



Weekly Commentary
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

April 1, 2002

Spin Doctoring at the CWB

In modern lingo, "spin" is what happens when a political party or agency of government takes information about itself and deliberately presents it in a way that makes people believe it says what it doesn't mean. Spin is the strategic application of bull#%&#.

Spin has become such a significant part of modern culture that it spawned the hit TV show Spin City. Hollywood cashed in on it when it made the hilariously funny movie, "Wag the Dog", which starred Robert DeNiro and Dustin Hoffman. In Wag the Dog, using nothing but spin, a couple of White House communications people and a Hollywood movie producer engineer a communications campaign that gets the US president re-elected right after he gets caught having a sexual romp with an underage girl.

The Internet has numerous websites devoted to spin. A tongue-in-cheek site boasts that it has "news so necessary that we invented it!" Not too long ago, the Toronto Star ran a column titled "Confessions of a Spin Doctor." The column was Eric Sparling's first hand account of the way spin-doctors influence what people hear and see on the news. He writes: "[spin-doctors] write stories that our clients want us to write, send them to newspapers, magazines, or TV stations, [and then] journalists write stories using our information..."

It was the art of spin that came to mind when I read a recent press release that had been cobbled together by spin-doctors at the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB). The release was the CWB's spin on what the Auditor General of Canada said in the recent audit report of CWB operations.

The first sentence of the press release declares: "The CWB's accounting and reporting systems are economical and efficient according to a special audit conducted by the Auditor General of Canada..." A few sentences later, CWB chairman Ken Ritter is quoted as saying: "We see the audit results as confirmation that the CWB is an effective marketing organization."

The fact that the Auditor General of Canada didn't even study the "effectiveness" of the CWB as a marketer makes it pretty easy to determine whether the CWB's press release is designed to inform people or apply "spin". Furthermore, to see the CWB's spin doctoring in a clearer light, consider what the Auditor General's report really did say about certain aspects of CWB operations and performance. The following statements are taken word-for-word from the Auditor General's report:

"...the CWB lacks clear and measurable targets, both financial and operational, to assess its ongoing performance..."

"...the [CWB's] communication and corporate policy functions lack operational plans with clear goals and strategies to guide activities and measure and monitor performance..."

"...[We have noted] significant deficiencies in governance, strategic planning, performance measurement and reporting, and the management of information technology..." "...deficiencies in performance measurement were identified in the marketing areas of sales plans, sales negotiations, performance of Accredited Exporters, and market development..."

With each passing year, the CWB grows more adept at spin, which explains why its communications budget is climbing through the roof. The irony is that in the midst of all this propaganda, it refuses to release detailed information concerning how much farmers spent on demurrage 2, 10, or 22 years ago. It won't let anyone know how much was received for a bushel of oats back when it still handled oats. It won't provide farmers with details related to export prices for durum, wheat, or barley on sales that were made several years in the past. It won't give out any information about anything that allows anyone to independently evaluate its performance.

In short, the CWB doesn't practice accountability. It prefers spin.

- Kevin Avram

Kevin Avram sits on the Prairie Centre's Board of Trustees. "Where Do We Go From Here" is a feature service of the Prairie Centre.

Where Do We Go From Here?" is a feature service of the Prairie Centre.