

Thoughts from the Wheat Growers Convention

By Rolf Penner

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I had the pleasure last month of going to my first ever Wheat Growers convention in Saskatoon. It was three great days of informative speakers, thoughtful discussions and resolutions on farm policy and the chance to rub elbows with fellow farmers from all three Prairie Provinces.

Some will no doubt be surprised to learn that yes the Wheat Growers are indeed a ‘farm’ organization that is actually being run by ‘farmers’ and not the corporate elite of Agri-Canada as has often been alleged. And they come from farms of all various shapes and sizes, one certainly doesn’t need to belong to the ‘10,000 acre-plus’ club to feel comfortable in their midst.

Cherilyn Jolly-Nagel the fiery 26 year old President of the association is a breath of fresh air in the world of farm politics which is largely dominated by tired old men trying to hold onto and or increase their entitlements. She is young, smart, and energetic and has the public speaking ability of someone twice her age. She did not shy away from going toe-to-toe with ivory tower academics, politicians, a critical media or CWB chairman Ken Ritter, all of whom attended the conference.

While many resolutions were passed on everything from bi-lateral trade deals and WTO negotiations to free trade in chemicals, education tax’s, falling number grading, CGC bonding, research and development, transportation and alternative fuels, the highlight of the event was the formal release of the groups report on reforming the CWB.

Entitled “The Path Forward” the policy paper outlines the benefits, timing and implications of marketing choice, addresses the question of the Feds authority to make the necessary changes and deals with the long term structural changes needed by the CWB to enable it to become an effective marketing choice for farmers. The most important and interesting part of the paper is the ten odd pages devoted to the legal analysis of the CWB act, which should be required reading for all Conservative MP’s.

This thorough analysis clearly shows that it is within the power of the federal government through an order in council to instruct the CWB to provide export and interprovincial licenses to prairie farmers, or anyone else for that matter, free of charge. This would effectively give prairie farmers the same marketing choice now enjoyed in other province. It does not require amendments to the CWB act through a vote in parliament nor does it require a farmer vote. The act gives the feds the authority to prescribe ‘terms and conditions’ on which these licenses may be granted, the changes can therefore be accomplished without the requirement of legislation.

Ms. Nagel also has an answer for those who are calling for a farmer election on the issue even if the Feds do have the power and authority to make the changes. She says, “We don’t collectively decide on when or what we are going to seed, we don’t collectively decide when or how we are going to control the weeds in our fields, and we don’t collectively decide when it is time to harvest our crops. I have never understood why people think that we have to collectively decide how to sell our wheat. There is no one better suited to make any of those decisions than the farmer who has to live with the consequences of those decisions. ”

She makes a good point, yes Canada is a democracy, but it is a limited democracy not an absolute one. We have a constitution and a charter of rights and freedoms that limits the will of the majority and our elected leaders. We do not decide everything by a vote, because in Canada it’s not just about democracy it’s also about freedom.