The Conservative Government Must Stop undermining the principles of democracy

By the Honourable Wayne Easter, Official Opposition Critic for Agriculture

As the Liberal Agriculture Critic, I believe the concern over the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) is not simply a farm issue, but it is a matter of ethics in government and democracy.

The CWB is widely supported by the farming community. It is one of Canada's biggest exporters and is one of the world's largest grain marketing organizations. It ensures that Canadian farmers don't have to compete against one another in a dual market, but can sell as one producer through the CWB, allowing them to maximize returns from the marketplace. Independent benchmark studies show single desk selling benefits producers collectively by $265 million annually.

The Conservative government is not only seeking to destroy this important institution, but is doing so by duplicitous and undemocratic methods.

The Conservatives campaigned on a promise to move towards a dual marketing system, which would result in an open market with no protection for Canadian farmers. An election which includes the non-farm sector should not be considered a referendum on the CWB. To date, the Conservative government has refused to abide by the legal provision of the CWB Act, which would ensure a vote by all producers, large and small. When the Act was amended in 1998, the Wheat Board became independent from the federal government. Farmers then began electing the majority of members to the board of directors. As a result control and direction of the CWB passed from government to farmers.

Last July the Minister of Agriculture Chuck Strahl convened a closed door, invitation-only meeting with anti-wheat board supporters to further the Conservative agenda of moving forward on dual marketing. While the Alberta government was able to participate, the governments of Manitoba and Saskatchewan were excluded from the discussion.

Following this meeting, Minister Strahl announced a Task Force to implement changes to the wheat board, which was stacked with anti-wheat board members including members of the grain trade whose interest it is to take marketing power away from farmers.

The consequences of a marketing choice would mean a massive loss of power for farmers, placing big grain companies in control.

As the Liberal Agriculture Critic, I am calling on this government to hold public consultations with all parties affected regarding the future of the CWB.

It is time for the Conservative government to end its undemocratic behaviour and finally stand up for the interests of producers in the Western Provinces.

Canadian farmers deserve better. Under Canadian law and the Wheat Board Act they are entitled to be consulted and to vote on their future.

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