

Concerning the Media

When it Comes to the CWB, Why is the Media so Unbalanced?

For some time now I have felt the media hasn't given CWB issues an even break. Too often it appeared that reporters didn't understand the issues or didn't know all the facts – or worse, had a bias that they couldn't contain. The CWB is very good at getting its message out and the media seems to pick up on it, ignore other ideas, and report with a bias toward the CWB's perspective.

The Western Barley Growers Association and the Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association often challenge the CWB in press releases but far too often, their positions or analysis don't get balanced coverage in print. This concerns me; the media's job is to report what is happening, and if there are two sides to an argument, the media's responsibility is to give readers the opportunity to see both sides – give both sides equal air time. But that just doesn't happen when it comes to the CWB.

With this year's CWB election approaching I thought I could contribute by providing facts that are often overlooked. Via email I started to distribute daily commentaries and analyses using mostly the CWB's own figures, asking only that my comments be forwarded to as many people as possible. I made sure that the media – the farm press in particular – received these commentaries. I indicated to the media that if they wanted to do a story around anything I had written, I would be happy to discuss with them the information, sources and analysis – in the interest of getting a balanced story.

The Western Producer

Last week, I asked Barb Glen, editor at the Western Producer about their coverage of the CWB election. She acknowledged they "really hadn't done a very good job of it". When I asked about my blog she replied that she had been reading my articles daily. She added that my blog had shown her and others at the Western Producer that "there's a lot more to the CWB than the single desk issue." That was refreshing and disappointing at the same time.

Unfortunately, this new appreciation for the various current CWB issues by the Producer never emerged in its election coverage.

The Manitoba Co-operator

A couple of weeks ago I got a call from Allan Dawson, a reporter with The Manitoba Co-operator. We got into a lengthy discussion about the election and the question of honesty and integrity among the five candidates that have not declared their position on the future of the single desk. It was clear that Allan felt that the five candidates in question were being dishonest.

I told Allan that he was missing something; I suggested there's much more about this election than the future of the single desk. Allan's disagreement and singular, undying focus on this one issue showed his bias. Much like the candidates that say the single desk must be protected, to Allan Dawson, the future of the single desk is the only issue.

I asked Allan if he had looked at any of my commentaries. He said he had only scanned them; even so, he felt it was "all the same old stuff" that the Wheat Growers have been pushing for years. If Allan had chosen to actually read these pieces with an open and enquiring mind, he would have seen that the analysis and the specific issues were all new – and relevant.

When I explained much of it has never been presented before, and certainly not in this form, he just said there was too much – "it's overwhelming".

I find this fascinating; he only "scanned" what I wrote – over 30 different articles clearly identifying many shortcomings of the CWB – and he dismissed them all, but picked up two quotes buried in a couple where I give my opinion on the single desk position of these five candidates. I guess he found what he was looking for; and the other material didn't interest him.

It was clear his mind was made up. He would not consider any of my analysis - or any other input - as worthy of his ink. His article, "Some mum on single desk versus open market" confirmed this. As a colleague said, "That's typical for Allan – editorials masquerading as news".

Dawson allowed his pro-CWB bias to get in the way of an important story. To him, the story is how candidates misled farmers by not declaring a position on the single desk. He indicates they are all well known to be supporters of a voluntary CWB and by not declaring this in their platform they are being less than honest.

I suggested to him that none of the other eight candidates have commented about the questions of marketing performance by the single desk. They all have a position that the single desk is fundamental to the power of the CWB yet, not one has ventured a comment, solution or even a disagreement concerning the current, serious problems related to the single desk. Now really – who's being disingenuous? When someone says your business model isn't working and asks what you plan to do about it, the least you can do is answer.

To me, the real story is this: if the "open market supporters" aren't talking about taking away the single desk (as Dawson seems to have expected them to), don't we want to know why? What has their attention so strongly that "marketing choice" is not even on their radar?

News reporters go by the W5 rule of reporting. Let's test it on Dawson's story:

- Who? CWB candidates
- What? Didn't declare their position on the single desk
- When? Now
- Where? Western Canada
- Why? According to Allan Dawson, because they're dishonest.

Dawson failed the W5 test in this article. He came up with his "Why?" answer even when faced with other potential answers. I asked him what he thought had grabbed the attention off these

candidates; what is so important that they have chosen to put the future of the single desk to a lower priority? It must be something important. But even faced with many substantial reasons, Dawson wouldn't even go down that path.

Dawson and others in the media, supposedly reporting news stories, too often show their bias. This is a real disservice to Western Canadian farmers who deserve a balanced conversation on the issues with full disclosure from both sides.

But they're not getting it from the media, particularly from the Manitoba Co-operator and the Western Producer. Pity.

Decisions, Decisions. Knowledge is Power

Laura Rance is the editor of the Manitoba Co-operator and also writes a weekly article in the Winnipeg Free Press. Her Free Press article last Saturday, called "CWB candidates silent on big issue", was along the same lines as Allan Dawson wrote in the Co-operator, so I felt it was overkill to include them both in my earlier article.

But upon second review, another issue emerged.

Rance's article was an editorial so, unlike Dawson's piece in the Co-operator that was presented as a news article and shouldn't feature Dawson's opinion, to read Laura's opinion was expected. It's her opinion so she's free to share it. But she should present it as her opinion, not as an irrefutable fact.

What I have a problem with is how Rance and others speak with supposed authority on a subject that they really have none.

For example, Rance wrote "It could be they've realized the logic of analysis that concludes a dual market scenario would simply be a slow death for the CWB. Without capital and without its own grain handling facilities, the board would be unable to compete for farmers' grain against the multinational grain companies."

There are actually two schools of thought on this topic – that's why this issue is so polarized. Rance demonstrates an affinity for the position pushed by the CWB and its single desk supporters, but seems to ignore the other one that states that the CWB could indeed survive, and if managed properly, flourish, even without facilities.

Since she's stating this as fact, I would like to know upon what evidence she's basing this "fact". (And I do mean evidence – not just someone else's opinion.)

And why does she dismiss contrary evidence as if it doesn't exist?

Farmers need good information to make good decisions

When someone who has a deep and detailed understanding of these issues – on either side of the argument – presents sound analysis and conclusions, I take note. But when someone like Laura

Rance writes about the CWB and its single desk with apparent authority on the subject but without the commensurate knowledge, I find the whole article lacks credibility.

Unfortunately, Rance's article is indicative of the tripe many of the CWB defenders have felt is good enough for farmers. Whether its Laura Rance, the CWB Alliance, or individual pro-single desk candidates, none of them actually refer to any real data, real analysis, real examples or real experience. None of them even acknowledge there are serious problems facing farmers right now. Are they not paying attention or are they diverting attention on purpose?

Farmers are facing real tough challenges right now on CWB grains – poor cash flow, higher than necessary costs, poor movement – the list goes on and on. They need good, sound information upon which to base decisions on a daily basis; the CWB election process is no different. They don't need the additional risk of a board of directors that can't even acknowledge the problems.

Rance's blind faith as a CWB defender doesn't help.

All eligible farmers should vote

Laura Rance wrote "The board plays a pivotal and unique role co-ordinating the entire grain-industry value chain, from policy through to logistics." I don't see it quite the same way as she does, I'm sure. However, the CWB's impact on the industry is indeed unique – it touches every farmer who grows a crop in Western Canada - any crop. Those that think the CWB is not "their issue" because they don't deal with the CWB are mistaken.

To those that are afraid of candidates who support change (because they might get rid of the single desk), think about this. The most the board of directors can do is ask Ottawa for a plebiscite on the issue. And most farmers I know – on both sides of the argument – would welcome that.

Right now it's up to all eligible farmers to vote for directors that will make a difference – because a difference is exactly what is needed.

Better get 'er done - the deadline is this Friday.