ALR lands (farmer would be paid so much per year in perpetuity).

#5 Include an Agricultural Competitiveness Test in the evaluation criteria for all projects/policies that may effect farm communities. Require full mitigation measures if risk to the competitiveness of the farm sector arises, backed by a compensation fund to indemnify farmers against any unanticipated losses (e.g. the risk of error in the scientists' assessment that a US power plant in Sumas would not compromise the integrity of the Abbotsford Aquifer).

#6 Land expropriated from Delta farmers (Roberts' Bank Lands) must be immediately removed from the native land claims bargaining table (unacceptable precedent).

#7 Municipal Affairs must immediately overturn its approval of Delta Council's \$23,000 per acre Development Cost Charge against intensive farming (unacceptable precedent).

#8 Serious and ongoing government support must be given for the development of a BC Centre of Excellence in "green" and commercial-scale organic farming practices.

#9 The BC Agrologist's Act should be changed back to "right to practice" from its present "right to title" (this would mean that civil servants constructing farm policy would need to be professionally qualified Agrologists).

#10 Agricultural extension must again become a funded and staffed ministry priority.

Clip this column and stick it on the fridge for the duration of the provincial election. Challenge the political wanna-be's on talk shows and at candidates debates. Send this column to your local paper. Get a ready-for-insertion electronic version from me at <holm@pinc.com>.

Allan Patton, newly-elected BC Fruit Growers' Association vice president, summed it up well: "I am a farmer at heart and when I am finished farming, I want to be able to sell my land to another farmer. It's continuity. And my whole driving philosophy is as basic as that."

It's been too long since this fairly simple expectation was a certainty.