



Comments on the Federal Electoral Platforms - Agriculture and Food: Few Hits, Many Misses

Bob Seguin, Janalee Sweetland, Kate Stiefelmeyer, and Al Mussell

Introduction

With less than a week to go before the May 2nd Federal Election vote, the George Morris Centre has examined the party platforms on the agriculture and food sectors. As part of our ongoing analyses of the challenges and opportunities facing the Canada's agri-products sector, the following is a brief summary of the five major Canadian political parties' agriculture and food platforms, coupled with a short commentary on the policies, the variability or similarity of the platforms, and the hits (few) and misses (many) for Canadian agriculture and food policy.

Although each of the national political parties' outlines their platforms for the agri-products sector differently, there are common themes in all five platforms, summarized in the table below. These themes include:

- Income Support and Risk Management;
- Farm Succession/Young Farmers;
- International Agriculture Trade Policy;
- Environmental Policies and Agriculture;
- Food Safety and Inspection;
- Regulated Marketing: Supply Management/Canadian Wheat Board;
- Local Food

Within each of these broad themes, each party has outlined its position on the broad topic or on several specific issues within it.

Analysis

Overall, despite the claims by each of the national parties on their major differences of views/policies/actions across the overall political spectrum, there are very few major differences between them. As expected, the Bloc Quebecois position on most of these issues focuses upon Quebec concerns, which may not apply across Canada, while the Green Party has a continuous environmental sustainability focus throughout its policy positions.

These similar viewpoints reflect a remarkable consistency in approach by the major parties and on the desired solutions. Not surprisingly, the views do not vary too far from the views of most national farm/food groups, nor from key farm groups with specific political sensitivities, such as on supply management. This reveals the willingness of the major parties to listen to (if not always understand) the national and regional agri-food issues, and to reassure farm groups and their memberships of their support of the status quo, with modest variations.

Policy “Hits”

It is not surprising then that the policy positions outlined remain at a very general level with minimal, if any, discussion or comment on implementation, eligibility or other program details. The Conservative Party’s proposal for a \$50M fund for the development and commercialization of local farm-based innovation; and the Liberal Party’s \$80M Buy Local Fund would both benefit from increased details including specifics on the longer term goals, measures, and program criteria to determine if such initiatives would substantially alter the current national farm policy landscape. Still, to a limited extent both of these parties are looking modestly beyond the traditional mix of income support, regulated marketing, and food safety programming.

The similar positions advocated by the five parties on Environmental Farm Plans, and the sustained national consensus to do more on such plans at the farm level is one area of interest that reflects a changing Canadian farm community perspective. This initiative has grown substantially over the last 20 years and indicates both a more proactive approach by Canadian farmers to address some of the environmental issues facing Canadian agriculture, and a determination to continue with this program vehicle to address such issues. However, measures of success and failure have not yet been well developed.

Another “hit” would be the commentary on international trade policy and the agri-food sector by all five parties. Here there are slight differences in approach and we would raise some questions about the effectiveness and focus on the key issues. The Conservative Party platform comments favourably about its existing commitment to the Market Access Secretariat/Canadian Trade Commissioner Service, while the Liberal Party platform acknowledges the need to improve coordination among the key departments involved in agri-food trade. Neither position outlines desired goals in detail, current effectiveness or what must change. An intriguing similarity is the focus on trade agreements among several of the national parties on obtaining/improving fairness of trade in agri-food products (implying it is not fair now), and on treatment of imported foods to meet Canadian food safety standards – again implying that current practices are not fair, or that other nation’s standards are inferior.

Policy “Misses”

Unfortunately, there are far too many misses in the various platform documents. It may be too much to ask, but aside from general comments or support for a National Food Strategy (as yet undefined) which signals support for many farm and food groups’ interests, there is little discussion of the vision for the sector, what such a strategy would entail, why it is critical at this point, and what would change.

This leads to another key “miss”- inherent in all of the platform documents - the view of modest variations of the status quo, both market and policy, in Canada and across the globe. There is little to signal that Canadian farmers, food processors, retailers and foodservice firms are facing significantly different market opportunities or challenges within Canada’s domestic markets or in its global markets. There is even less on what these changes in market forces, and in the behaviour of Canada’s competitors, might mean for Canadian farms and food companies. This “gap” is critical when examining Canada’s approaches to policy/programming and recognition of different needs for different markets-both global and local, and determining an appropriate balance between national standards and regional flexibility that can be accepted.

Another key “miss” is the near consistent platform views on supply management with little indication that any party would argue for, or even raise the need for, some modest changes in

the status quo to meet both shifts in the domestic markets for supply managed products, or to address global trade concerns, without sacrificing the domestic policy framework. In light of both global market demand opportunities, changes in food technology, and internal concerns over the limited flexibility of the supply managed groups, the platforms reinforce a view of minimal change under any scenario for this sector. Yet the supply managed sectors are dealing with change and challenges, both internal and external, all the time.

The limited acknowledgement of the other parts of the agri-food sector, the value chain and its importance for sustained competitiveness and enhanced value, for all of the participants in that food chain, is certainly a significant “miss”. This is surprising as the Federal department of agriculture and its provincial counterparts, as well most farm and food groups, are actively exploring how to better link all participants in the food system to improve profitability, growth, innovation, environmental sustainability and overall competitiveness. Indeed, there is limited acknowledgment, despite the extensive public discussion over the links between agri-food policy and health policy in Canada, on the links between health policy and farm/food programming and regulation. An improved capacity to undertake legislative and policy changes in this new critical area will have substantial impact on farm/food production, processing and marketing.

Finally, given that Canada is a developed nation with relatively high input costs, leveraging its capacity to be innovative and respond to market demands and changes is paramount to its competitiveness. However, there is little or no discussion with respect to what is needed in agri-food research and commercialization funding and programming, and for developing needed talent in this sector to remain an innovator in a global marketplace and allow Canadian farmers and food firms to gain and hold market share. Rather, the universal recognition among parties of the importance of farm income support and risk management suggests a conviction on their part that the sector is a victim in need of ongoing financial support to be viable. There is no apparent willingness to address the disparity in funding for innovation versus farm income support and stabilization (which absorbs well over 50% of government funding to the sector). This is a critical “miss” on all fronts.

Conclusion

The platform policies of the five parties simply reinforce the status quo, and to a great extent avoid any need for policy change by the Federal government in the future. This is likely a safe position, but is it realistic, and is it the right policy stance? The George Morris Centre does not view the status quo in any policy area as the way in which to move the sector forward.

It is most likely that the success or failure of Canada’s national parties in the May 2nd election will not be decided solely on the “farm”, “rural” or “food” votes. However, Canadian farmers, food processors, retailers, foodservice firms and other agribusinesses should expect far better, with more proactive policies and electoral platforms which recognize the realities of the Canadian marketplace and do not just gloss over the “hot” issues of the day.

Policies on Core Domestic Programs

	Bloc Quebecois	Conservative	Green	Liberal	NDP
Income Support and Risk Management Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review income support programs to reduce costs and increase effectiveness Better control of commodity prices Make programs more responsive to regional needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support Risk Management programs at the provincial level provided they do not cause a detriment to producers in other provinces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restructure Business Risk Management programs to help with climate risk and disaster assistance Make support programs farm rather than production based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise “AgriFlex” program to allow for regionally flexible programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support Business Risk Management Programs Reduce accounting fees to make BRM programs more accessible
Innovation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$50 million for development and commercialization of local farm-based innovation 			
Farm Succession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase capital gains allowance to \$1 million, provided farm will continue to operate after sale Extend family transfer benefits to include other immediate family members under the age of 40 Allow use of RRSP for farm purchase Creation of tax sheltered accounts for producers to save for retirement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make loan programs more accessible for young farmers Continue with consultations with producers to develop programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government funded legal assistance for loan agreements within families for transfers Revise tax laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise Federal Agriculture policy introducing policies that will encourage young people to farm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support farmers, particularly young farmers with training and mentorship programs Revise criteria for intergenerational transfers to include other family members Revise capital gains allowance

International Trade Policy

	Bloc Quebecois	Conservative	Green	Liberal	NDP
Market Access		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase funding for Market Access Secretariat and Canadian Trade Commissioner Service 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinate effort between AAFC, Department of Foreign Affairs and CFIA to improve “international brand” 	
Trade Agreements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage food sovereignty Ensure inclusion of employment laws, respect for human rights and environment in trade agreements 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritize fair trade in exports and imports 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review trade agreement to assess threat to domestic food security

Environmental Policies related to Agriculture

	Bloc Quebecois	Conservative	Green	Liberal	NDP
Environmental Farm Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support Federal/ Provincial partnership that exists for development of farm plans in Quebec 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Streamline EFPs to meet municipal, provincial and federal standards allowing for submission on one plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of program to provide new funding sources for implementation of EFPs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “strengthen” environmental farm plans Environmental stewardship plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EFPs to develop financial incentives for “ecological goods and services” on farms
Endangered Species and wildlife		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compensate for land use restrictions under Species at Risk Act 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reward farmers for land set aside for wildlife habitat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compensation for land use restrictions under Species at Risk
Clean Energy				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in On-farm clean energy development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reinstate Federal incentives for clean power Create community owned renewable

					energy facilities
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Policies related to Production Practices

	Bloc Quebecois	Conservative	Green	Liberal	NDP
Pesticides, Fertilizers		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regulation reform to allow better access to inputs used in other countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce pesticide allowance on crops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support improved pesticide and fertilizer management 	
Organic Agriculture			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistance to support switch to organic agriculture 		

Food Safety and Inspection

	Bloc Quebecois	Conservative	Green	Liberal	NDP
CFIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase staffing at CFIA by 1,000 Review traceability laws Revise the role of the CFIA to prioritize its role in food safety and protection Mandatory reporting to provincial bodies when cases of disease are reported in more than one province simultaneously 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase CFIA budget and capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review CFIA to reduce perceived conflict of interest (promoting Canadian good while regulating safety) Allow area specific food safety standards for local areas without industrial scale farming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review CFIA and Public Health Agency of Canada to improve coordination of services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hire 200 new inspectors Enhance capacity of CFIA
Imported Food Safety Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply same food safety standards to imported food as 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply same food safety standards to imported food as 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply same food safety standards to imported food as

	domestic			domestic	domestic
Labeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement mandatory domestic labeling system 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review labeling regulation for foods containing GM products Origin labeling to identify Canadian food products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review nutritional labeling requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased labeling for nutrition, origin, presence of GM products

Marketing

	Bloc Quebecois	Conservative	Green	Liberal	NDP
Local Food Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote policies to encourage consumers to buy local 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand farmers' markets and local culinary tourism activities Promote rooftop gardens and urban green space for agriculture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of \$80 million Buy Local fund Farmers' Markets Development program jointly with provinces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support regional food self-sufficiency
Supply Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect supply management in international negotiations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support supply management in current and future trade agreements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow for unregulated production of supply managed products for small and family farms to local markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support supply management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support supply management
CWB		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support marketing choice for Western Canadian grain farmers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support for CWB 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support for CWB 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support for CWB