

Economics and Emotion: The Ideological Debate Over Prairie Grain Marketing, 1973–1996

LAURA LARSEN*

In 1943, the federal government proclaimed the Canadian Wheat Board the exclusive marketing agent for Prairie farmers' grain. Prairie farmers and politicians from all parties strongly supported this action. Yet by 1993, the question of how best to market grain, cooperatively through the single desk or individually in a private market, increasingly divided the Prairie agrarian community. The 1973 rapeseed marketing vote, the continental barley market, and the 1996 border-running protests against the Wheat Board's cooperative single-desk marketing show the rise in the rhetoric of individual freedom in grain marketing that divided Prairie farmers. These events demonstrate how the grain-marketing debate shifted from focusing on economic policy to ideological values.

En 1943, le gouvernement fédéral décréta que la Commission canadienne du blé serait l'agent exclusif de commercialisation de la production céréalière des agriculteurs des Prairies. Les agriculteurs et les politiciens de tous les partis des Prairies furent très favorables à ce geste. Et cependant, en 1993, la question de savoir comment commercialiser au mieux le blé, en coopérative à partir d'un seul bureau, ou individuellement sur le marché privé, commença à diviser de plus en plus la communauté agricole des Prairies. Le vote, en 1973, de la commercialisation du colza, le marché continental de l'orge et les manifestations, en 1996, contre la gestion des exportations par la coopérative centralisée de la Commission canadienne du blé montrent la montée en importance, dans la rhétorique, de la liberté individuelle en matière de commercialisation de la production céréalière, qui divisait les agriculteurs des Prairies. Ces événements montrent qu'il s'est produit un glissement dans le débat sur la commercialisation des céréales, de la prééminence de la politique économique aux valeurs idéologiques.

* Laura Larsen is a specialist in Western Canadian history with a particular focus on agriculture. She holds a PhD in history from the University of Saskatchewan. She would like to thank Ben Bradley, Jodey Nurse, Frances Reilly, and the anonymous reviewers whose comments helped improve this article.

IN OCTOBER 2002, when Alberta premier Ralph Klein stood on the Lethbridge courthouse steps and outlined what he believed were the causes of Western Canada's growing alienation, he declared, "We have the Kyoto protocol, we had the national energy program, we had the gun registration, we have the Canadian Wheat Board."¹ The oldest of these factors was the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB), created in 1935 by Calgary-based Conservative prime minister R. B. Bennett under pressure from farmers. Yet the rally that Klein spoke at was in support of 13 farmers who had chosen to serve jail time rather than pay fines for violating the Customs Act during their protest against the CWB being the exclusive marketing agent for Prairie farmers' grain. The farmers were, as Klein described it, "standing up for an important principle—the principle that is freedom."² As members of Farmers for Justice (FFJ), they argued their action was a political protest. FFJ member Darren Winczura likened it to the campaign to end apartheid in South Africa, explaining that "Nelson Mandela spent a whole lot of years in jail just to prove a point [so] eventually we (western farmers) will have equal rights."³ Farmers for Justice—and Klein's overt support for the organization—were part of a decades-long debate about grain marketing where the terms of the debate had transitioned from socio-economic policy to moral choice.

The debate in the Prairie farm community over the Canadian Wheat Board's single-desk marketing reflected a growing emphasis on farmers acting as individual businesspersons rather than as a cooperative group, which was part of a larger move toward market deregulation in Canada.⁴ The reactions of Western Canadian grain farmers to government decisions that effectively encouraged individual selling instead of cooperative marketing appear in regional periodicals. Newspapers, including such mainstream dailies as the *Globe and Mail*, regional papers like the *Calgary Herald*, which favoured neoliberal policies, and industry-specific papers like the *Western Producer*, had widespread circulation across the Prairie agrarian community.⁵ Thus, newspapers are a central source because they present farmers'

1 "The Text of Alberta Premier Ralph Klein's Thursday Speech at a Lethbridge, Alta., Rally Prior to 13 Farmers Going to Jail for Violating the Customs Act for Hauling Their Grain to the United States to Protest Canadian Wheat Board Policies," *Canadian Press NewsWire*, October 31, 2002.

2 "The Text of Alberta Premier Ralph Klein's Thursday Speech."

3 Quoted in Allan Chambers, "Farmers Jailbound for Selling Own Grain to U.S.: Wheat Board Protest," *Edmonton Journal*, October 31, 2002, p. A1. Winczura spent one night in jail before paying his \$1,000 fine, which time served reduced to \$844. Maria Canton, "Four Jailed Farmers Pay Fines," *Calgary Herald*, November 2, 2002, p. B1.

4 For overviews of deregulatory policy in Canada, see Dimitry Anastakis, *Re-creation, Fragmentation, and Resilience: A Brief History of Canada Since 1945* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2018); and G. Bruce Doern, Michael J. Prince, and Richard J. Schultz, *Rules and Unruliness: Canadian Regulatory Democracy, Governance, Capitalism, and Welfarism* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014). For case studies related to the privatization of specific industries and sectors, see Matthew Bellamy, *Profiting the Crown: Canada's Polymer Corporation, 1942–1990* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); John Erik Fossum, *Oil, the State and Federalism: The Rise and Demise of Petro-Canada as a Statist Impulse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Janet Smith, "Canada's Privatization Program," in J. J. Richardson, ed., *Privatization and Deregulation in Canada and Britain* (Halifax: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1990), pp. 37–44; and Allan Tupper and G. Bruce Doern, eds., *Privatization, Public Policy and Public Corporations in Canada* (Halifax: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1988).

5 Although the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool took ownership of the *Western Producer* in the 1930s, it did not interfere with the autonomy of the paper. The paper supported market regulation but reported on the actions

voices as they participated in public debates on Prairie grain marketing. Widely read, these papers provide personal reactions exhibiting frustration and enthusiasm to changes in public policy.

Over three decades, a major divide developed between Prairie grain farmers who opposed the single desk because they believed it restricted their ability to market their crops as they saw fit and those who supported cooperative single-desk marketing because of its demonstrated economic benefits. Farmers successfully campaigned for orderly marketing in the first half of the twentieth century, as an examination of changes to the grain trade during this period shows; by the 1970s, however, emerging rhetoric emphasizing the importance of farmers' freedom of choice began to challenge the majority support for orderly marketing. During the 1990s, the continental barley market (CBM) and the border running of FFJ highlighted growing polarization over the marketing of Prairie grain.

Origins of the Single Desk

The promise of prosperity from bountiful crops drew settlers to the Canadian Prairies. Yet they soon discovered the promises far exceeded the reality due to significant grain price fluctuations.⁶ Prices were generally lowest at autumn harvest, then rose through winter and spring as grain supplies declined. This seasonal cycle meant that farmers who could afford to wait to sell benefited, while those who needed cash soon after harvest sold the same product for less.

Grain farmers were also captive sellers to the grain company operating their local delivery point. Even if there were multiple companies, farmers noted a lack of competition and elevator agents who arbitrarily downgraded their grain.⁷ Historian Lyle Dick has noted in his study of Saskatchewan's Abernethy district that freight rates, or the cost of moving grain from elevator to port, "comprised less than half the difference between the quoted local and Fort William prices."⁸ In other words, freight costs did not account for the difference between the price paid for grain at country elevators and the westernmost Great Lakes port. The telegraph let farmers know port prices, but they were captive to a limited number of grain company buyers, which gave them little choice but to accept low inland prices. The 1899 Senkler Royal Commission concluded price fixing in grain occurred just as farmers alleged.⁹ Despite the resulting Manitoba Grain Act (1900), farmers remained vulnerable to price fluctuations.

Grain is subject to the boom-and-bust cycles that characterize most raw commodities. For grain farmers, orderly marketing became a popular solution to this problem; a single-desk sales agent metering grain into the market would avoid the

and arguments of the opposite side of the debate. It encouraged readers to debate issues by publishing letters from both perspectives. Georgina Taylor, "Violet McNaughton's Influence on the Western Producer," in Sarah Carter and Nanci Langford, eds., *Compelled to Act: Histories of Women's Activism in Western Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), p. 49.

6 Doug Owrain, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856–1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

7 Lyle Dick, *Farmers "Making Good": The Development of Abernethy District, Saskatchewan, 1880–1920*, 2nd ed. (1989; Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2008), pp. 70–75.

8 Dick, *Farmers "Making Good"*, p. 73.

9 D. J. Hall, *Clifford Sifton*, vol. 1, *The Young Napoleon, 1861–1900* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1981), p. 240.

flood of newly harvested grain depressing prices, thereby stabilizing prices. Orderly marketing was part of a wider Prairie reform movement that stressed cooperation to overcome defects in capitalist economic and social systems.¹⁰ There were two basic solutions to the question of how best to maintain an orderly movement of grain into the market: farmers could work together through their own organizations or the state could regulate marketing.

During the First World War, the Dominion Government created the Board of Grain Supervisors, which served as an example of effective state grain regulation. Prior to the Board's creation, the grain futures markets were in disarray as futures prices rose quickly with Allied purchasing and fell without it. The Winnipeg Grain Exchange asked the government to intervene, so it terminated trading and mandated the Board handle all grain marketing.¹¹ Although this board ensured a secure grain supply for the Allies, it did not impose low prices on Canadian farmers. Indeed, Minister of Trade and Commerce George Foster emphasized that it was important for farmers to receive a fair price.¹²

The Board of Grain Supervisors was the first case of orderly grain marketing in modern Canada. It was a single desk, since all marketing action flowed through the Board. Prairie farmers responded enthusiastically because they got immediate financial benefit, receiving \$2.63 per bushel of wheat, which economic historian V. C. Fowke has described as the highest price on record.¹³ When the government ended the Board, Prairie farmers protested vigorously because, as C. B. Watts of the Dominion Millers' Association explained, the Board "protected the farmers, who got good prices without excess profits going to anybody ... [now] 'farmers must protect themselves.'"¹⁴ After the Board's removal in 1920, the Canadian Council of Agriculture noted the move had caused an "undue depression of prices."¹⁵ This left little question in the minds of farmers about the necessity of the Board or a similar agency. United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) president Henry Wise Wood summarized the position of Prairie grain farmers when he stated, "There is no question about the Board being the best way to market this year's crop."¹⁶ In 1921, farmers made their

10 Seymour Martin Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

11 Allan Levine, *The Exchange: 100 Years of Trading Grain in Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: Peguis, 1987), pp. 94–96; C. F. Wilson, *A Century of Canadian Grain: Government Policy to 1951* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Books, 1978), p. 88; Mitchell W. Sharp, "Allied Wheat Buying in Relationship to Canadian Marketing Policy, 1914–18," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, vol. 6, no. 3 (August 1940), pp. 381–382.

12 Wilson, *Century of Canadian Grain*, p. 136.

13 Wilson, *Century of Canadian Grain*, p. 162; V. C. Fowke, *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), pp. 173–177.

14 Quoted in "Grain Men Favor Wide-Open Market," *Toronto Daily Star*, August 30, 1920; "Wheat Board Not to Control 1920 Crop," *Toronto Daily Star*, July 17, 1920; "Wheat Control to End, Ottawa Announces," *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, July 16, 1920.

15 "Agric. Council Wants Wheat Board Again," *Globe and Mail*, October 23, 1920, p.5. The Canadian Council of Agriculture included agricultural organizations from the Prairie provinces as well as the Maritimes and Ontario. Carrol L. Jaques, *Unifarm: A Story of Conflict and Change* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2001), p. 42.

16 Quoted in "Says Farmers Want Board," *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, July 26, 1920.

feelings known when no candidates from the Conservative Party, which refused to reinstate the single desk, were elected in the Prairies.¹⁷

Government resistance to re-establishing the Board led Prairie farmers to campaign for farmer-run provincial wheat pools that would act in a similar fashion. Farmers established the Alberta Wheat Pool in 1923 and the Manitoba and Saskatchewan Wheat Pools in 1924, which acted together through their Central Selling Agency (CSA) to market Prairie grain to international customers. Farmers acted cooperatively to regulate grain flowing into the market to achieve better prices, and the Pools' guaranteed minimum payment also provided additional financial stability. Demonstrating their popularity, by 1927, the Pools had "70 per cent of the total [Prairie] wheat acreage" under contract.¹⁸ Yet their CSA failed with the 1929 stock market crash.¹⁹ The federal government took control of the CSA out of concern that its financial difficulties would further destabilize Canada's banking and finance sectors.²⁰

Facing the Great Depression and severe drought on the Prairies, Bennett's Conservative government sought to avoid worsening already low farm gate prices.²¹ In 1935, under intense pressure from Prairie farmers, it tabled Bill 98, based on the Board of Grain Supervisors, to establish the Canadian Wheat Board.²² Grain farmers enthusiastically supported Bill 98; but to their dismay, Bennett and his government chose not to proclaim into law the critical clause making the CWB the single-desk marketer for Prairie grain. Without this clause, farmers could choose between the CWB and the private trade, effectively creating a dual market system. This dual market appeared to be the perfect solution since it allowed the federal government to provide price support for farmers while not interfering with the private grain trade. However, problems with this "best of both worlds" system quickly became apparent. As Agriculture Minister James Gardiner later explained, "farmers always deliver their grain to the wheat board as long as the advance paid by the wheat board is higher than the market price."²³ The CWB, therefore, often bought high and sold low, which put the government, as the CWB's financial guarantor, at considerable risk when the CWB could not recoup its offered prices through sales. To mitigate this risk, the government proclaimed the single-desk clause of the Canadian Wheat

17 John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, *Canada 1922–1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), p. 333.

18 Levine, *Exchange*, p. 142.

19 See Wilson, *Century of Canadian Grain*; William E. Morriss, *Chosen Instrument: The McIvor Years* (Edmonton: Reidmore, 1987); Fowke, *National Policy*.

20 Fowke, *National Policy*, pp. 256–257.

21 The Great Depression and drought created social unrest and caused severe hardship throughout Canada. See R. D. Francis and H. Ganzevoort, *The Dirty Thirties in Prairie Canada: 11th Western Canadian Studies Conference* (Vancouver: Tantalus, 1980); Thompson and Seager, *Canada 1922–1939*; Eric Strikwerda, *The Wages of Relief: Cities and the Unemployed in Prairie Canada* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2013); and Gregory Marchildon, ed., *Drought and Depression: History of the Prairie West* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2018).

22 Wilson, *Century of Canadian Grain*, p. 473. At the time, there were a series of measures taken to encourage cooperative and regulated marketing of agricultural products, most notably the federal 1934 Natural Products Marketing Act. For greater discussion, see Jodey Nurse, "'Milk is Milk': Marketing Milk in Ontario and the Origins of Supply Management," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2017), pp. 127–156.

23 Canada, Parliament, House of Commons Debates, 19th Parl., 4th sess., vol. 5 (1943), p. 4488.

Board Act in 1943. UFA President Robert Gardiner declared it “in the best interests of the people,” echoing the position of the majority of farmers.²⁴

The wartime context of the single-desk clause has supported the quasi-historical claim popularized during the 1990s that the government “invoked the War Measures Act and forced all farmers to sell to the board,” but at the time, Prairie farmers clearly supported the single-desk decision.²⁵ In the 1945 federal election, Prairie ridings elected candidates who supported maintaining it. Although the federal government had intended to reconsider the single desk following the war, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture recommended the CWB “be continued as the sole marketing agency for wheat.”²⁶ Indeed, support for the single desk was so strong that its original mandate to handle wheat was expanded to barley and oats. The Manitoba government, although supportive, held a farmer vote in 1951 in which over 90% of the farmers who cast their ballots voted in favour of CWB control.²⁷ This overwhelming support was because, as Manitoba farmer G. R. Witty wrote, “Most of us remember too well the many ills of the Grain Exchange to wish to return to a system of grain gambling.”²⁸ The vote also served as a proxy for the question of how to best market agricultural products. In a letter to the editor of the *Russel Banner*, Earle Keating warned the vote’s results “will have a very great bearing on the marketing of wheat, and the establishing of producer marketing boards, now in the offing.”²⁹ Farmers saw marketing boards as a way to stabilize and improve postwar prices through the regulation of how their products moved into the market. The 1949 federal Agricultural Products Marketing Act combined with provincial legislation made it easier for farmers to form boards and by 1965, “eighty producer marketing boards operat[ed] in Canada.”³⁰

Although the popularity of marketing boards grew, the single-desk CWB remained subject to renewal votes until Parliament voted unanimously to make it permanent in 1967. During the renewal votes, both Conservative and Social Credit MPs representing Prairie ridings supported it and suggested making it permanent.³¹ When MPs did so, farmers, their organizations, and Prairie provincial governments all considered it a success.³² Prairie agriculture, however, was changing radically during this period. Beginning in 1941, the number of Prairie farms began declining

24 “Welcome Wheat Policy as Progressive Step: Leaders in Farm Movement State Views on Action,” *Western Farm Leader*, October 1, 1943, pp. 1, 5.

25 Terence Corcoran, “The War Measures Wheat Board,” *Globe and Mail*, July 12, 1996, p. B2.

26 Quoted in Wilson, *Century of Canadian Grain*, p. 809.

27 W. E. Morriss, “Chosen Instrument: The Canadian Wheat Board: Facts, Fiction and Fallacy,” in Murray Knuttila and Bob Stirling, eds., *The Prairie Agrarian Movement Revisited* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2007), p. 89.

28 “Letter to the Editor,” *Russel Banner*, October 25, 1951, p. 5.

29 “Letter to the Editor,” *Russel Banner*, November 8, 1951, p. 1.

30 Jaques, *Unifarm*, p. 182. For an overview of marketing boards in Canada see Michele Veeman, “Marketing Boards: The Canadian Experience,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, vol. 69, no. 5 (1987), pp. 992–1000.

31 In 1949, seven Quebec and Ontario MPs voted against renewal; all other votes were unanimous. John Herd Thompson, “A Response to David Bercuson and Barry Cooper, ‘The Monopoly Buying Powers of the Canadian Wheat Board: A Brief History and Analysis,’” report submitted to Agriculture and Agri-food Canada (1997), pp. 12–14.

32 “F.U.A. Convention Passes McKenzie Paving Resolution,” *Peace River Record Gazette*, June 28, 1967, p. 6.

while farm size began increasing.³³ Increased mechanization, decreased farm populations, and farm consolidations had repercussions for rural communities.³⁴ Businesses such as banks and government services such as post offices were closed or consolidated as people left rural areas to pursue opportunities in larger centres. Although agriculture remained central to the Prairie economy between 1951 and 1971, the total number of farms dropped by 29%.³⁵ Yet agricultural production increased due to chemical fertilizers as well as government plant-breeding programs that improved yields and hardiness.³⁶

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, worldwide grain carryover grew, creating downward pressure on prices despite the International Wheat Agreements, which sought to maintain a minimum price through cooperation between grain exporting nations. Rising carryover combined with nationalist agricultural policies (particularly in the United States) led exporting nations to reduce their own stocks by ignoring the floor price.³⁷ The CWB attempted to maintain prices, which meant Canadian grain farmers received low international prices; therefore, low farm income was a serious problem. As a solution, politicians and farmers stressed the necessity of finding new markets beyond Europe. The CWB's cultivation of new markets resulted in large long-term contracts with the Soviet Union. These contracts, combined with significant Soviet purchases of American grain, reduced international carryover and increased grain prices for Canadian farmers and thus increased their farm income.³⁸ As Prairie farmers' financial situation improved, a renewed debate about how best to structure and finance Prairie grain transportation emerged. Those favouring neoliberal changes to the structure of the Prairie grain handling and transportation system, including members of the federal transportation department and small, recently formed farmers' organizations such as the Palliser Wheat Growers Association, argued that Prairie farmers could afford to contribute more to cover the costs of transportation and remove some financial burden from the federal government. These new farmers' organizations saw farms as businesses

33 "Number and Area of Farms and Farmland Area by Tenure, Historical Data," Statistics Canada, Table 32-10-0152-01, <https://doi.org/10.25318/3210015201-eng>.

34 Tony Ward, "Farming Technology and Crop Area on Early Prairie Farms," *Prairie Forum*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1995), pp. 19–36; William J. Carlyle, "Rural Population Change on the Canadian Prairies," *Great Plains Research*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1994), pp. 65–87; R. Bruce Shepard, "Tractors and Combines in the Second Stage of Agricultural Mechanization on the Canadian Plains," *Prairie Forum*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1986), pp. 253–271.

35 "Number and Area of Farms and Farmland Area by Tenure, Historical Data."

36 "Crop Statistics: Production, Imports, Exports and Domestic Disappearance of Wheat, Canada, 1868 to 1974," Statistics Canada, Table M301-309, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-516-x/section/m/M301_309-eng.csv; A. E. Slinkard and Douglas Knott, eds., *Harvest of Gold: The History of Field Crop Breeding in Canada* (Saskatoon: Extension Press University of Saskatchewan, 1995); T. H. Anstey, *One Hundred Harvests: Research Branch, Agriculture Canada, 1886–1986* (Ottawa: Agriculture Canada Research Branch, 1986).

37 Colleen M. O'Connor, "Going Against the Grain: The Regulation of the International Wheat Trade from 1933 to the 1980 Soviet Grain Embargo," *Boston College International Comparative Law Review*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1982), pp. 225–270.

38 Wayne G. Broehl Jr., *Cargill: Going Global* (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1998), pp. 183–227.

rather than lifestyles; therefore, they felt farmers as business owners had to shoulder a greater share of the costs of export agriculture.³⁹

A significant change to the structure of the Prairies' export agriculture was the consolidation of the decentralized railway and grain elevator networks, which began in the 1970s. Rural residents linked the closure of their railway lines with the loss of their local grain elevators, increased transportation costs, and ultimately the economic decline of their communities.⁴⁰ This decline contributed to depopulation, which had negative consequences for "networks of mutual aid and volunteerism that have traditionally created a sense of community" in rural areas.⁴¹ Thus, the closures of branch lines and elevators not only continued the trend of postwar rural depopulation but also signalled diminishing government support for the structure of Prairie farms and communities created during the settlement period of the early twentieth century. The eroding sense of community exacerbated the fragmentation of the social structure of the Prairies created by ongoing depopulation. It was especially noticeable for farmers who, tied to their land, could not easily move and were able to access communities only within a limited area.

Further fragmentation in agrarian communities came with the rise of commodity-specific producer groups during the 1970s. Some farmers began shifting away from the established view of themselves as united by shared interests within a larger economic system and toward the view that they were individual business owners in competition with one another. Commodity-specific organizations such as the Western Barley Growers Association emphasized the notion that farms were businesses that had to make individual choices in order to improve their profitability. Political scientist Grace Skogstad has described these groups as "philosophically committed to a greater role for market forces and a lesser role for state intervention in Canadian agriculture."⁴² Within this climate where sections of the industry increasingly favoured deregulation, division grew between those farmers favouring single-desk marketing and those favouring individual selling into the private market.⁴³ At the same time, realized net farm incomes declined while farm debt increased.⁴⁴ Thus, farmers' struggle to improve their revenues underpinned the polarized debate over how to market Prairie grain: cooperatively with the single desk or as individuals selling on the private market.

39 This debate focused on the Crow Rate, which limited freight rates, and was replaced by the Western Grain Transportation Act in 1983. Laura Larsen, "The Public Good and Private Business of the Crow Rate: Prairie Grain Handling and Transportation Policy" (PhD dissertation, University of Saskatchewan, 2020).

40 Transportation Agency of Saskatchewan and University of Regina Sample Survey and Data Bank Unit, *Community Impact of Railline Abandonment 1975–1976: Summary Report* (Regina: n.p., 1976).

41 JoAnn Jaffe and Amy Quark, "Social Cohesion, Neoliberalism, and the Entrepreneurial Community in Rural Saskatchewan," *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2006), p. 212.

42 Grace Skogstad, "Farm Groups in Canadian Politics," in Miriam Smith, ed., *Group Politics and Social Movements in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), p. 57.

43 Discussion of these divisions appears in Jaques, *Unifarm*; Skogstad, "Farm Groups"; and Barry Wilson, *Farming the System: How Politics and Farmers Shape Agricultural Policy* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1990).

44 Melanie Sommerville and André Magnan, "'Pinstripes on the Prairies': Examining the Financialization of Farming Systems in the Canadian Prairie Provinces," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2015), pp. 124–125.

The Rapeseed Question

Polarization of the Prairie grain-growing community over marketing began with rapeseed rather than wheat. In 1971, the first rapeseed suitable for human consumption became available. It opened a potentially lucrative new market, which divided farmers between those who supported rapeseed's inclusion under the CWB's single desk and those who favoured individual selling to private companies. This divide culminated in a vote on the future of rapeseed marketing in 1973.⁴⁵

Developed through publicly funded plant breeding at Agriculture Canada Research Stations, low erucic acid and low glucosinolate rapeseed was a significant breakthrough that shifted the crop from its predominant use as an industrial oil to one suitable for human consumption.⁴⁶ Production increased rapidly in response to a demand for healthy oils. It became a cash crop and part of the standard Prairie crop rotation. As rapeseed was not under the single-desk mandate of the CWB, farmers sold rapeseed to grain companies or through futures contracts. In June 1973, an unexpected price increase left many farmers questioning whether those companies were manipulating the market for their own benefit after purchasing rapeseed cheaply from farmers earlier in the year. Otto Lang, Minister of Justice and Minister Responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board in the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau, concluded "there [was] no evidence of any manipulation" and that prices had been "determined through the operation of the cash and futures markets of the Winnipeg Commodity Exchange."⁴⁷ However, his assurances did not satisfy farmers. The Wheat Pools and cooperatively oriented farm groups pressed Ottawa to include rapeseed under the single desk as a solution to what they saw as the disadvantages farmers faced selling rapeseed individually. In response, the government held a mail-in vote for farmers to determine the future of rapeseed marketing.⁴⁸ The conditions of the vote required a 60% majority in favour of placing rapeseed under the CWB's mandate, with the ballot containing three options to this binary question: yes, no, and undecided.⁴⁹ As one Saskatchewan Wheat Pool campaign ad warned, "You have two ways of saying no and only one way to say

45 Although this vote took place only a year after the introduction of the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act, it did not directly appear in the debate over rapeseed marketing. The Act changed the marketing of dairy, eggs, and poultry. Grace Skogstad, "The Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act: A Case Study of Agricultural Policy," *Canadian Public Policy*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1980), pp. 89–100. See the discussion of the transformation of dairy marketing and the conflict between dairy farmers over the supply management system in Nurse, "Milk is Milk." For a long-term examination of egg marketing regulations, especially in relation to how those changes were intended to improve farm incomes, see Jodey Nurse and Bruce Muirhead, "The Long Road to Stability: Egg Farmers in Canada and Fair Farm Pricing," *Agricultural History Review*, vol. 68, no. 2 (2020), pp. 286–306.

46 The Rapeseed Association of Canada branded it "canola" in 1978. Lawrence Busch, "Canola: A Cinderella Story," in Harry Diaz, JoAnn Jaffe, and Robert Stirling, eds., *Farm Communities at the Crossroads: Challenge and Resistance* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2003), p. 47; V. J. Barthet, "Canola: Overview," in Colin Wrigley et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Food Grains*, 2nd ed. (San Diego, CA: Elsevier, 2016), p. 238.

47 Canada, Parliament, House of Commons Debates, 29th Parl., 1st sess., vol. 7 (1973), p. 6840.

48 The return deadline for ballots was extended from December 14, 1973, to January 4, 1974, as some eligible voters were not on the original mailing list. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons Debates, 29th Parl., 1st sess., vol. 8 (1974), p. 8564.

49 Canada, Parliament, House of Commons Debates, 29th Parl., 1st sess., vol. 7 (1973), p. 7253.

yes to the Wheat Board way.”⁵⁰ The structure of the vote suggests the federal government was ambivalent, even reluctant, to include rapeseed under the single desk and remove it from the private market. This ambivalence reflects the beginnings of the trend in agricultural policy toward reduced regulation of the grain market.

Questions arose about the representativeness of the vote. The only farmers eligible to vote were those holding CWB permit books who had twice grown rapeseed between the 1971/72 and 1973/74 crop years; or new permit book holders who grew rapeseed in 1972 or 1973. While rapeseed acreage had increased, the voters list was small compared to the total farm population. Additionally, the requirement of two crops within three growing seasons potentially disenfranchised northern Prairie farmers because they experienced an infestation of Bertha armyworms and agronomic advice recommended preventing reoccurrence by avoiding growing rapeseed for several years. Between the eligibility criteria, 60% support threshold, and undecided option, supporters of single-desk rapeseed marketing accused the federal government of attempting to maintain the status quo. While Otto Lang and Minister of Agriculture Eugene Whelan insisted the government was impartial, it did not provide information packages on the ballot options, which is standard practice for mail-in votes. Instead, it asked the Pools to create a pamphlet supporting single-desk marketing and the Rapeseed Association of Canada (RAC) to create a pamphlet supporting the status quo for distribution along with the ballots.⁵¹

Farm groups campaigned through meetings and in print to place rapeseed under the CWB’s single-desk control, while the RAC and the Winnipeg Commodity Exchange (WCE) spearheaded a vigorous counter-campaign.⁵² As part of the pro-private marketing campaign, advertisements implied that modern, “sophisticated” farmers profited from rapeseed sales.⁵³ As individual sellers, they had the choice of *when* to sell rapeseed—implying that unlike CWB grains, they could deliver when they wanted. The RAC gathered farmers’ testimonials to support the idea that it was important to have choice and give the impression that the single desk made farmers complacent instead of innovative decision makers. Saskatchewan farmer Tony Youzwa ended his testimonial by noting, “I personally, like the certain feeling of a bit of uncertainty.”⁵⁴ This point negatively reframed the idea that the single desk offered farmers the certainty of capturing the best value. Albertan Ralph Child offered a more dramatic explanation to keep rapeseed off the single desk: “If we haven’t got a choice it is not a democratic country any more—it is a dictatorship.”⁵⁵ These and other testimonials extolled individual freedom in selling and, by extension, lack of government regulation. They also implied that farmers were only businesspeople if they sold rapeseed or other non-CWB grains, whereas those who trusted the CWB to do their marketing abdicated their business responsibilities. While some of these testimonials were implicitly critical of the

50 Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, “There’s Only One Way to Say,” *Western Producer*, November 29, 1973.

51 Canada, Parliament, House of Commons Debates, 29th Parl., 1st sess., vol. 7 (1973), p. 7253.

52 The Winnipeg Grain Exchange changed its name to the Winnipeg Commodity Exchange in 1972.

53 Rapeseed Association of Canada, “You’ve Heard a Lot of People (Who Don’t Grow Rapeseed) Tell You How to Vote on the Rapeseed Poll,” *Western Producer*, December 6, 1973.

54 Rapeseed Association of Canada, “You’ve Heard a Lot of People.”

55 Rapeseed Association of Canada, “You’ve Heard a Lot of People.”

single desk, none argued for its removal. Instead, they emphasized the importance of maintaining farmers' ability to choose between single desk and private market.

This idea of choice between two incompatible systems illustrates an emergent anti-single-desk position. RAC ads explained the dual market (pooled sales and a private market simultaneously) and implicitly argued against single-desk marketing. In comparison, the campaign material produced by the WCE used an explicit rhetoric of single-desk marketing versus individualism. Its ads encouraged farmers to vote for the status quo to maintain their individual freedom, warning that "once you surrender freedom of choice, you never get it back."⁵⁶ Unlike the dual market concept, "freedom of choice" required no explanation, and the use of this emotionally weighted tagline continued uninterrupted into the 1990s. The WCE's rallying cry supported the RAC's more moderate stance, which asserted that farmers selling rapeseed benefited from choosing both when and for how much they sold. These complementary campaigns pushed the rhetoric that single-desk marketing discouraged farmers from risk-taking sales decisions because it stifled their initiative and freedom.

Proponents of single-desk marketing argued pooling allowed farmers to benefit from higher prices while insulating them from low prices. In contrast, the WCE made the hypothetical argument that even if a farmer received a low price, that "doesn't mean [they] didn't get a better price than [they] would have under a government monopoly system."⁵⁷ In doing so, it took advantage of a common misunderstanding of how single-desk marketing worked. The single-desk CWB acted as farmers' marketing agent by pooling their grain for sale on the international market. It returned a share of the total sales achieved over the pooling period to farmers based on the amount of grain they had delivered. One of the strongest arguments to support single-desk marketing was that farmers did not compete against and potentially undercut each other in the market. Single-desk rapeseed marketing supporters used this argument to explain the private market for rapeseed effectively had the same structure and same problems as the markets for wheat, barley, and oats had prior to the single desk. The WCE countered that farmers might not do better than their neighbours but there was no certainty they could have done better through the single desk. Thus, the WCE's argument appealed to individual ego in two ways: First, by suggesting that business-savvy farmers might do equally well (or better) than the single desk, thus implying that cooperative single-desk marketing impeded their individual betterment; and, second, by suggesting only farmers afraid of competition—and of their neighbours outperforming them—would want single-desk rapeseed.

56 Winnipeg Commodity Exchange, "Who'd Ever Guess These Fellows Are Creating Stability?" *Western Producer*, November 29, 1973.

57 Winnipeg Commodity Exchange, "If Your Neighbor Got More Money Does That Mean You Lost Money?" *Western Producer*, November 22, 1973.

if your neighbor got more money does that mean you lost money?



YOU can't always sell your products at the peak of the market. Although somebody always will. Abraham Lincoln frequently said that a man with less gains nothing by taking away from a man with more. Bernard Baruch, one of the most famous of financiers, said that he never bought at the bottom nor sold at the top, but took a profit in between and thanked God for the opportunity to do so. These men knew that the greatest overall good was served through freedom of barter.

Today, there are those who believe that the fairest system is the one that brings us all to a single, common denominator. We disagree. We're in the business of providing free trade opportunity for whoever wants to

make an honest, responsible bid as either buyer or seller.

We believe that this method of marketing assures producers of the highest available price, inspires the most active sales force for Canadian agricultural products, moves the most grain, and provides the most stable economic foundation for farmers' sales.

The principal complaint producers have against open marketing is that, since prices vary, some producers get more for their products than others. But just because you don't happen to sell at the market high doesn't mean you didn't get a better price than you would have under a government monopoly system.

Think it over. Your best interests are not served by eliminating the open market place from Canadian agricultural merchandising.

Before you cast your ballot in the rapeseed poll, we suggest you give the matter plenty of thought.
After all, once you surrender freedom of choice, you never get it back.

**the
winnipeg
commodity
exchange**

Figure 1. One of the Winnipeg Commodity Exchange advertisements that ran in papers across the Prairies in late 1973, encouraging farmers to vote to keep the status quo for rapeseed sales. Source: Courtesy of ICE Futures US.

The results of the rapeseed vote were 52.7% for the status quo, 46.2% for single-desk marketing, and 1.1% undecided.⁵⁸ Rapeseed remained off the single desk. Both sides had spent large sums, with private market proponents outspending the cooperatives; historian Allan Levine has calculated the WCE “probably spent over \$100,000 in its advertising campaign” compared to \$60,000 spent by the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool.⁵⁹ As the rapeseed acreage in Western Canada increased, it provided Prairie farmers with the illusion of comparison between individual selling and cooperative single-desk marketing. It was an illusion because marketing rapeseed was different from marketing single-desk cereal grains. Cereal grains had a complex grading system to identify their quality and ideal usage, whereas rapeseed (or canola) grading had fewer characteristics and fewer grades.⁶⁰ Another important difference was that cereal grain uses (such as milling or brewing) required more precise characteristics (such as moisture and protein content) than the larger tolerances for canola regardless of its end-use. Reflecting the wider variations in use and grading, wheat prices varied more widely than canola. It was also difficult to compare canola prices with wheat prices as canola sold at a spot price while wheat sold through the CWB’s pools, so farmers received the pooled price for their wheat unlike the transitory spot price received for canola.⁶¹ Thus, considering canola a direct comparison to wheat overlooked significant differences in how these crops were graded, marketed, and used.

The End of Single-Desk Oats

The first significant challenge to single-desk grain marketing came as part of a wider pattern of deregulation and privatization enacted by Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservative government.⁶² In early 1989, Minister of State for Grains and Oilseeds and Minister of Western Economic Diversification Charles Mayer abruptly and unilaterally removed oats from the CWB’s mandate. An agronomist by training and former president of the Manitoba Beef Growers Association, Mayer represented the Manitoba riding of Lisgar-Marquette.⁶³ He justified his decision by calling oats a niche crop, unlike more widely cultivated wheat and barley. Instead of pursuing niche markets using the single desk, Mayer believed “the best way to do it is with

58 Levine, *Exchange*, p. 226. An estimate of the vote appears in *Hansard* but there was no discussion of exact figures. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons Debates, 29th Parl., 1st sess., vol. 8 (January 1974), p. 9228.

59 Levine, *Exchange*, p. 226.

60 See Rajshekhhar B. Hulasare, Digvir Jaya, and Bernie Dronzek, “Grain-Grading Systems,” in Amalendu Chakraverty et al., eds., *Handbook of Postharvest Technology: Cereals, Fruits, Vegetables, Tea, and Spices* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 2003), pp. 41–55; Canadian Grain Commission, *Official Grain Grading Guide* (Winnipeg: Canadian Grain Commission, 2020).

61 On the challenges of comparing a pooled price to a spot price on the private market, see John Morriss, “Canola Pool, Maybe. Wheat? Probably Not,” *Manitoba Cooperator*, August 11, 2011.

62 Allan Tupper and G. Bruce Doern describe the Mulroney government as “the first federal government in the post-war era committed to reducing the state-owned sector.” They note part of the support for privatizing came from public disagreement over the role of government in economic enterprises and with regard to government-owned companies not making profits. Allan Tupper and G. Bruce Doern, “Canadian Public Enterprise and Privatization,” in Tupper and Doern, *Privatization*, pp. 1, 10–11.

63 Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, *Serving Agriculture: Canada’s Ministers of Agriculture, 1867–1997* (Ottawa: Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 1998), p. 78.

individuals and private traders.”⁶⁴ The Alberta Grain Commission (AGC), formed in 1972 by the provincial government, opposed single-desk marketing and had been actively calling for the removal of oats, arguing that the CWB failed to market oats adequately, with the result that farmers received unreasonably low prices.⁶⁵ The Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association (WCWGA), formed in 1970 with the goal of improving grain sales by removing the single desk, also supported Mayer’s contention that “individuals and private traders” were best at accessing niche oat markets.⁶⁶ It celebrated the removal of oats from the CWB as a triumph for “market-oriented policy solutions” in agriculture.⁶⁷

Yet most farmers did not see the removal of oats as a positive change. Saskatchewan farmer Avery Sahl, chair of the farmer-elected CWB Advisory Committee, described the removal of oats as “a bombshell to producers.”⁶⁸ Mayer’s decision had been unexpected, as the Advisory Committee had received “no indication from oat producers that they were unhappy with the manner in which their oats were marketed.”⁶⁹ Indeed, a survey conducted by Decima Research on behalf of the Wheat Pools found 63% of Prairie farmers opposed Mayer’s actions.⁷⁰ Advisory Committee members, as elected representatives of Prairie farmers, held 24 meetings to consult their constituents, and the outcome of these meetings is instructive. As Sahl recounted, the meetings “were attended by over 3,000 producers [and] 22 of those meetings passed resolutions asking the government to reinstate oats under the Canadian Wheat Board.”⁷¹ Ten meetings also demanded Mayer’s resignation.⁷² Although the farmer-elected Advisory Committee was not explicitly political, it too called on Mayer to resign because, as Sahl explained, Committee members were “under pressure from producers and ... had no alternative in fulfilling our mandate.”⁷³ In response, Mayer attempted to present the committee’s role as unrelated to policy, declaring, “I don’t take what [the Advisory Committee] said with a lot of seriousness ... their role is to advise the wheat board—it’s not to advise the minister or government on policy.”⁷⁴ This division is significant, for Mayer held the cabinet position responsible for the CWB, and its mandate was to market grain in the best interests of Prairie farmers. The arbitrary way he announced the removal

64 Quoted in “Wheat Board Plans to Stop Handling Export Sale of Oats,” *Globe and Mail*, January 21, 1989.

65 Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, *Alberta Grain Commission: 25 Years of Service* (Edmonton: Alberta Agriculture, 1997); Alfred Thomas Neitsch, “Political Monopoly: A Study of the Progressive Conservative Association in Rural Alberta 1971–1996” (PhD dissertation, University of Ottawa, 2011), pp. 131–167.

66 The group changed its name from the Palliser Wheat Growers Association to the WCWGA in 1985. Ron Friesen, “Wheat Growers’ Group Formed to Protest CWB,” *Manitoba Cooperator*, January 14, 2010; Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Standing Committee on Agriculture, *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence* (hereafter Committee on Agriculture, *Minutes*), 34th Parl., 2nd sess. vol. 1, no. 17 (1989), p. 55.

67 “Media Kit,” Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association, accessed October 16, 2020, <https://wheatgrowers.ca/media/media-kit/>.

68 Committee on Agriculture, *Minutes*, 34th Parl., 2nd sess. vol. 1, no. 17, (June 1989), p. 11.

69 Committee on Agriculture, *Minutes*, 34th Parl., 2nd sess. vol. 1, no. 17 (1989), p. 5.

70 Henry Cybulski, “Survey Says Farmers Against Oat Policy,” *Calgary Herald*, May 9, 1989.

71 Committee on Agriculture, *Minutes*, 34th Parl., 2nd sess., vol. 1, no. 17 (1989), p. 6.

72 Committee on Agriculture, *Minutes*, 34th Parl., 2nd sess., vol. 1, no. 17 (1989), p. 10.

73 Committee on Agriculture, *Minutes*, 34th Parl., 2nd sess., vol. 1, no. 17 (1989), p. 11.

74 Quoted in “Mayer Scoffs at Resignation Call from Wheat Board Committee,” *Globe and Mail*, February 9, 1989.

of oats showed an unwillingness to engage with grain farmers' representatives. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Prairie farmers had grown accustomed to broad consultation processes over agriculture issues, especially ones that could significantly change their industry. Polling found 76% of Prairie farmers "resented not being consulted," and 13% disliked the manner in which Mayer had removed oats even though they supported the removal.⁷⁵ Fort Saskatchewan farmer Peter Galloway captured the sentiment of most farmers in a letter to the *Edmonton Journal*, asserting that "it remains the right of the producer to decide the future of his industry and the responsibility of government to implement those decisions."⁷⁶

With the CWB no longer involved in oat marketing, farmers scrambled to find private-market buyers. Although not as widely grown as wheat or canola, the sudden influx of oats into the market crashed oat prices, both immediately and on futures contracts. Farmers accused the WCE of insider trading, as high-volume oat futures trading had occurred with what they considered suspiciously good timing in relation to Mayer's announcement.⁷⁷ The WCE admitted that "someone had earlier obtained inside information from Mayer's office on oats marketing," but claimed "the information wasn't used in trading."⁷⁸ This finding was little comfort to oat farmers, especially when the final CWB oat pool had an unexpected \$32.4 million loss caused by the sudden decline in the value of its inventory. Consequently, farmers received less than they anticipated based on previous years' pools.⁷⁹ CWB spokesperson Brian Stacey attributed the loss to Canada's removal of oats from the single desk, which had contributed to a collapse of the international oat market.⁸⁰ The price crash disappointed farmers who expected oat prices to rise with a private market. As Saskatchewan NDP MP Rod Laporte noted, "There is no indication at all that the privatization or the removal of oats from the Canadian Wheat Board had any effect whatsoever other than to cause oats to go down."⁸¹ The abrupt, top-down decision to remove oats from the single desk indicated a federal policy shift in favour of deregulation. Made without widespread consultation and against the wishes of the majority of producers, it also demonstrated declining consideration for broadly based agrarian organizations that supported the single desk. With no realistic way to compel the Mulroney government to return oats to the single desk, farmers adjusted their cropping practices to reflect the new low prices: oat acreage decreased dramatically in the following years.⁸²

75 Cybulski, "Survey Says."

76 Peter Galloway, "Mayer Can't Dictate Marketing of Oats," *Edmonton Journal*, April 7, 1989.

77 This trading occurred prior to any official announcement but significantly benefited from the changes to the oat market that occurred after Mayer officially announced the removal of oats from the single desk, which is why farmers levelled their accusations of insider trading.

78 "Grain Sales Legitimate, Winnipeg Probe Finds," *Toronto Star*, May 9, 1989.

79 "Ruling Blamed for Oat Losses; Prices," *Edmonton Journal*, April 18, 1990.

80 "Ruling Blamed for Oat Losses."

81 Canada, Parliament, House of Commons Debates, 34th Parl., 2nd sess., vol. 10 (1990), p. 1388.

82 The seeded oat acreage dropped from 4 million acres in 1989 to 2.4 million acres by 1991. "Estimated Areas, Yield, Production, Average Farm Price and Total Farm Value of Principal Field Crops, in Metric and Imperial Units," Statistics Canada, Table 32-10-0359-01, <https://doi.org/10.25318/3210035901-eng>.

Barley Marketing and Border Running

The next major challenge to the single-desk marketing system was the Mulroney government's attempt to establish a continental barley market (CBM) in advance of the North American Free Trade Agreement. While the CBM ultimately failed, it further polarized Western Canada's agrarian community. In the debate, both sides relied on academic experts in economics to support their position while downplaying the expertise and experience of farmer-leaders. Indeed, economists were supposed to be dispassionate "scientific" experts who would be impartial in their evaluations despite economics shifting toward prioritization of neoliberal free-market approaches.⁸³ Similar to the 1973 rapeseed vote, supporters of the CBM argued that farmers should have the freedom to sell their grain when, where, and to whom they chose.

In 1993, Agriculture Minister Charles Mayer announced the CWB would no longer handle North American barley sales. He contended a CBM would give farmers a choice, resurrecting the idea that the RAC and the WCE had promoted during the rapeseed vote 20 years earlier that farmers lacked freedom with single-desk marketing.⁸⁴ The question of how feasible a CBM would be ignited a battle between experts. Before making a final decision, Mayer turned to a study by University of California economist Colin Carter.⁸⁵ Carter's study supported Mayer's assertion that a CBM would benefit farmers, concluding that they would experience "increased annual grain revenues of about \$52 million per year."⁸⁶ Farm groups that opposed single-desk marketing embraced Carter's study, while those supporting it—including the Wheat Pools—were skeptical and questioned many of the study's underlying assumptions. The Western Barley Growers Association (WBG), which supported the idea that farmers should have individual choice in marketing their crops, claimed that Carter illuminated how barley farmers could benefit from new marketing opportunities, although what precisely those opportunities were was vague. Presenting the single desk as the product of an older era, the president of the WBG predicted the CBM would show "that the wheat board system just doesn't work in today's world."⁸⁷ The WBG was supported by the Alberta government, with newly elected premier Ralph Klein declaring, "Too many rules and regulations hinder Alberta farmers' ability to compete in global markets."⁸⁸ On the other hand, the vice-president of the Alberta Wheat Pool described Carter's study as taking a more "philosophical" than practical approach, while the president of the National

83 For more discussion of the embrace of neoliberalism in economics, see Thomas I. Palley, "From Keynesianism to Neoliberalism: Shifting Paradigms in Economics," in Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston, eds., *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), pp. 20–29; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Rob Van Horn and Philip Mirowski, "The Rise of the Chicago School of Economics and the Birth of Neoliberalism," in Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 139–178.

84 "Grain Growers Reluctantly Prepare for New Rules on Barley Exports," *Edmonton Journal*, June 22, 1993.

85 For a published version, see Colin A. Carter, "The Economics of a Single North American Barley Market," *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, vol. 41, no. 3 (1993), pp. 243–255.

86 Carter, "Economics," p. 254.

87 Terry Johnson, "Birth of a Salesman," *Alberta Report*, July 19, 1993, p. 20.

88 Quoted in Susan Braungart, "Rules Hurting Farmers: Klein," *Calgary Herald*, March 30, 1993.

Farmers Union (NFU) warned that “the benefits it attributes to a continental barley market are fictional.”⁸⁹ Opponents of the CBM believed it would undermine cooperative single-desk marketing and lower barley prices to farmers’ detriment.

Similar to the rapeseed and oat marketing debates, pro-single-desk groups called for a farmers’ vote on the CBM. Although one former WBGA president conceded that a vote would be a fair way to gauge grower support for the measure, he also declared that “most farmers don’t understand the issues,” implying that he believed farmers did not know their own industry.⁹⁰ Such statements helped centre economists as impartial experts in marketing debates, which further alienated farmers from policy decisions due to their “non-expert” status and the implication that they were not objective. Carter’s academic credentials and privileged position gave him the appearance of an objective authority on the CBM, and Mayer described his study as “key” to his decision.⁹¹ By comparison, the federal government discounted or ignored predictions from the farmer-elected CWB Advisory Committee, farmers’ organizations, and the Wheat Pools about potential negative consequences. The Pools responded by hiring Andrew Schmitz, also an economist at the University of California, in conjunction with University of Saskatchewan economists Richard Gray and Alvin Ulrich, to examine the CBM scenario.⁹² Their preliminary work found “farmers would lose \$15 million a year.”⁹³ These opposing results demonstrated that despite economists being positioned as impartial “experts,” there was no consensus on how to evaluate grain marketing, and that underlying assumptions heavily influenced their conclusions.⁹⁴ In addition, single-desk supporters used the results of US trade challenges investigating whether the CWB underpriced Canadian grain or used other unfair practices to support their position that single-desk marketing was the best choice. The 1990 International Trade Commission investigation had found Canadian wheat sold at prices on par or better than US prices, while the 1992 US General Accounting Office review and the 1993 Bi-national Panel returned similar findings.⁹⁵ Although these investigations had focused on wheat, single-desk supporters argued the CWB used the same practices for barley and therefore any investigation of barley would reach similar conclusions.⁹⁶

With the CBM, Mayer expected farmers to choose between selling their barley into the American market through brokers and American-based grain elevators or

89 Quoted in “Farm Groups Slam Barley Study; Report Says Farmers, Not Wheat Board, Should Sell the Grain,” *Edmonton Journal*, April 20, 1993.

90 David Hueppelsheuser quoted in “Farm Groups Slam Barley Study.”

91 “Farm Policy Changes Spark Angry Response,” *Globe and Mail*, June 5, 1993.

92 For a published version, see Richard Gray, Alvin Ulrich, and Andrew Schmitz, “A Continental Barley Market: Where are the Gains?” *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, vol. 41, no. 3 (1993), pp. 257–270.

93 “Farm Groups Slam Barley Study.”

94 For a detailed explanation of how assumptions influenced results in the Carter study, see Harvey Brooks, “First, Let’s Assume We Have a Can Opener: An Analysis of the Economics of a Single North American Barley Market,” *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, vol. 41, no. 3 (1993), pp. 271–281.

95 For an overview of these and other trade challenges that returned similar results, see Andrew Schmitz and Hartley Furtan, *The Canadian Wheat Board: Marketing in the New Millennium* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2000), pp. 111–127.

96 A 1999 US Department of Commerce investigation into barley sales related to cattle feeding did return similar findings for barley as those for wheat. Schmitz and Furtan, *Canadian Wheat Board*, p. 126.

using the CWB. This dual market approach, which had first been floated during the rapeseed marketing vote, became the new reality for barley on August 1, 1993. The WPGA welcomed the CBM and framed farmers who used it as modern individualists “using more sophisticated marketing techniques ... to take advantage of the new system without losing the price security afforded by the old one.”⁹⁷ Its president described the CBM as making “all their options open.”⁹⁸



Figure 2. National Farmers Union members protest against the continental barley market in Winnipeg in July 1993. The sign in the back has a drawing of Agriculture Minister Charles Mayer with the words “Charlie Mayer: A Man Afraid of Democracy.” The sign in the foreground reads “I Want a Vote.”

Source: Courtesy of the National Farmers Union.

Beyond hiring economists to examine the CBM, the Wheat Pools worked politically with other agricultural organizations opposed to the CBM, which publicly demonstrated widespread opposition to it and the way the federal government had implemented it. In June 1993, a 21-member coalition of agriculture organizations, including the three Prairie Pools and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, released a statement denouncing Mayer and describing his actions as “an affront to the principles of open and consultative government, and to the very principle

97 “Direct Marketing May Cost Farmers Flexibility,” *Ottawa Citizen*, June 29, 1993.

98 Ted Cawkwell quoted in “Direct Marketing May Cost.”

of democracy itself.”⁹⁹ The NFU, one of the coalition members, had organized three days of protests in Winnipeg to show support for cooperative single-desk marketing.¹⁰⁰ When the federal government enacted the CBM, it did so through an order-in-council instead of by amending the Canadian Wheat Board Act. It was on this basis that the Pools launched a legal challenge against the government and sought an injunction to block the enactment of the CBM while the court decided. John Beke, the Pools’ council, described this tactic as “a last recourse,” but it was successful.¹⁰¹ A Federal Court judge ruled the order-in-council *ultra vires* on September 10, 1993.¹⁰² After just 40 days, the CBM ended.

As had occurred with oats in 1989, barley prices crashed with the CBM as Canadian barley flooded the North American market. Most notably, malt barley, which usually sold at a premium compared to other barley classes, no longer commanded a higher price than barley for animal feed. The CWB’s *Annual Report* noted the amount of barley entering into the market during the 40-day CBM filled “over half the demand [for barley] in the US market [and] US feed barley prices did not recover until months later.”¹⁰³ The CWB’s earnings on barley were lower than expected, in large part due to the short-lived CBM. For single-desk supporters, the CBM—in particular the loss of malt barley premiums and the overall price decline—showcased the continuing value of orderly marketing. Yet the experience did not deter farmers who wanted either a dual market or removal of the single desk: they felt 40 days had not been a sufficient test.

The 1993 CBM illustrates the widening divide between grain farmers and between Canadian political parties over agricultural marketing. It was also part of a broader political divide over economic and social issues, which the 1993 federal election results made obvious. Reform Party candidate Jake Hoeppner won the party’s only Manitoba seat by defeating Charles Mayer.¹⁰⁴ This victory was part of a wave of political change in Western Canada in the early 1990s, when many “safe” Conservative ridings elected Reform Party candidates.¹⁰⁵ Reform did not advocate for removal of the CWB but did propose to restructure it by allowing farmers “to bypass the board” to sell their grain as individuals.¹⁰⁶ Reform MP Leon Benoit emphasized that his party was “not talking about abolishing the wheat board but about making it more farmer responsive.”¹⁰⁷ Reform’s position was essentially the

99 Duncan Thorne, “Farm Groups Fume at Mayer,” *Edmonton Journal*, June 10, 1993.

100 Brenda Suderman, “Protesters Want Barley to Stay with Wheat Board,” *Western Producer*, July 15, 1993.

101 Quoted in “Barley Battle Looms, Saskatchewan Farm Group Says Wheat Board Undermined,” *Globe and Mail*, July 3, 1993.

102 *Saskatchewan Wheat Pool et al. v. Attorney General of Canada*, [1993] 107 DLR (4th) 190; 67 FTR 98; 17 Admin LR (2d) 243; [1993] FCJ No 902 (QL).

103 Canadian Wheat Board, *Annual Report 1993–94* (Winnipeg: Canadian Wheat Board, 1994), p. 7.

104 Jake Hoeppner received 41% of the vote compared to Mayer’s 24% and Liberal candidate Grant Johnson’s 27%. “Lisgar-Marquette, Manitoba,” Parliament of Canada, Elections and Ridings, accessed June 5, 2019, https://lop.parl.ca/sites/ParlInfo/default/en_CA/ElectionsRidings/Ridings/Profile?OrganizationId=4894.

105 Roger Gibbins, “Western Canada: ‘The West Wants In’,” in Kenneth McRoberts, ed., *Beyond Quebec: Taking Stock of Canada* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), pp. 45–60.

106 “Reform Party’s Wheat Board More Flexible, Farmer Oriented,” *Western Producer*, May 19, 1994.

107 “Reform Party’s Wheat Board.”

discredited dual market approach: farmers should be allowed to use the CWB or sell to the private trade.

The wave of successful Reform candidates in the 1993 federal election should not be interpreted as evidence of a shift in farmers' support for the single desk, as there were many other issues in play.¹⁰⁸ The 1994 CWB Advisory Committee election provides a clearer indication of the level of support for the single desk. Those results show an uneven split within the agrarian community over grain marketing. Ten of the 11 positions were won by candidates who supported the single desk, and pro-single-desk candidates defeated two of the three incumbents who had supported the CBM: one from Alberta and one from Manitoba. Dan Cutforth, the only pro-dual market candidate elected, won in southern Alberta, a district that had strongly supported the CBM and that possessed a robust domestic market for feed barley (driven by the cattle feedlot industry). Farm organizations that had touted the 1994 election as a proxy vote on the CBM pronounced the result to be evidence that the majority supported the single desk.¹⁰⁹ However, Advisory Committee members recognized that the CBM and court cases surrounding it had widened the divide over grain marketing within the Prairie farm community. Manitoba farmer Wilf Harder, who chaired the committee, warned that even though the 1994 election results had been positive, "I don't think we can just sit back and be complacent."¹¹⁰ Harder's words were prophetic.

The WBGA and the WCWGA remained opposed to single-desk marketing, as did the Alberta government. These groups gave the language of freedom—specifically the freedom to choose when and where to sell grain, often shortened to the catchphrase "freedom of choice"—a central role in their publicity campaigns. While they were ideologically opposed to cooperative orderly marketing, widespread support for it led them to argue that farmers should be allowed to choose between single-desk marketing or individual selling, instead of publicly taking the more extreme position that single-desk marketing should be eliminated entirely. The WBGA also campaigned (unsuccessfully) for a plebiscite on barley marketing on the basis that such a vote would be a fair and democratic way to decide the issue.

In 1995, the Alberta government decided to hold its own marketing plebiscite. In *Barley Country*, the magazine distributed to all Alberta barley farmers by the Alberta Barley Commission (ABC), chair Tim Harvie explained: "After having our rights to market our own grain removed from us for over 50 years, we are now going to be given a chance, as Alberta farmers, to vote on this issue."¹¹¹ The two-question plebiscite used the language of freedom that had long been associated

108 See Michael Lusztig and J. Matthew Wilson, "A New Right? Moral Issues and Partisan Change in Canada," *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 86, no. 1 (2005), pp. 109–128; Trevor Harrison and Harvey Krahn, "Populism and the Rise of the Reform Party in Alberta," *Canadian Review of Sociology*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1995), pp. 127–150; David Laycock, "Reforming Canadian Democracy? Institutions and Ideology in the Reform Party Project," *Canadian Journal of Political Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1994), pp. 213–247.

109 Adrian Ewins, "Farmers Say No to Dual Market," *Western Producer*, December 8, 1994.

110 Quoted in Ewins, "Farmers Say No."

111 Alberta Barley Commission, "Barley/Wheat Plebiscite: Get Your Ballot and Vote!" *Barley Country*, Fall 1995, p. 1. The Alberta Barley Commission was a check-off organization that received a portion of the value of any farmers' barley sales in Alberta. It had been established in 1991 to promote the marketing of barley.

with supporters of individualistic dual marketing, and went beyond the ABC's industry mandate by including a question about wheat marketing. The plebiscite asked: "Are you in favor of having the freedom to sell your barley to any buyer, including the Canadian Wheat Board, into domestic and export markets?" and "Are you in favor of having the freedom to sell your wheat to any buyer, including the Canadian Wheat Board, into domestic and export markets?"¹¹² Single-desk supporters denounced both questions as leading. They dismissed the results—66% in favour for barley and 62% for wheat—as unreliable and questioned the validity of the voters list.¹¹³ Progressive Conservative MLA Ron Hierath, who represented the southern riding of Taber-Warner and had put forward the motion for the plebiscite, defended it, saying, "I know the other side will say it was slanted, and in some respects it was [but] it was a direct question and I don't know how else you word it."¹¹⁴ The Alberta government argued the plebiscite results gave it a clear mandate to fight for marketing freedom and the end of the single desk; however, the federal government and most farm groups outside Alberta ignored it.

The widespread dismissal of the Alberta plebiscite results prompted a group of southern Alberta farmers to form an explicitly anti-single-desk organization: Farmers for Justice. While the ABC continued, as they put it, "daring to speak out against the tyranny of this [single-desk] system," FFJ took a more confrontational approach using civil disobedience techniques.¹¹⁵ FFJ member Rick Strankman characterized it as "the Viet Cong of farm organizations."¹¹⁶ FFJ had a small membership, but pro-dual market groups, including the WBG and the WCWGA, gave it strong support. FFJ's primary tactic was to have its members contravene export regulations by trucking grain from Canada into the US. These border-running activities were done without export permits, leading border officials to fine or charge FFJ members under the Customs Act, which FFJ would in turn publicize in an effort to build support for its cause. FFJ characterized its border runs as protests against the CWB, which had control over the international marketing of grains under its mandate, yet the charges laid in response fell under the Customs Act because the border runners did not have export licenses (which Canadian law required for all goods moved across the border). Although FFJ accused the CWB of being dictatorial, the charges its members faced did not stem from the CWB's marketing authority but rather their lack of export licenses. In September 1995, Reform Party MP Jake Hoeppner proposed that his wife, Fran, should make such a border run and then take the issue to the United Nations Human Rights Commission.¹¹⁷ While the Hoeppners did not carry through with this plan, having an MP publicly side with their cause further encouraged FFJ.

112 Adrian Ewins, "CWB Changes Expected to Stem from Marketing Vote," *Western Producer*, January 4, 1996.

113 Mairi MacLean, "Alberta Farmers Vote for Marketing Change," *Edmonton Journal*, December 7, 1995.

114 Quoted in Ewins, "CWB Changes Expected."

115 Alberta Barley Commission, "Barley and Wheat Plebiscite Facts vs. Fiction," *Barley Country*, Winter 1995, p. 3.

116 Quoted in Mairi MacLean, "Disgruntled Farmers Plan 'Mother of All Convoys': Farmers for Justice Will Lead 500 Grain Trucks to U.S. Buyers," *Calgary Herald*, February 15, 1997.

117 Roberta Rampton, "Reform MP May Take Complaints on CWB to United Nations," *Western Producer*, September 21, 1995.

Manitoba farmer Andrew “Andy” McMechan became the most publicly prominent FFJ member because he accrued the most charges and received multiple convictions. In 1996, a judge convicted McMechan of failing to surrender his vehicle and breaking the Immigration and Customs Acts as well as the Criminal Code.¹¹⁸ During his short incarceration, FFJ appealed to Amnesty International to list him as a political prisoner, but the human rights organization refused.¹¹⁹ The individualist rhetoric of FFJ and like-minded organizations was not new, but heightened, framing the CWB’s single-desk marketing mandate as an unfair restriction of farmers’ freedom of choice. Their championing of individual freedom was combined with a distrust of government, as they saw the CWB as government overreach. Alberta farmer Rick Strankman explained that participation in FFJ was “my way of saying ‘no’ to the bureaucracy that’s encroaching on all our liberties.”¹²⁰ Their members rejected all evidence of the benefits of single-desk marketing and instead focused on a perceived loss of freedom due to the regulation of grain marketing. In his judgment on McMechan’s case, Justice B. D. Giesbrecht was unsympathetic toward such reasoning, noting that “to liken a grain marketing arrangement put in place at the request of a majority of farmers to a system of apartheid or government sanctioned segregation is an insult to the Mandelas of this world and trivializes the nobility of their struggles.”¹²¹ The judge reminded McMechan, and by extension his supporters, that “unless and until he succeeds in changing the law, he must obey it along with everyone else.”¹²² The judge issued this warning because McMechan’s arrest had spurred FFJ to encourage members to follow in his footsteps. When the Crown first tried McMechan, it asked for a strong sentence to “deter other farmers,” but Judge David Copleman suggested the case indicated a need for “Parliament to review the law.”¹²³ Though Copleman found McMechan guilty, his comments encouraged FFJ’s belief in the effectiveness of border running. So too did the national media’s reporting of the story as a “David and Goliath case,” where the CWB and Liberal minister of agriculture Ralph Goodale were attempting to stifle business-minded farmers’ individual freedom.¹²⁴

In response to McMechan’s protracted court battles, FFJ organized a 39-person convoy for a mass border run in spring 1996.¹²⁵ Though some of its participants were

118 A judge found McMechan guilty of breaking section 94.1(f) of the Immigration Act, sections 11, 31, and 153(c) of the Customs Act, and section 145.3 of the Criminal Code three times. McMechan appealed unsuccessfully. A summary of the judgments appears in the appeal ruling: *R. v. McMechan (A.M.)*, [1997] 117 Man R (2d) 291—35 WCB (2d) 37. See also *R. v. McMechan (A.) and Cairns (W.)*, [1996] 111 Man R (2d) 211; and *R. v. McMechan (A. M.)*, [1998] 126 Man R (2d) 302; 167 WAC 302.

119 “Protester Wants Amnesty to Help Jailed Farmers,” *Star Phoenix*, December 5, 1996.

120 Quoted in Shafer Parker Jr., “Backs to the Wall, But Fighting On,” *Alberta Report*, December 23, 1996, p. 14.

121 Quoted in Adrian Ewins, “Anti-Wheat Board Activists Get More Jail Time, Stern Scolding,” *Western Producer*, October 17, 1996.

122 Ewins, “Anti-Wheat Board.”

123 Nelle Oosteron, “Customs Aims to Deter Growing Problem of Illegal Grain Exports,” *Ottawa Citizen*, March 26, 1996.

124 *The National*, “Canadian Wheat Board,” aired May 17, 1996, on CBC.

125 There was a history of Canadian farmers using convoys for protests, as Bradley and Hadlaw show elsewhere in this special issue. See Ben Bradley and Jan Hadlaw, “Fruitleggers, Fruit Police, and British Columbia’s Black Market in Orchard Fruit, 1935–1975,” *Histoire sociale/Social History*, vol. 54, no. 111 (Septembre/September 2021), pp. 359–386. See also Ryan O’Connor, “Agrarian Protest and Provincial Politics: Prince

charged with breaking the Customs Act, they were delighted by Alberta premier Ralph Klein's decision to investigate the possibility of sending them legal counsel since he viewed federal grain marketing laws as "bad."¹²⁶ Buoyed by Klein's public support and by the ABC leading a court challenge to the CWB based on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, FFJ organized two more border-running protests.¹²⁷ The results were predictable: most participants were charged and fined for violating the Customs Act. The border-run at Coutts, Alberta, resulted in charges for exporting grain without a license and vehicle seizures by customs agents. Most who were convicted chose to pay fines, but as a "symbolic act of defiance," 13 FFJ members opted to go to jail instead.¹²⁸ On the day they were remanded, FFJ held the Lethbridge rally where Ralph Klein spoke and linked their cause to Western alienation.¹²⁹

Ron Duffy, one of the farmers charged in the summer of 1996, declared to reporters, "What the government is doing is unjust, illegal, immoral and unethical."¹³⁰ His assessment built on the rhetoric that the single-desk system hindered individual freedom and shows the growing emphasis on grain marketing as inherently reflecting moral choice. Many FFJ members linked the political and economic aspects of their actions with being morally righteous because they were trying to win "freedom of choice" by removing the single-desk system. For example, Tom Jackson and Gerald Blerot both described their protests as motivated by a desire to set a good example for their children. Jackson said he had to "stand up and make a point about public wickedness. If I don't, what will be left of this country for my kids?"¹³¹ Such reasoning shows how the polarization of the debate over grain marketing had turned it from an economic question to a moral choice. It also echoes the wider religiously influenced politics of the Reform Party, for which southern Alberta was a crucial stronghold. Its leader, Preston Manning, constructed party policies around what political scientist Clark Banack has referred to as a belief that "the divine purpose of the state was to protect the freedom of the individual," in both a moral

Edward Island and the 1971 National Farmers Union Highway Demonstration," *Acadiensis*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2008), pp. 31–55.

126 Ashely Geddes and Donald Campbell, "Klein Slams Grain Law," *Calgary Herald*, April 25, 1996.

127 The Alberta Barley Commission, Western Barley Growers Association, and a group of individual farmers, including lead plaintiff Ron Archibald and notable anti-single-desk farmers Brian Otto and James Palliser, initiated the Charter challenge to the CWB. Justice Francis Muldoon found against the plaintiffs. He noted the question of the CWB "is quintessentially a political problem" so the Charter did not apply. He also emphasized Parliament had the power of "freeing or regulating the market [as] the government see[s] fit." *Archibald v. Canada*, [1997] 3 FC 335.

128 Robert Remington, "Farmers 'Want to Go to Jail in the Worst Way': Wheat Board Protest," *National Post*, October 24, 2002.

129 In Canada, Western alienation is the regionally-based idea that the federal government treats the western provinces (primarily Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba although British Columbia is sometimes included) unfairly and makes them support central Canada (Ontario and Quebec) at their expense. This regional alienation of the Prairie West appeared in left-wing populist movements during the early part of the twentieth century but became strongly associated with right-wing populist movements in the later part of the twentieth century. The ideology of western alienation is particularly high-profile in Alberta. For greater discussion see Gibbins, "Western Canada"; Doreen Barrie, *The Other Alberta: Decoding a Political Enigma* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2006); and Clark Banack, "Ethnography and Political Opinion: Identity, Alienation and Anti-establishmentarianism in Rural Alberta," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 51, no. 1 (2020), pp. 1–22.

130 Janet Pierce, "Central Alberta Farmers Join CWB Battle," *Central Alberta Advisor*, June 11, 1996.

131 "The Gloves Come Off in the Grain War," *Western Report*, April 29, 1996, p. 18.

and economic sense.¹³² From this perspective, the cooperative single-desk CWB infringed on both types of freedom.

Single-desk proponents did not adopt a similar overt religious inflection for their arguments. Instead, they argued that by focusing on individual profit over working cooperatively, FFJ members were acting selfishly by not considering the profitable structure provided by marketing through the single desk that all farmers accessed. Moreover, they were ignoring the marketing preferences of the majority of Prairie farmers, which threatened what Saskatchewan farmer Pat Gabriel described as “our democratic system for marketing our own commodities.”¹³³ FFJ’s individualistic focus was in direct opposition to the CWB’s history of being created and perpetuated by the federal government at the behest of Prairie farmers. As J. Robidoux wrote in a letter to the *Western Producer*, the major Prairie agricultural newspaper, “Farmers for Justice baloney! Their name should be Farmers for Just Us.”¹³⁴

Conclusion

Anti-single-desk activists’ gradual reframing of grain marketing as a moral choice, combined with their rhetoric of individual freedom, polarized the orderly marketing debate. The 1973 rapeseed vote highlighted the narrative that farmers needed freedom as individual sellers. The 1993 CBM deepened the divide between farmers who supported cooperative single-desk marketing and those who wanted individual selling because, as Alberta farmer Steve Bothi explained, the divide was between “two different strategies that are diametrically opposed to each other.”¹³⁵ The FFJ’s actions in the mid- and late 1990s further shifted the grain marketing debate from one driven by economic policy to one focused on ideological and moral values, where government marketing regulations supposedly curtailed individual freedom. The question of how best to market Prairie grain remained hotly debated into the 2000s, with the rhetoric of freedom versus cooperation at its heart. The two sides also remained unevenly split, with support for the single desk remaining consistently high despite increased publicity around the issue. In 1998, the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien amended the Canadian Wheat Board Act so that a CEO and 15-person board of directors ran the CWB, with farmers retaining direct involvement by electing 10 of the directors.¹³⁶ Much like the Advisory Committee elections in prior years, grain farmers consistently elected a majority of candidates who supported single-desk marketing, evidencing strong albeit quiet support among Prairie grain farmers for the single-desk system. Indeed, a year prior to the Act’s amendment, a two-question federal government barley marketing plebiscite had demonstrated farmer support for the single desk with 63% of farmers voting in

132 Clark Banack, *God’s Province: Evangelical Christianity, Political Thought, and Conservatism in Alberta* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), p. 180.

133 Joanne Paulson, “NFU Stand Will Destroy Wheat Board, MP Says,” *Star Phoenix*, March 20, 1997; “Pro-Wheat Board Farmers Rally,” *Western Producer*, August 1, 1996.

134 J. Robidoux, “Unjust Farmers,” *Western Producer*, November 23, 1995.

135 Janet Pierce, “Farmers Go to Legislature in Support of Wheat Board,” *Central Alberta Advisor*, August 20, 1996.

136 Sonya Dakers and Jean-Denis Fréchette, *The Grain Industry in Canada* (Ottawa: Parliamentary Research Branch, 1998), pp. 5–9.

favour.¹³⁷ Yet these elections and increased options for using the CWB failed to appease ideological opponents of the single desk.

On October 18, 2011, Stephen Harper's Conservative government embraced the rhetoric of farmer freedom when it tabled the Marketing Freedom for Grain Farmers Act to end the single-desk CWB.¹³⁸ Although Prairie grain farmers demanded a vote on the fate of the CWB, Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz refused. He argued the government's actions were valid because it was a majority government. A mail-in plebiscite conducted by Meyers Norris Penny resulted in 60% of grain farmers voting in favour of the single-desk CWB.¹³⁹ Despite this result, the CWB's single desk officially ended August 1, 2012. After 69 years, control of Prairie grain sales reverted to the private trade.¹⁴⁰

Ultimately, the end of the single desk resulted from the rising challenge posed by the emotionally fraught ideology of individual freedom to cooperative marketing, which no longer carried the same emotional resonance. Single-desk proponents supported government involvement in and regulation of the market—a position at odds with the neoliberal emphasis on deregulated agricultural markets that had been becoming more politically influential since the 1970s. Moreover, it was at odds with the way anti-single-desk farmers identified themselves as business-savvy individual sellers who did not require government support within the global grain trade. These farmers valued individual choice and did not identify with the historical cooperative mindset of the pro-single-desk farmers that grain farmers needed to work together for their mutual betterment within the global grain trade. Anti-single-desk farmers diverged from an established Prairie agrarian tradition of cooperative action, working together only to gain the ability to sell their grain alone. Increasingly wrapped in the language of “freedom,” and drawing support from powerful business and political interests, their prioritization of individualistic relations with the market was a manifestation of the larger socio-economic shift toward neoliberalism in late twentieth-century Canada.

137 Grace Skogstad, “The Liberal Party, Insensitivity, and Western Canadian Agriculture: Does the Account Still Stand Up?” in Hans Michelmann and Cristine de Clercy, eds., *Continuity and Change in Canadian Politics: Essays in Honour of David E. Smith* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 238; “Upshall Says Barley Vote Indicates Producer Confidence in the CWB,” Government of Saskatchewan, March 26, 1997, <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/1997/march/26/upshall-says-barley-vote-indicates-producer-confidence-in-the-cwb>.

138 “The Marketing Freedom for Grain Farmers Act,” Government of Canada, last modified August 1, 2012, <https://www.canada.ca/en/news/archive/2012/08/marketing-freedom-grain-farmers-act.html>.

139 Mia Rabson, “Majority of Wheat Growers Vote to Keep CWB as Sole Marketing Agent,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, September 12, 2011.

140 “Marketing Freedom for Grain Farmers Act.”

