



# BIG GREEN HAT...

Eugene Whelan as seen from the opposition camp in 1974...

IT IS A MEASURE of the man that all you have to say to a Canadian farmer is “the guy in the big green hat” and they immediately know who you mean. Eugene Whelan, ‘Gene’ to his friends, was in this agrologist’s mind Canada’s finest agriculture minister. Elected as a rookie Member of Parliament in 1962, he was appointed Canada’s Agriculture Minister in 1972.

I first met Whelan in 1974. At 26, I’d just landed a job in Ottawa, keen to take on supply management and defend the public interest in farm policy based on “competition and free trade”. Seated at the right hand of the indomitable Mrs. Plumptre, my job as her “chicken and egg gal” was to load up the ammo as she and Eugene Whelan battled it out on the public stage.

And what a stage it was. I’d seen that same look and thundering determination only once before: glimpsed quickly over my shoulder as I took an unfortunate but very fast shortcut thru a dairy pasture.

This time, Beryl and Gene both had it. It was a

clash of titans... and the media loved it.

Close up and personal, I watched as an embattled Whelan defended farmers’ rights to supply management to the media and in the House. I was on the Hill in ’76 when he was pelted with milk by Quebec dairy farmers. Ever at Beryl’s back, I cheered her on as she rode into battle, time and again, my reports and briefings her armour.

But what did I know? Straight out of an honours masters in agricultural economics from UBC, I’d been fed four years of the very same simplistic, neo-classical dreck so in vogue with right-wing pundits and Liberal leadership wanna-be’s today.

It took only a few years of paying attention in the real world (much longer to write about it; see Confessions of an Economist, July 2008, WDF) to understand that I was totally wrong and Gene was totally right: supply management gives farmers needed power in the marketplace to extract fair prices from concentrated agri-food players, maintain a healthy, independent family-farm sector, contribute to a sustainable community and ensure the Canadian consumer is provided with a stable supply of local, safe, affordable and trace-

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able food products.

From then on, Eugene and I were friends. I volunteered to be his "driver" whenever I could – picking him up from airports and ferrying him about. I invited his participation at gatherings (Agrologists, Canadian Farm Writers). We shared a number of fine dinners together, and his messages on my voice-mail remain treasured and un-erased.

Back in the 70s, as I was sitting around those inter-departmental tables, Whelan's strength in Caucus was the stuff of legend and still is. Gene demanded and got cabinet support for good farm policy because he could deliver the farm vote. He could deliver the farm vote because he defended farmers' interests. He defended farmers' interests because he understood the importance of agriculture as a primary sector, and of food security as a national priority.

As Canada's ambassador to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Whelan's call for national food policy sovereignty ruffled American feathers but won the support of many countries. In the spring of 2008, before the collapse of the DOHA

Round, he wrote WTO Director Pascal Lamy that food should be "hands-off" for the WTO and that it was high time they shifted focus from food to energy. With an oil industry operating in a manner "contrary to everything the WTO is supposed to stand for", Whelan argued "Is it a WTO policy to leave this group of robbers alone? Are they untouchables?...If this is the case, the WTO should be dissolved."

From a humble beginning and wearing the hat of a farmer, Whelan was a municipal politician, an elected Member of Parliament, a Trudeau-appointed Minister, a Senator and finally our ambassador to the FAO. In that time, he did many admirable and noteworthy things.

To this Agrologist, supply management is Whelan's policy centerpiece. As farmers around the world are buffeted and broken by low prices and unfair contracts, and market bullies want to know more about SM policy, opportunistic knaves in our own country are out to destroy it. With global processors - busy promising investors the moon to expand deriv-

ative markets - at their back.

We will never have another agriculture minister like Whelan. But we need to remember from him what one looks like so we can try for something better next time around. And until then, it's up to farmers to defend Canada's right as a sovereign nation to construct our own policies to sustain and preserve the interests of our own farmers and our own communities.

This defense must come from all SM commodities standing together. But the Canadian Holstein is undoubtedly the poster child. Milk is a motherhood issue - it is our FIRST FOOD. If Canadians cannot come up to speed, separate the dreck from the truth and rally together to defend Canada's cows and their feathered friends, food sustainability and food sovereignty is indeed beyond our reach as a nation.

Thank you Gene for your leadership and vision. Your eyes will ever hover over my shoulder as I write...You stood up for farmers everywhere you went, and farmers stood up for you.

No one but you can fill that big green hat... **D**



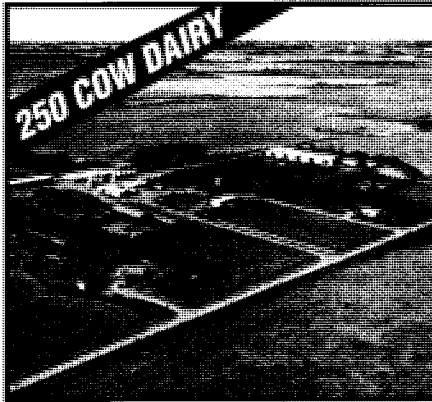
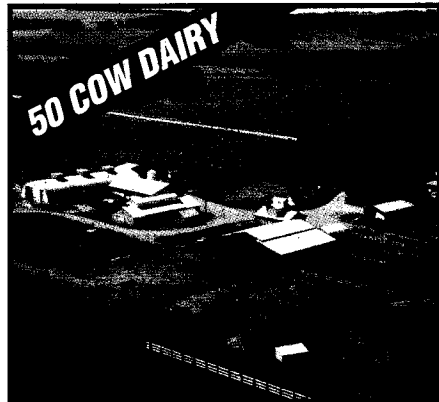
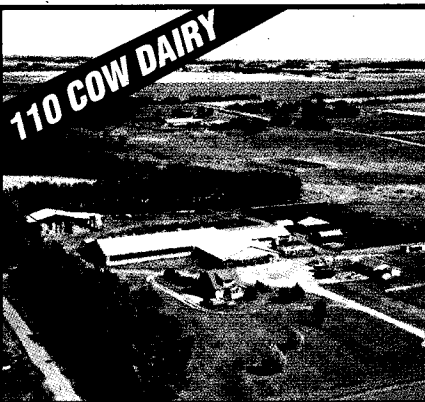
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