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MARKETING FREEDOM FOR GRAIN FARMERS BILL

Second Reading of Bill C-18

Speech by:

The Honourable Claudette Tardif

Thursday, December 1, 2011

THE SENATE

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SECOND READING

Hon. Claudette Tardif (Deputy Leader of the Opposition): Honourable senators, there has been no shortage of discussion in this chamber in recent weeks on the Canadian Wheat Board and the role that it plays in Western farmers' livelihoods. I rise today to speak to Bill C-18 because this is a bill that matters to me and to the farmers in Alberta, my home province.

I was born in a rural community in Northern Alberta, a place where many made their living by farming. I am proud to be able to represent in the Senate today the voices of those farmers who have not been heard.

Over the past several months, I have received countless letters from Alberta farmers, as well as Manitoban and Saskatchewan farmers, all of whom convey serious concerns with the way this government has handled the issues at hand pertaining to the Canadian Wheat Board.

Honourable senators, no one would be so foolish as to argue that all Canadian farmers unanimously support or unanimously oppose the Canadian Wheat Board. However, I think it is reasonable to say that each of us values one's right to be heard on a matter that directly affects one's livelihood, especially when that "right" is a statutory one. It is on this subject, honourable senators, where the Conservative government has utterly failed Canadian farmers. By refusing farmers their right to a say in the future of the Wheat Board, this government has disenfranchised and alienated farmers on both sides of the issue.

As Senator Fraser has so eloquently stated, section 47.1 of the Canadian Wheat Board Act is presently the law. I will read again section 47.1 of the Canadian Wheat Board Act. We have heard it many times today, but it is the law, and one cannot break an existing law. The law states that the Minister of Agriculture may not exclude any kind, type, class or grade of grain from the single-desk marketing structure unless:

(a) the minister has consulted with the board about the exclusion or extension; and

(b) the producers of the grain have voted in favour of the exclusion or extension, the voting process having been determined by the Minister.

This is pretty clear.

An Hon. Senator: It could not be any clearer than that.

Senator Tardif: By doing away with the single-desk, the government is effectively removing all types of grain from that structure, and is doing so without fulfilling the requirements of parts (a) and (b). Grain producers have a statutory right to vote on these consequential changes to the Canadian Wheat Board, and the government's legislation is being imposed in direct contravention of the statute in question.

What is perhaps most disturbing about this violation of the Canadian Wheat Board Act is that just eight months ago, in March, heading into an election, the minister assured farmers that there was no reason to worry and that the government would not act arbitrarily on the Wheat Board when it came forward in this Parliament.

Honourable senators, protests have been staged across the country. Online campaigns have sprung up on website and social media platforms. Farmers have travelled from the Prairies to Ottawa, expenses paid out of their own pockets, to try to be heard by their government.

Through all these efforts, my colleagues in this chamber and in the other place have stood shoulder to shoulder with Prairie farmers and asked this government to give them a chance to be heard.

Regrettably, these pleas have fallen on deaf ears. In what was perhaps the most disappointing display of the reticence of the government in this very chamber, senators on the other side voted down two separate amendments to have the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry hold hearings in the Prairie provinces, giving farmers a real chance to be heard.

What we asked for was simple: Bring the debate on the subject matter of this bill to the places where it really counts; bring the debate to the places where families and their livelihoods stand to be affected. Honourable senators, I am left to assume that the government was reticent to hold such hearings because they feared they would not like what they heard.

Some Hon. Senators: Hear, hear.

Senator Tardif: I have listened to members of the government in this place stand and say that those farmers who still want the CWB can still have the CWB, voluntarily — but this is categorically false, and I know that they know so. The CWB's defining characteristic is its single-desk selling system. With no single-desk, no capital base and no access to grain-handling facilities, what is left is an empty shell set up to fail. Even if I do not agree with the beliefs of the government, I expect the government to have sufficient courage in its convictions to be forthright about the policies it seeks to implement — not to deliberately conceal the intended effects of a piece of legislation.

The conspicuous absence of an economic impact study to accompany this significant legislation has been raised by a number of my colleagues. As a matter of interest, I would like to bring to the attention of senators an economic impact report that was conducted on the Canadian Wheat Board by PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2005. The report observed the annual benefits attributed to the CWB's economic activity in the city of Winnipeg, where the board's headquarters are located, throughout the Western provinces and for the rest of Canada.

• (1630)

The gross output on Canada attributable to the total initial expenditures and premiums generated of \$751.7 million was \$1.6 billion. Furthermore, in addition to the 460 positions at the

CWB, a further 14,239 full-time, full-year jobs are created in Canada as a result of the initial CWB expenditures and premiums generated. In addition to wages paid to CWB employees, total labour income generated in Canada was estimated at \$519.3 million.

A final point of interest from this report was the notion of the Wheat Board's activities as a significant revenue generator for the government. Approximately \$360.1 million in taxes paid to all levels of government is generated by the CWB's initial expenditures and premiums generated in Canada. Honourable senators, the figures I have quoted are not small amounts. I have serious concerns with the absence of an economic impact study to accompany the bill currently before the Senate.

Since the government has declined to allow farmers' voices to be formally registered by way of a vote, I would like to use my allotted time to speak in this place to ensure that some of those voices are indeed formally on the record. I will read from some of the letters that I have received.

Two weeks ago, I received a letter from a farmer in Central Alberta. He writes:

Dear Senator Tardif,

If ever there was an issue that required sober second thought, it is Bill C-18.

I harvested my 35th grain crop this year. In 1998 I participated in the Senate Agriculture Committee hearings, which gave us our farmer directed Wheat Board. One of the key aspects of that legislation was the right of farmers to have an honest plebiscite on any substantive changes to the mandate of our Wheat Board. Coupled with the democratic elections of farmers to the CWB Board of Directors, this makes our CWB one of the most democratically legitimate institutions in our society.

The farmer's letter went on to describe his belief in the CWB as a critical component of the overall economic health of Canada. I think I just gave you some of those numbers.

Another farmer, from Grande Prairie, Alberta, writes:

Dear Senator,

After working from 8:00 AM to 12:00 midnight for the last while, my son and I completed harvesting on November 2. Meanwhile, the Harper government has been ramming the Bill to kill the CWB through Parliament with total disrespect for the ability of grain farmers to represent their interests.

In fairness to grain farmers in Western Canada and to rural communities, could the Senate hold public hearings across Western Canada?

Well, we tried that and we saw what occurred. He goes on to state:

This would give us the opportunity to let government and the public understand the impact this irreversible change will have on our farms, rural communities and the environment.

The Senate might also consider holding the vote among wheat and barley producers that is required under the current CWB Act, as a federal election was not a referendum on grain marketing in Western Canada.

Some Hon. Senators: Hear, hear.

Senator Tardif: Honourable senators, just a few days ago I received another letter, from a farmer near the community of Camrose, Alberta. He states:

Our rural municipality is located in the central area of the Province of Alberta. This farming community is still able to thrive thanks to local farmers and their families.

The CWB is an important tool in our infrastructure in keeping local grain growers living the valued, small town lifestyle that has been a strong part of creating the great Country we live in.

Keeping our community viable and growing is the most important part of our heritage which is being threatened by the possible dismantling of the CWB. This is a very serious concern for us as transportation of our grain is provided by trucks and producer cars on a short line railway. Gone are the local elevators, and service by a Class 1 railroad; caused by rationalization in the post Crow Rate era. This is also a big concern to farmers who farm 1000 to 2000 acres and for the budding farmer, or my son, who is just beginning to farm for a living.

These are but a few of the many, many letters that we have all received.

Honourable senators, we have one last opportunity, as a chamber of sober second thought, to give those whose livelihoods will be directly affected by this bill the chance to be heard. That this bill will pass at second reading is a fait accompli. As such, I would like the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry to receive this bill as soon as possible so that it may begin hearing from farmers and from other witnesses who will appear.

I must admit that I am disappointed that the government voted against our attempt to have the committee hear on site from those who will most bear the impact of this legislation. Had senators on the other side supported our motion, the committee could have travelled to Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta to listen to all of those who wished to be heard. Unfortunately, that was not to be.

Nevertheless, I hope that the committee will listen carefully to the testimony of those who appear before it on the subject of this bill. I hope that they will be thorough and meticulous in the examination of the legislation, taking into account what they hear from witnesses. This diligence is the true mandate of our committees and of our chamber. I therefore look forward to the study to be carried out by the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry.