

Opinion: Lies, dam(n) lies, and Canadian milk



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SUSAN WALSH / THE ASSOCIATED

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When I was a little girl, I had a friend who was seriously afraid of clowns. We had gone

together to the circus one day and this big clown with orange hair, a red nose and a big fat belly started shouting at us, gesturing wildly and waving his tiny little hands. She fled in tears and that was the end of our day at the circus. At the time, I thought she was silly to be afraid. Since last November, my friend's coulrophobia — fear of clowns — makes more and more sense.

In the reality show circus that has become the hallmark of Donald Trump's presidency, a new euphemism — “alt-facts” — has emerged. A lie by any other name, “alternative truth” is the new administration's spin for Trump's shoot-from-the-lip populist bombast — served up with a large side of arrogance — to an increasingly stunned world.

Several weeks ago, it was Canada's turn to be shocked. In a fiery speech to Wisconsin factory workers, Trump launched a scathing attack on Canada's dairy farmers.

It was no coincidence that this happened in Wisconsin, America's top cheese-producing state. A week or so earlier, Wisconsin's Grassland Dairy announced they would cut ties with 75 local dairy farmers, sourcing milk instead from their own 5,000-cow herd.

Jumping on the plight of these Wisconsin farmers like fleas to a dog, Trump threw his hands in the air and pointed north — blaming Canada: “Some very unfair things have happened to our dairy farmers ... and we're going to start working on that.”

Two days later, from his Oval Office, Trump doubled down his attack. Charging that American farmers in Wisconsin and New York State “are being put out of business” because “rules, regulations, different things have changed” in Canada (reality check: they have NOT), he cranked up the rhetoric: “What they've done to our dairy farm workers is a disgrace. It's a disgrace.”

Yes, well ... the disgrace, of course, is Trump's ignorance. The problems facing America's dairy sector are directly related to global market conditions: an increased demand for butterfat has resulted in massive surpluses of milk protein. Exacerbated by rapid concentration at the processing level, farmer returns have been below production costs for much of the past decade.

A stronger American dollar and a loss of export markets in China have worsened the situation for American farmers. America is awash in surplus milk as farmers milk more and more cows to pay the bills. Today in America, a mere four per cent of farms produce 52 per cent of the milk, and 40 per cent of farms milk more than 1,000 cows a day. American taxpayers foot the bill with massive government subsidies to keep the boat afloat.

In contrast, Canada's milk producers are the only farmers in the world who have consistently — for over 40 years — received a return from the market that covers production costs. Not one cent of taxpayer subsidy goes to support Canada's supply management system. Canada's dairy sector is based on vibrant family farms. Milk prices paid by Canadian consumers are among the lowest in the world.

Precipitating Trump's attack was a reduction in U.S. exports of "diafiltered milk" — a product created by U.S. processors a few years back specifically to get around Canada's trade regulations. Because diafiltered "milk" (an 85-per-cent protein slurry — you would never put this on your cereal!) did not exist when the tariff lines were drawn, it began entering Canada, duty free, as a milk protein, displacing Canadian milk in cheese manufacturing and harming the interests of Canadian farmers.

In response, Canadian dairy farmers and processors implemented a national ingredients strategy to improve the price competitiveness of Canadian milk, reducing the market for American diafiltered milk.

In response to Trump's provocative allegations, Canada's

Ambassador to the U.S. David MacNaughton was quick off the mark. “Canada is not a contributor to the overproduction problem,” he said, citing a USDA report that shows “poor results in the U.S. sector are due to U.S. and global overproduction.”

Canada’s Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland assured Trump Canada is “fully compliant with all our NAFTA and WTO commitments...”

Unfettered by facts, Trump vows he will renegotiate NAFTA to “fix” the problems facing America’s dairy farmers, promising (of course!) that the results will be “fantastic.”

Best approach to a scary clown? Stand him down. Renegotiate NAFTA, Donald? Bring it. Canada has some fixing of our own to do. Topping the list is exempting water (Harmonized Commodity Coding System Tariff Item 22.01.9) from both the FTA and NAFTA. Before B.C.’s Site C dam — being built just where needed to bring water from Alaska and Canada across the top of the Rocky Mountains and south into America’s central Midwest — drains Canada dry.

Wendy Holm is a retired agrologist and prize-winning farm columnist.

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Lyle Craver · North Vancouver, British Columbia

excellent article - and let us be sure to note that there's a \$300 million dairy surplus in the US's favor at the present time. Given the degree of US subsidies this is hardly surprising though one wonders why the immediate reaction isn't to slap an anti-dumping tariff on - but then Canadians don't do that kind of thing do we?

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Dorwin Sr Anderson

Couldn't agree more re the writer's opinion.

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Don't forget, we too, here in Canada, have huge loads of "alternate truth" and "fake news". It is served up by our ridiculous liberal government and their ever-faithful lap-dog, the CBC ! The author comes across as grossly smug and sanctimonious, accusing the United States of lies and bombast..... You want lies, bombast and outright hate ? Look no further than Ottawa !

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