

Election 2011 - Truth and the Consequences for Agriculture

By Joan Brady

As I watched the recent leader's debate, I remarked to my husband that the upcoming election was all about truth in more ways than one. The election was called following the non-confidence vote which resulted from the Harper Governments' contempt of Parliament by refusing to share information that opposition members said they needed to properly assess legislation put before them. The opposition leaders again and again referred to the lack of trustworthiness of the Harper Government. In response, Harper countered, often preceding his comments with phrases like; "reality is quite different", "it is simply not correct", "based on realistic facts" and my favorite "it is simply not the truth".

The leaders framed their statements according to their own perception of truth, showing their political prowess again and again by presenting their platforms regardless of the questions posed. I was left with a question, "what is truth and how does my perception flavour it?" Also, "how can perception influence reality, will it not always overpower the way we would prefer things to be?"

The same thoughts and reflections have surfaced over the past few months as I have attended various agriculturally oriented events. So often, Agriculture is presented only as an economic driver. It certainly reinforces the importance of agriculture to the Canadian economy when we reflect on agriculture generating \$44.6 billion in gross cash receipts in 2009 and as the source of 1 in 7 jobs in Canada. But is that the whole picture? Average realized farm incomes for 2010 were projected at or below \$0 at the beginning of this year. Although, some price rallies, particularly in the grains and oilseeds sector, have caused 2010, thankfully, to be better than first predicted, but many other commodities and sectors did not see similar increases.

Agriculture is an important contributor to the Canadian economy -- and it is on a shaky foundation. Unless the extent of the farm income crisis is analyzed, understood and addressed, then proposed platforms that promise food safety, food security, innovation and research, and more global trade cannot be successful. Low farm incomes have resulted directly in a huge increase in farm debt which will become a virtual firestorm if interest rates go up.

The current preoccupation with global trade as reflected in many of the parties' platforms is counterproductive if trade is not considered in conjunction with a strong, stable domestic market. Feeding Canadians first not only gives us a secure food supply, it also gives the industry the critical mass and the infrastructure needed to meet the opportunities in the global market place. Increases in global trade have not added anything to the bottom line on the farm. When we consider that much of the increase in exports has been matched with increases in imports, the conclusion can only be that we are trading away our domestic food supply. Food security and food sovereignty are threatened as a result.

As I reflect on my choices as a voter, I think about truth and politics and hope that they are not mutually exclusive. I see a great deal of positive motion aimed at food and farming and I am encouraged. At the same time, I am concerned about the lack of full disclosure, and about agendas and platforms that do not consider the direct impact of policies on farmers, their assets and their ability to feed Canadians.

My particular reality is quite different from one which focuses on global trade. It is simply not correct to assume that competitiveness in a global market will necessarily put more money in farmers' pockets. Based on realistic facts and solid research, farm incomes have been virtually unchanged since 1970, while the value of farm products has steadily increased. Nearly all of that gain has paid out to other links in the chain. Finally it is simply not the truth that gross farm income and farmers' ability to access credit is the proper measure of the health of Canada's food system.

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