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Strahl's tactics have hurt farmers

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The federal Conservatives have bungled the Canadian Wheat Board issue. After a year in power, all they've managed to do is inflame the old debate and further polarize the competing viewpoints. It didn't have to be this way.

When he was newly minted as agriculture minister and minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board, Chuck Strahl could have immediately announced a vote on the Canadian Wheat Board single-desk issue.

That would have been in keeping with the Conservative election promise of marketing choice for Western grain farmers. According to the CWB Act, a vote of producers is needed before making changes.

Instead, Strahl tried to address the issue through the back door. His initial position was that the marketing monopoly on wheat, durum and barley would be removed and that no vote was necessary.

He sparred with CWB supporters and the board itself. He held closed-door, invitation-only meetings of pro-choice supporters.

Government-appointed CWB directors, who were on the board for their expertise, were replaced by people willing to support the government's agenda.

Finally, Strahl relented and a plebiscite on barley marketing has been launched. True to form, the questions are also evoking controversy, throwing the whole result into question.

According to Strahl, farmers can have their cake and eat it too. The barley plebiscite is designed to make one of the three ballot choices seem the most appealing. It states, "I would like the option to market my barley to the Canadian Wheat Board or any other domestic or foreign buyer."

Strahl and his supporters obviously think a majority of farmers will choose this option. Those who say this is the end of the board are fear mongering, says Strahl. The board will be there for the farmers who want it.

What the agriculture minister doesn't seem to realize is that economics rules. Whether you're a board supporter or not, you sell your product where you think the return will be the greatest.

Without elevators and port facilities, the Canadian Wheat Board will face a number of challenges in order to compete in the barley market. Yes, it has expertise in barley marketing and perhaps through collaboration with other

market players, it may have some role in barley marketing.

However, that is far from assured. And really, the CWB would only be one of the choices in an open market.

Open markets have many advantages. Especially in barley, an open market may serve producers well. A year ago, before Strahl's ham-handed handling of the issue, the market-choice forces could probably have won a clear-cut honest question on barley, if not on wheat and durum.

Do you favour the current Canadian Wheat Board single desk marketing of barley to international customers and for domestic food use? Or you do you favor an open market? Those are the real options.

It's misleading to imply that the current CWB system and an open market are compatible. Chuck Strahl can say that the wheat board will be there for farmers, but why would farmers deal with the wheat board if it can't provide competitive returns?

A barley plebiscite is the right approach, but the results could be badly skewed by the intellectually dishonest approach to the questions. That will create another problem for the Conservatives. If the opposition parties reject the plebiscite results because of the options on the ballot, changes to the CWB Act might still be blocked in Parliament.

Market-choice supporters say they should have marketing freedom even if they're in a minority. Wheat board supporters, on the other hand, will accept the opinion of the majority if the question is straightforward.

If Strahl had started the process with a clear-cut question, an open market for barley may have been in place by now. Instead we have uncertainty and acrimony. His miscalculation has been a disservice to all grain producers.

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