Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice
A national faith-based organization founded in support of Unitarian values
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November 21, 2011

The Hon. Gerry Ritz,
Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board and Minister of Agriculture

The Rt. Hon. Stephen Harper,
Prime Minister of Canada,

Dear Hon. Gerry Ritz and Hon. Stephen Harper;

I am writing on behalf of the Canadian Unitarians For Social Justice to express our concerns about your approach to the Canadian Wheat Board. We want to know why you have imposed closure on the house so that there can be no debate on this issue. Canadian Unitarians affirm the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in society and especially in parliament. Is Canada a democracy or not under your regime?

We are shocked that the Government of Canada is ignoring the law under the Canadian Wheat Board Act, an act of the Canadian Parliament, that before any substantive changes are made to the single desk authority of the Canadian Wheat Board there must be a farmer vote to approve such a change. Since when is the Government of Canada exempt from obeying the laws of Canada?

The single desk authority of the Canadian Wheat Board gives farmers a degree of control over how much overall is produced and therefore what price each farmer can get for their grain. We are aware that there are farmers who would prefer to sell their own grain in an open market, but they are in a minority as was demonstrated by the farmer plebiscite conducted by the Wheat Board this summer. If you are not satisfied with the quality of that vote, then the Government of Canada should follow the law and hold its own plebiscite. The majority know that there is, in fact, no such thing as an open market. A few big companies will control the supply chain from production to retail, and farmers will be reduced to employees working for someone living on the other side of the world.

The destruction of the Wheat Board will deal a death blow to the family farm. A voluntary wheat board is unlikely to work. Big companies with deep pockets will pay well to draw farmers away from a voluntary board. When the voluntary board is gone, prices will drop. Canadian farmers, have lots of experience dealing with big companies who hold all the cards. Canadian farmers will lose control of the decisions as to what they grow, how they grow it, and where it goes. These decisions will no longer be made in the interests of farmers and Canadian consumers, but will be made for the profit of people who care nothing for our well being or our food security.

We believe the Government of Canada should have in its agricultural policy a primary focus on food security for all Canadians developed in cooperation with Canadian farmers.

Given that we are now in a period that is post peak oil, and given that we can reasonably expect oil to become more and more expensive as there is less and less available, we believe that the Government of Canada should be working with farmers to make the transition to using much less oil in our food system. This would mean a less globalized approach to agriculture and a more localized approach with more small-scale farming. Under this scenario, it would be more important to have farmers who are grounded in the land, and close to their local communities. The killing of the Canadian Wheat Board is the opposite approach to what is needed.

Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice:

- Recognize the billions of dollars of economic value that the CWB annually creates for farmers, rural communities, short line railroads and the whole of Canada through its superior marketing ability, capacity to defend Canadian interests in trade disputes, and the fact that it returns all net proceeds from sales to farmers.
- Are proud of the strong international reputation for quality and reliability that Canadian wheat and barley have, which is a direct result of the CWB and its companion institutions, Canadian International Grains Institute and the Canadian Grain Commission.
- Deplore the federal government's stated intention to deny the outcome of the recent voluntary plebiscite where 62% of farmers voted in favour of keeping the single desk for wheat and 51% supported keeping it for barley.
- Deplore the transfer of wealth created by farmers for farmers to big, private, often foreign-owned grain companies that Bill C-18 will achieve.

We therefore call upon the federal government to immediately stop undermining the single desk authority of the CWB. If any changes to the Board are contemplated, we insist that the federal government comply with the Canadian Wheat Board Act Section 47.1 which requires a binding plebiscite (vote) of farmers before any substantive change to its single desk authority is implemented.

In faith,

Rev. Frances Deverell
President,
Canadian Unitarians For Social Justice

Cc The Hon. Nicole Turmel, Leader of the Official Opposition
Bob Rae, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada
Elizabeth May, Leader of the Green Party of Canada