

Sea Change.

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Grab the kids and the sweetie. Go and stand out in front of the barn/greenhouse/tractor/animals (whatever best captures your operation) and get someone to snap a picture. Make triple prints. On the back of each, write "Farmers Keeping Canada in Good Heart" and print your names, address, phone number and date. Send one to the Hon. Lyle Vanclief (Minister of Agriculture, Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, Canada; no stamp necessary). Send one to me. And put one in the family album titled "This is when it all started to change."

Assuming we live in a democracy, the direction of that change is up to us. But it's WAY past time to seize control. This column is about evoking change.

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Canada's farmers don't need glasses to read the writing on the wall. For many, watching federal agriculture minister Lyle Vanclief's stone-faced shrug to yet another year of devastated farm incomes, the message is as clear as a barnside billboard on the Trans Canada: Forget farming. The Canadian government has...

Consider recent Western Canadian headlines (the situation is much the same in the rest of the country):

Federal Liberals reject Sask. request for additional farm aid. Manitoba to lobby Ottawa for more emergency aid. Drought reduces Saskatchewan crop yields by 80 percent and more. Irrigators forced to ration. Pulse crop yields worse than thought. Hay expensive and scarce. Heat wave takes toll on farm production. Southern Alberta drought continues to rage. Irrigation water running short. Harvesting tips for stunted crops. Hailstorm decimates central Alberta fields. Provinces vow to push Ottawa to provide drought assistance. Feds under pressure to match U.S. subsidy. Ag minister not swayed by drought. Bush eager for talks on Canadian water. Vanclief's advice: more summerfallow. Ag Canada expects farm income to rise.

Last month in Saskatoon, four farm women somehow managed to corner Vanclief in a van for 15 minutes to explain in plain language the farm crisis. Vanclief's answer? "I understand that. I've been there, I've done that. I went through the same thing. My wife and I had to make a financial decision. We shut 'er down."

Are we surprised? No. Like putting an engineer whose bridges fall down in charge of highways, a failed farmer is a beyond-stupid choice for an ag minister. Particularly one who is too thick-headed to admit the course he is steering for Canada's farmers makes Head-Bashed-In-Buffalo-Jump look like a destination resort.

Under the administration of Vanclief and his predecessors federal and provincial subsidy support programs have been gutted (faster and deeper than any of our trading partners) and trade agreements have flooded Canada with cheap imports from factory farms, driving commodity prices through the floor. This, while Canadian farmers are experiencing drought considerably more severe than the dustbowl conditions of the "dirty 30's" (30% less soil moisture in some regions).

MEANWHILE, SOUTH OF THE BORDER

Meanwhile, south of the border, the US Congress just approved a \$168 billion, 10 year Farm Aid Bill. That's \$255 billion Canadian. The legislation, anticipated to whisk through the House this fall with

broad bi-partisan support, reinstates US subsidies cut in the 1990's and creates a whole host of new ones for everything from peanuts to vegetables to tobacco to horses. The Bill provides bailouts to grain and cotton growers when commodity prices fall below a fixed target price, boosts spending on conservation programs by \$1.6 billion a year (a 75% increase that includes new subsidies for fruit and vegetable, cattle and hog producers), extends federal price supports for sugar, restores previously-abolished subsidy programs for honey, wool and mohair and drops \$350 million a year into the pockets of peanut growers. Tobacco growers will get export market development assistance. Horse farmers who have lost animals will qualify for federal subsidy support. Annual payment limits on crop support will increase from \$75,000 to \$150,000 per recipient (roughly \$115,000 to \$230,000 a year, Canadian funds). Another new program provides payments for grassland preservation. Bob Stallman, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, describes the new US legislation as "balanced and equitable". Natch.

In a special media briefing in Washington DC a few days before the recent G-8 Summit, George Bush told reporters that America was very interested in water exports from Canada. And that he personally, coming from dryland Texas and all, understood the great importance of water. Nothing radical, mind you. Just something along the lines of the continental energy pact the US is now "negotiating" with Canada. American farmers will, of course, be major beneficiaries.

(Prior to the Columbia Treaty, the snow-melt Columbia gave American farmers lots of water when they didn't need it and none when they did and "heat, wheat and rattlesnakes" were the region's main crops. Thanks solely to the benefits delivered under the Columbia Treaty, some 500,000 acres of American farmland were brought into irrigated production of high-valued potato, vegetable and fruit crops. Crops that could never be grown before now compete directly with Canadian products in our own and export markets. With regional deep wells in the East High Basin now drawing radioactive tracings from long-buried Hanford waste, a further 500,000 acres of deeded irrigation rights will almost certainly be invoked. Columbia Basin Project farmers now pay federal fees of between \$30 to \$45 a year for the right to apply between 3 and 5 acre feet of irrigation water to an acre of land. At a US water market price of \$2,000 an acre (mid 90's), that amounts to a hefty chunk of subsidy change. But the real value of the subsidy is in the opportunity shift; without federal water, those lucrative potato, apple and vegetable crops wouldn't be grown in the first place...)

AMERICA BUILDS, CANADA DISMANTLES

While the Americans are building up their farm support arsenal, we are brutally dismantling ours. Leaving farmers to twist in the wind and hopefully blow away.

NO OTHER SECTOR of our economy would put up with the abandonment of policy and governance ethics that has - for the past decade - characterized Canada's response to farming.

This position is strengthened by government spin doctor prescriptions like Agriculture Canada's recently released poll that "people talk about support for farmers [but] few Canadians like the idea of a significant financial package to help them". Ontario Federation of Agriculture president Jack Wilkinson called the poll "a bit of Agriculture Canada mischief", accusing Ag Can of asking loaded questions to elicit negative or blasé responses and using the result to justify making agriculture a low policy priority. The issue is not whether Canadians understand farm issues but rather whether government does. And whether government can get away with abrogating their responsibility to manage Canada's farm sector in the medium and long term interests of Canadians.

(Vanclief says the problem is not enough farmers carry crop insurance and NISA. If these programs worked right they would be subscribed to.)

RESPONSES FROM THE FARM SECTOR

Last month's column on Canada's looming water/trade crisis evoked responses from farmers across Canada.

The problem, you told me, is lack of a strong farm voice to get the message across in a high profile and effective manner. Traditional ways of expressing farm concerns don't seem to work anymore. Politicians make arrogant statements, a few farm leaders get interviewed and tomorrow is another news day. End of story.

Two interesting ideas emerged from these discussions.

PROJECT BARNSTORM

WHAT IF Canadian farmers started naming the culprit behind the sellout of Canada's water and the abandonment of farm support policies? WHAT IF, on the broad sides of farm barns, appearing first in BC and moving systematically across the country, remaining visible for all to see, messages started suddenly appearing such as:

- CUT VANCLIEF, NOT FARM POLICY!
- EXPORT CHRETIEN, NOT WATER!

The signage could be simple whitewash or creatively undertaken by local artists with an agreement to remove and restore when requested by the farmer (maybe funded by local credit unions). The public would love it. The media would love it. And the message would persist for all to see every time they drove by. Very embarrassing politically. What's the cost of some vinyl or a little whitewash and a few hours of time on a sunny fall afternoon?

PROJECT GOODHEART

Traditionally, farmers and the rural communities they support have occupied the centre of Canada's heartland. Trusty keepers of Canadian values and ethics. Careful stewards that through good farming practices hold the land in good heart for future generations.

So maybe its time to put a face on that. Take those snapshots I mention in the beginning of this column and send them off. One to Vanclief, one to me. I will take all prints received and, depending on the response, figure out something to do with them that is creative and media-savvy.

THIS COLUMN IS ABOUT EVOKING CHANGE

Sound crazy? Some of the craziest ideas in the world have been the most successful. What have we got to lose? In the oft-repeated words of Margaret Mead: Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has...

American farmers are being treated like gods. Canadian farmers are being treated like beggars. It's time for a sea change.

Think on it. For Canada's sake. And then PLEASE give me your thoughts. Who knows what splendid mischief can be made by a whole country of committed farmers? (holm@pinc.com, ph: 604-947-2893).