

Defend the Canadian Wheat Board!

“The history of the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) is grounded in the experience of farmers prior to World War I,” according to the CWB’s website. “Many farmers at the time felt captive to the railways, the line elevator companies, and the Winnipeg Grain Exchange for the delivery, weighing, grading, and pricing of their grain. They wanted greater power and protection for themselves in the grain marketing system. They developed a strong confidence in cooperative strategies and government intervention for addressing their needs...” (www.cwb.ca).

The first CWB, established in 1919, utilized a two-payment system: one payment in the Spring and another in the Fall, depending on price levels. The Federal government guaranteed any shortfalls due to low prices, effectively setting a floor price for the farmers’ produce. The second, and current, CWB, now representing over 75,000 farmers, was established in 1935 to protect the farming community from the ravages of the Great Depression. Its role has changed a great deal over the years, but its function in promoting the interests of Canada’s Western farmers has endured.

In the 1960s, the CWB began making direct deals and entering into long-term contracts with its customers, such as

the governments of Russia and China, thus circumventing the speculators and middlemen, a decision which the grain cartels have never forgiven. Today the CWB is the world’s single largest grain exporter, and the last of the big international Wheat Boards; in 2007 it exported 21.5 million tons of grain.

The current Conservative government of Stephen Harper is committed to terminating the CWB, but recently received a major setback. A Federal Court Judge ruled on June 20 that the Harper government had violated Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms, when it issued a directive in 2005 forbidding the CWB from promoting or defending its own existence in the media, while the government organized a massive media campaign aimed at manipulating farmers into supporting the dissolution of the Wheat Board’s mandate. Unfortunately for Harper, the CWB remains exceptionally popular among Western farmers, and it can only be eliminated through a farmer plebiscite, something which is highly unlikely for the near future. However, with the dissolution of the Australian Wheat Board, the CWB will come under increasing pressure.

With the floods now hitting the U.S. breadbasket, the grain cartels pushing for completely liberalized trade, and many countries facing food shortages, the world cannot afford to lose the CWB, which could be a precedent for other nations, such as Argentina, which have shown interest in reviving grain marketing boards of their own, in defense of the general welfare. —Rob Ainsworth