

Economic Slavery on the Prairies

Dr. Barry Cooper teaches political science at the University of Calgary and Dr. David Bercuson is director of the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the same institution. They could hardly be accused of being unable to formulate an intelligent decision based on the Prairie experience and the facts.

It is certainly comforting to know that these two great scholars have come to the same enlightened conclusion that many prairie residents have, that the Canadian Wheat Board is a tyranny. They say the Canadian Wheat Board is "... a tyranny of rules and faceless bureaucrats for which even parliamentary oversight is absent. Alone among Canadian farmers, prairie wheat and barley producers must, by law, market their product through the Canadian Wheat Board." These learned scholars continue by pointing out that, "They [meaning wheat and barley growers] have no choice. The Wheat Board is a compulsory monopoly run by and for the people who staff it. Like CSIS, the spy agency, the CWB is exempt from access to information requests."

At one time, had anyone made such a damning indictment of the CWB, the defenders would have held rallies, marched in the streets, and would have accused the detractors of heresy and lies. They would

have insisted on a retraction and even an apology. How times have changed. Today, the shrill voices in defense of the CWB are all but silenced. Even the most ardent defender is ready to admit that the CWB is a secretive, self-serving, untouchable bureaucracy, unfamiliar and insensitive to the realities of a changing world.

The CWB and its dwindling support base continues to assert that the Board extracts premium prices for farmers and will still not provide any empirical research that supports that assertion. Since Saskatchewan, with 48% of the arable land in Canada is the biggest contributor of wheat and barley to the CWB, it should be the most prosperous province in Canada, right? Not so. Real income in Saskatchewan has fallen 7% in the past ten years. In 2001, it had only 136,295 net taxpayers supporting just over one million people. It has a 1 in 7 dependency ratio (for every taxpayer, Saskatchewan has 7 people who take more out of the system than they put in). Saskatchewan has lost 20,000 people to out-migration in the past three years. In spite of these negative statistics, the CWB spin doctors continue to maintain that they are doing a good job.

Cooper and Bercuson, to their credit, see it differently. They say,

"In practice, the CWB is simply oppressive. The 13 farmers who were found guilty of a crime are eloquent witnesses to its despotic power."

It is high time for the Liberal-dominated Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food to present a Bill in the House of Commons to amend the Canadian Wheat Board Act in accordance with the Standing Committee's own recommendation #14 to "authorize on a trial basis, a free market for the sale of wheat and barley".

In the past few years, we have witnessed the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, and the re-unification of East and West Germany. Just like the Berlin wall was used to oppress East Germans and keep them from the free market economy, the Canadian Wheat Board uses its power to oppress those who want the freedom to market their grain as they choose. Is it possible that the end of another bastion of socialist oppression is finally very near?

- Ken Dillen

Ken Dillen sits on the Board of Directors of the Prairie Centre Policy Institute. "Where Do We Go From Here" is a feature service of the Prairie Centre.

Previous commentaries can be viewed on the Prairie Centre's web site at: www.prairiecentre.com