

High Time for a Revolution...

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Tuesday, March 26, 2002, Hotel Nacional, HABANA, Cuba... Sitting in the courtyard of Havana's 5 star Hotel Nacional, sipping seven-year rum and watching the peacocks (human and animal variety) stroll by, I am struck by the incongruities. Playground to the rich and dirty before the Revolution, the Nacional remains a bastion of elitism; a successful milking parlour for Cuba's most important cash cow: tourism.

Closer to home, it is the farm policy incongruities that are the most striking. And the most disturbing.

In Cuba, considered a "third world" country (due largely to the economic terrorism of the US embargo), farmers are respected and highly paid members of society. Science bends over backwards to ensure a ready supply of agriculture inputs — bio-pesticides and bio-fertilizers — at the lowest possible price. Agricultural extension is thriving. In both urban and rural communities, agriculture is presented as a strong career choice from elementary schools forward. As a result, agricultural universities and technical colleges are full. In Cuba, farmers are considered pillars of the community – providing essential support for economic, environmental and social sustainability. Farming is the focus of rural communities.

In Canada, considered a "first world" country, farmers are disrespected and poorly paid members of society. Science has been captured by concentrated capital interests (private sector funding control of government and academic research, intellectual property rights, patents), ensuring a reduced range of inputs at the highest possible prices. Agricultural extension is dead or dying in most provinces, turned over to the private sector by bureaucrats trained to serve political masters not the public interest. Most young Canadians today – particularly those from urban backgrounds - would rank farming right up there with zoo-keeping as a career choice and ridicule any guidance counselor who suggested it. In Canada, farmers are - with increasing frequency - considered the poor cousins of the community: perceived as demanding "handouts", endangering habitat and occupying land that could be put to better use. Farm communities are faltering as infrastructure essential to farm viability disappears.

What's going on here?

Yesterday, I said goodbye to the eleventh Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer delegation in just 39 months – 205 farmers in all from across Canada: BC, the Prairies, Ontario and the Maritimes. One day earlier, at Sunday's pre-dinner Room-Rum (a nightly tradition enjoyed by all Delegations and IN PARTICULAR this last one!), I was asked to explain again how this Project got started and the connection I saw to Canadian agriculture.

As readers of this column know, I became interested in Cuba because as an Agrologist I am appalled at the problems facing Canada's farmers: globalization, a dramatic reduction in economic supports to farming (lowest amongst all OECD countries), a dilution of crop disaster mechanisms, a reduction in trade protection and consequent increase in import competition from large factory farms, increased countervail and dumping allegations by US interests, increasing costs for farm inputs, land and environmental compliance measures, a serious undermining of cooperative structures, attacks on supply management, increased market concentration of suppliers and buyers, an erosion of local processing capacity, fundamental changes in market structure (large food conglomerates taking over from independent processors, distributors, retailers) and multinational contract integration of our farm sector. All conspire to take money from the pockets of Canadian farmers, resulting in a dramatic drop in farm income; a death-blow to sustainable agriculture.

It seemed to me to make sense that giving Canadian farmers the chance to witness first hand Cuba's world leadership in large scale organic crop production, effective manufacture and use of bio-pesticides

and bio-fertilizers, strong agricultural extension and an even stronger voice for farmers could trigger some new perspectives on the problems we face in Canada. And just maybe suggest some new solutions...

Chewing it over, the farmers and I kept coming back to one issue: in the face of government's abandonment of farm policy, how can Canadian farmers quickly and effectively kick ass? Canadian Federation of Agriculture doesn't seem to be raising much of a stink. Commodity groups are fragmented. Politicians are uninformed or asleep or both. Where is the one voice that is speaking for Canadian agriculture?

In Cuba, that voice belongs to ANAP (Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños), an organization to which all Cuban farmers belong that for the past 42 years has presented a strong and unified voice for farmers. To a great extent, the success of Cuban farming is directly attributable to the hard work of ANAP (whom I am happy to announce has just agreed to be our ongoing Project partner). Is ANAP's experience (one voice) relevant for Canada? And if so, how can that experience be harnessed?

Canadian farmers are facing a farm crisis of unprecedented proportions. Demands for an about face in farm policy are completely justified. But the politicians have switched off. No one is listening. Despite our huge capacity, Canada's farmers feel disempowered and fragmented. When only 27, Fidel and a small band of men and women committed to the ideals of a just society for Cuba launched a revolution that would overthrow one of the most corrupt and tightly held dictatorships in Latin America in just a few short years. How can we in Canada feel so disempowered? And how can we address that power imbalance? Exciting ideas emerged. Suggestions flew back and forth. It has to be something do-able in a very short time. Something completely above organizational and partisan politics. One spot where the left, right and centre of Canadian farm politics can quickly gather. A SWAT approach that can empower us for further initiatives. Something that will turn the heads of Canadian consumers; that will identify Canadian farmers as champions of sustainability and public policy, Something that will work fast to kick ass. Heads nodded. Smiles grew. The room became a-buzz with potential.

In the end, all of us (with the possible exception of John; with John, it was always hard to tell) knew: the certainty of the opportunity before us left little room for doubt. In the space of an hour discourse, twenty farmers from British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario had hatched a plan that stood to change the face of Canadian farm politics. A way identified. A path committed to. A revolution birthed.

Listen up. The troops are marshalling. Victory is at hand. Stay tuned. Hasta la Victoria Siempre!

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WENDY HOLM, P.AG., is a Canadian Agrologist, resource economist, columnist and author. Past president of the BC Institute of Agrologists, past BC Director of the Agriculture Institute of Canada, past Director of Vancouver City Savings Credit Union and past Chair of the Board of Trustees, Ethical Funds Inc., Holm received the Queen's Commemorative Medal (honouring the 125th Anniversary of Canadian Confederation) from Canada's Governor General for "contribution to community" and the B.C. Government Award for Excellence in Community Programming. Editor/contributing author of the book WATER AND FREE TRADE (Lormier, Toronto. 1988), Holm was named AGROLOGIST OF THE YEAR 2000 by the BC Institute of Agrologists for her leadership of the Canada Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project and the water/trade issue (public policy concerns regarding water's inclusion in the FTA/NAFTA).

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