TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE: THAT IS THE QUESTION

Single desk supporters are now arguing against the government’s plan to end the CWB’s monopoly arguing for a plebiscite or insisting the CWB board of directors has the mandate to decide on the future of the CWB – not Ottawa. Their message is clear; Ottawa should just “butt out” as farmers should decide for themselves.

- Immediately following the federal election Allan Oberg, chairman of the CWB said in a CWB release: “Prairie producers have been clear that they should determine the future of the CWB as their marketing organization.”
- NFU president Terry Boehm said: “…any changes to the Wheat Board should be decided by farmers”
- The CWB Alliance stated on its website: “We are calling on Prime Minister Harper to respect farmers’ right to democratically choose their marketing system through the elections to the CWB Board of Directors”
  
  Bruce Johnstone of the Regina Leader Post wrote: “… a plebiscite of producers who actually use the Canadian Wheat Board’s services would give the government the mandate to change the single-desk marketing system.”
- In this week's Western Producer, Pat Martin, NDP MP for Winnipeg Center said: "The general public might not give a hoot about the Canadian Wheat Board, but they do care about democracy, and to take deliberate steps to sidestep basic rights and freedoms is not going to sit well with the public.”

None of them accept the results of the federal election as a mandate for the government to provide marketing freedom. The definition of mandate is “support from electorate: the authority bestowed on a government by an electoral victory, effectively authorizing it to carry out the policies for which it campaigned.”

The conservatives won a majority on a platform of marketing freedom; everyone understood that meant the end of the single desk. In fact it was a dominant majority, winning all rural ridings within the CWB designated area (with a popular vote of around 67%). Any way you look at it, they do have the mandate.

CWB director elections

Single desk supporters’ argue that CWB election results should trump anything the government might want or need to do. CWB directors are elected (or appointed) to share governance (with the government) and to oversee the management of the CWB. However, CWB directors do not have the power to remove or add commodities to the single desk. If farmers voted for a director because they thought he would be able to keep or protect the single desk, they were misguided or misled.

Regardless of who the directors are or what their personal conviction on the single desk is, there are two irrefutable facts:

1. **Under the current Act, CWB directors do not have the power to remove commodities from the CWB single desk.** Through a plebiscite, farmers do. The federal government cannot remove commodities except after holding a farmer plebiscite (or changing the Act). That’s the way the Act is written.

2. **The federal government has the power to make substantial changes to the CWB Act, which would include rescinding it altogether if that is what it figures is necessary.** And there is nothing that says that making these substantial changes is to be done only on the basis of a farmer plebiscite.
Make no mistake: the board of directors can no more protect the single desk than it can stop the rain. Electing directors is not a proxy for a plebiscite; nor does it supersede the authority and mandate of a majority federal government. On the issue of the future of the single desk the directors are powerless.

**Why a vote for the single desk?**

Here are some things to think about to put all this talk of a vote into perspective.

- The single desk was bestowed upon the CWB in 1943 by parliament. Farmers did not get to vote on it.

- The Crow Rate was “retired” in 1995, by Jean Chretien’s liberal government. Farmers were undoubtedly the group most affected by this, yet they did not get to vote on it.

- The same liberal government amended the CWB Act in 1998, sharing governance with a board of 15 directors, including 10 elected by farmers. Although farmers were the ones most affected, they did not get to vote on these amendments. (Interestingly, the NFU, Friends of the CWB and CWB Alliance did not clamour for a farmer-vote on these amendments. There is only one reason: things were going their way anyway. Why fight it?)

- Just weeks after the conclusion of the latest CWB farmer-director election, the CWB board approved the use of farmers’ money to purchase two lakers. And – you guessed it – farmers did not get to vote on it.

Single desk supporters agreed with the laker purchase by the directors saying; “that’s why we elected them; to use their judgement and make sound decisions on behalf of farmers”. They contradict themselves when they don’t take the same position on the federal government and its platform that specifically included marketing freedom. As Laura Rance said in the Manitoba Co-operator, “You don’t vote for a government hoping it won’t live up to its election promises.”

The ONLY reason we’re even talking about a voting on the single desk is because the CWB Act gives farmers the right to vote on changes to what commodities are covered by the single desk. Single desk supporters have twisted this to argue that this includes anything about the CWB. That would mean the CWB directors have more power within the Act than the government itself. The CWB Act cannot transfer absolute power to farmers and directors to be used to stop the government from making appropriate changes to the Act. The government cannot be hamstrung by the wording of the Act.

**So how would a vote on the CWB go anyway?**

Let’s say a farmer vote was held on the future of the single desk. If the results favoured the single desk supporters’ position, end of story, along with some self-satisfied gloating. Open market supporters would take a page out of the single desk book and challenge it.

If it went against their position, history has shown the single desk supporters would complain about the voters’ list, the question, the colour of the ballots, or anything else they could say that was a problem. Then, when all else fails, they would take it to court. A vote delays the process during which things would stay the same. After the vote, win or lose, challenges would delay any progress. The strategy of the single desk supporters would be to delay it long enough until a change in government in Ottawa. And that’s why they want a vote.

In other words, no progress. In my view, they don’t have a mandate to do that. I didn’t vote for them.

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The CWB Monitor