

Transcript of August 18, 2006 CBC Radio One Regina Interview with
Wendy Holm, former monthly columnist, Western Producer and
Barb Glen, Producer, Western Producer.

cbc.ca summary: Freelance journalist Wendy Holm lost her column in the Western Producer after participating in a rally to support the Canadian Wheat Board. We heard from both sides about whether protesting and punditry should mix.

CBC host: Wendy Holm has never been shy about expressing her opinions. That's generally considered a good thing if you're a newspaper columnist. Holm is also willing to take to the streets to back a cause she supports. That might not be such a good thing for a newspaper columnist, at least not in the eyes of the Western Producer. Holm's monthly column in the weekly newspaper was cancelled recently. The decision was made after she attended a rally in support of the Canadian Wheat Board in Saskatoon. Wendy Holm is on the phone this morning. Good morning Miss Holm.

Holm: Good morning.

CBC host: Well, can you tell me what happened?

Holm: Um. Well, I guess I'm still trying to figure that out. I went to the July 27th rally in Saskatoon. As you know it was organized by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and the National Farmers' Union. As an Agrologist I felt it was important to go and to lend some support to the farmer's position. As a columnist I felt it was important to go because I wanted to hear what the speakers were saying and become, you know, closer to the issue. So I took out my Visa and I went, on my... paying for it of course on my own.

CBC host: What happened after you were at that... I guess what happened at the meeting first of all? Did you stand up and say something??

Holm: There was a rally in the park, and speakers had two minutes. I stood up and in my two minutes said that I was there as an Agrologist on my own nickel, that I thought it was very important that farmers continue to make decisions about the wheat board, I urged other Agrologists to come forward and stand up, I, you know, I made some comments about competition and economics and the importance of single desk selling for the Canadian wheat growers

CBC host: What happened? There was a press conference afterwards as well, wasn't there?

Holm: And then, in the afternoon, there was a group of speakers in support of the farm rally, Across the street, the Agriculture minister was meeting with a group of people whose opinion was the same as the government's on the wheat board. And I guess that's why the rally was held that day - to highlight that closed door meeting. There was a press conference at the end of that meeting which I was told about by another journalist and so I went to the press conference, identifying myself as a freelance columnist, Western Producer. And I asked a polite question of the Minister, whether he was prepared to actually go against the wishes of Canadian grain growers in implementing... unbundling basically the single desk selling of the Canadian wheat board

CBC host: Ok, and what happened with the Western Producer and your column then?

Holm: Well, so I got back to British Columbia, I began doing some more research on the column. I spoke to the Producer on Monday. I file my column as in every month on the second paper of the month so I was filing the week I came back, on Monday. I was told that Chuck Strahl's office and one other person had called the Producer questioning my participation in the farm rally, and that this created a very serious situation for the paper, that it created the perception of bias and lack of objectivity. That I was, some people thought of me as a reporter, not a columnist. And that they had to think about what they were going to do about it. And the next day, my column was cancelled. That column, my August column, was cancelled, and my column was cancelled for good from the paper.

CBC host: Is there a problem as you see it in wearing two hats at an event like that? You said you went to one thing and said you were an Agrologist and at another thing you said you were a freelance journalist.

Holm: Well, I think if, you know, if some one is a reporter, obviously a reporter has a responsibility to have balanced and objective reporting. They are working for the paper. They are reporting without any voice on the story. A columnist is very different. A columnist is expressing opinion. I've won three awards for my columns and I looked back at the award criteria and it's all that they "express a strong opinion", that they try and "bring readers to a certain conclusion", a column is filled with voice. And if I didn't go to these kind of things, quite frankly I wouldn't have the voice to be the columnist that I am, so....

CBC host: Is a columnist not a journalist?

Holm: A journalist... a journalist covers reporters and columnists, so yes, I am a journalist; I am a columnist, not a reporter. An so I don't work for the Producer, and I work for myself, and...

CBC host: So as a journalist is it a good idea to so publicly mix advocacy and journalism?

Holm: Well, I think it depends on how critical the issue is. As an Agrologist, I mean, my mandate is as an Agrologist - and I am an Agrologist first, and my hat as a columnist and journalist is one I'm very proud of, but I'm an Agrologist - and what was happening with agriculture, right now, in this situation I think, bears, deserves to have people like myself stand up and stand up on the side of

farmers. So I have no real quarrel with that. Um, I guess I feel, that you know, I have a lot of respect for the Western Producer, I think it's a really important farm paper, so in bringing this issue forward I'm not, I suppose, meaning to cast any aspersions on the paper but I think by the same token that if Agrologists like myself cannot, you know, it's almost saying you cannot be an Agrologist and a columnist, and that of course can't be right because that doesn't serve anybody's interest.

CBC host: Obviously the newspaper has a right to hire and fire people and put whatever columns they want in...

Holm: Obviously, yes.

CBC host: What would you have rather have had them do in this case, if there were questions about any perception of bias because you appeared on one hand saying you were an Agrologist and on the other hand saying that you were a freelance journalist.

Holm: Well, I don't think the two are antithetical, I think I am a good columnist because I am a good Agrologist. And I think that those are my strengths. I would have rather, I mean if you look at my columns - which are all posted on my website - I've written three strong columns in support of the Canadian Wheat Board, as have other professionals taken that position, so I don't think that it's any surprise that I am, you know, that I have that opinion on this. I would have preferred that the paper said to the Minister's office well, she's a columnist, and it says right under her column that she's a freelancer and her opinions don't express the opinions of the paper necessarily,

CBC host: And are you alleging that the Minister Chuck Strahl's office had something to do with all this?

Holm: Well, what I'm saying, what I know, is that on Monday I was told by the Producer they had received two calls – one from the minister's office – one from Chuck Strahl's office – and one from one other farmer. And this created a tremendously difficult situation for the paper, they didn't know what they were going to do, it was very serious, and they were going to get back to me. And that's what I was told by the paper. So yes, one call was from Chuck Strahl's office and I can only assume that that call was alleging bias, that was the reason for the actions taken by the paper.

CBC host: Well, Miss Holm, thanks very much for talking to us this morning.

Holm: Well, thank you very much...

CBC host: Bye for now.

Holm: Bye.

CBC host: Wendy Holm is an Agrologist, and economist, and she's been saying, a freelance columnist as well. We reached her at her home this morning in British Columbia. For more on this, we go to Barb Glen, she is the Editor of the Western Producer, and she is at home in Saskatoon this morning. Good morning, Miss Glen.

Glen: Good morning Ted.

CBC host: Well, you've heard Miss Holm's version of events, can you tell me what happened that prompted you to cancel her column from your perspective?

Glen: Yes it was a business matter that had to do with a freelance writer's methods or attempts to associate herself with the Western Producer brand.

CBC host: How do you mean her attempts to do this?

Glen: Well, there was clearly confusion amongst participants at both of the meetings on July 27 about who she was representing. Now this may have been a by-product of the number of different hats she was wearing, as Wendy was just saying. She was participating in part of it apparently as an Agrologist, part of it as a participant at the rally, and then during the news conference she identified herself as a freelance columnist, Western Producer. And so there were a number of questions among those who were attending as to exactly who she represented and whether she represented the views of the Western Producer.

CBC host: If there are questions among people who attend, couldn't they be answered? And why cancel the column, or why fire your freelancer?

Glen: Well, um... I suppose they... I did attempt to answer every one who called, and there were several calls, more than two as Wendy said, but um, I guess, uh, well, more importantly, it's not a matter of us trying to censor Wendy's message, this isn't really about her opinion, columnists are supposed to have opinions, but it is about an individual who, in a sense, claimed to represent the Western Producer. That created concerns for us, so we made the business decision to publish her columns no longer.

CBC host: So as far as you're concerned, is the main problem the fact that Miss Holm was at a rally and then at the news conference, or was it the fact that people thought she was a reporter rather than a freelancer.

Glen: Well, the main problem is the fact I guess that people thought she was a reporter but actually the nub of the issue is that apparently by her actions or her speech there was confusion created about her exact relationship with the Producer.

CBC host: Why is that so important?

Glen: Because people have to believe that the... in order to have a credible newspaper people have to believe that certainly its reporters approach the issues in a balanced and fair way. If they think that Wendy is a reporter and clearly she had taken a partisan role in the proceedings then that could potentially be damaging to the newspaper's credibility.

CBC host: Some of the people we've spoken to about the whole issue say that while there's a difference, a distinction between being a freelance reporter or columnist and being an actual staff reporter at the paper and appearing.... You certainly as a staff reporter would not want your people appearing and lobbying on behalf of one side or another. But as a freelancer they are entitled to have an opinion like that.

Glen: Yes they are. The problem is when they potentially represent themselves as representing the Western Producer.

CBC host: Now certainly Miss Holm had a certain point of view that you had been publishing in the Western Producer. What do you lose at this point in not having her as a columnist?

Glen: Well, obviously there won't be a column with Wendy's byline on it. But as far as her views, many people share her views, the wheat board has many very articulate defenders, and these defenders don't rely on an Agrologist from British Columbia to present their views. They've done that quite capably themselves in the pages of the Western Producer and elsewhere. I have no doubt they'll continue to do that. Lots of people can present the pro-monopoly argument as Wendy has been doing. The forum within our newspaper is open to them, and its open to those who hold other views, and I might add that most of those people have a direct stake in the outcome of the wheat board debate.

CBC host: Looking back at what's happened, do you think it was handled the right way? Could it have been handed differently?

Glen: I suppose any situation could be handled differently. But I think the right decision was made.

CBC host: Miss Glen, thanks very much.

Glen: Thank you, Ted.

CBC host: Good to talk to you this morning. Barb Glen is Editor of the Western Producer and she spoke to us from Saskatoon.