

OPINION

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Arguments of majority opposition fall on deaf ears

IT HAS been a quarter century since the opposition has used Parliament so effectively to mount a campaign against a government agricultural policy plan.

It has been the same length of time since extra-parliamentary farm lobby groups have joined forces so effectively with the parliamentary legions to use Parliament Hill as the appropriate forum in which to try to thwart a government policy.

The irony is that all those years ago, the opposition efforts worked, even though the Liberals had a majority government and could have imposed their will.

This time, it seems not to be working despite the fact that the governing Conservatives are in a minority, claim to be great democrats, won just 36 percent of the vote last January and do not control Parliament. They seem not to care.

It is a jarring democratic spectacle — a majority government buckling to pressure,

a minority government ignoring it. Voters will judge.

The first case came in 1980-81 when the re-elected majority Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau decided through its Ottawa-based transport minister Jean-Luc Pepin to defy history and western opinion to abolish the Crownest Pass freight rate for grain shipments.

Opposition Progressive Conservative and New Democratic Party MPs mounted an opposition, aided by a fifth column within the government.

Trudeau had no seats to lose on the Prairie and no insinuated appreciation of the issue. His critics revile him as a leader with little regard for democracy and popular will. Yet on Feb. 12, 1981, he laid down the



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law based on his understanding of what the people wanted.

In the face of filibusters inside Parliament and demonstrations outside, Trudeau stopped cold proposals for radical change since western opposition MPs were opposed, Prairie provincial governments were opposed and prairie players like the wheat pools were opposed.

"On some things, I am prepared to give leadership," he said at a news conference in Ottawa, "but not on changing the Crow."

The message to Pepin was clear: build a consensus, show industry support and then we'll talk turkey, or Crow. The Liberals did not speak for or understand the West so let the popular voice rule.

Twenty-five years later, a minority Conservative government led by anti-Canadian Wheat Board ideologue Stephen Harper is determined to end the 63-year-old monopoly without a clear reading of prairie

opinion and he could care less if the majority of prairie farm voices are for him or against him.

He leans on the crutch that the Conservatives consistently win almost all rural prairie seats but surely he also understands that same sex marriage or gun control have counted far more in past elections for most rural voters than the future of the CWB.

There is no evidence one way or the other about whether the majority of affected farmers support or oppose the Conservative wheat board proposals.

In Parliament, Liberal agriculture critic Wayne Easter has led an effective battle to demand the government find out what farmers want before it acts. The Harper Conservatives brush those demands off like so many horseflies.

So, let's consider: If the Alberta view of Trudeau as an anti-democratic dictator holds true, what does that make Harper?