

Maybe it's time for a maternalistic approach...

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In the television documentary *The Gods of Our Fathers*, the fourth and last program in the acclaimed PBS series *The Human Race*, internationally-renowned historian and journalist Gwynne Dyer describes a world before patriarchy; an early world of democratic village-states where women were held in high esteem as communicators, healers, keepers of the past (cultural traditions) and bearers of the future (children).

Then, some 5,000 years ago, independent village-states merged to become unified states, and the way in which we communicate and govern ourselves was forever changed.

According to Dyer, the fall of democracy to patriarchy was a natural reaction on the part of the state to maintain order absent mass communications.

Examining the implications of patriarchy for the subsequent development of our institutions and culture, Dyer presents a compelling argument for its (long-overdue) replacement by a more egalitarian approach.

Our new agriculture minister, Corky Evans, seemingly alluded to much the same thing when he addressed the B. C. Federation of Agriculture's December meeting in Harrison.

"The days of government paternalism towards the farm sector are over", Evans told farmers in defense of recent cuts to Ministry staff and programs.

Cuts which eliminated all technology trials, demonstrations and tests; shut down our on-farm dairy inspection and livestock brand registration and inspection programs; eliminated enhanced NISA — put in place only a few years ago as the *quid pro quo* for FII — and annihilated extension services (Fraser Valley farmers took the biggest hit of any region, losing 38 of 53 extension workers).

Perhaps its time for a more maternalistic approach?

The Fraser Basin Management Program's draft discussion paper on agriculture and sustainability examines farming from an economic, environment and community perspective. It concludes that sustainable agriculture is part and parcel of sustainable communities. (For your copy of the draft report, phone 660-1177; fax 660-3600.)

If the Fraser Basin Management Program is right, the challenge for government then becomes to construct policy instruments which encourage competitiveness, independence and growth while at the same time delivering the capacity to withstand shocks inevitably dealt the farm sector by weather, disease and markets.

For without the values contributed by farmers — such as the maintenance of a safe and affordable local food supply, land stewardship far more ecologically and environmentally beneficial than would occur under alternate land use options, jobs that pay fair wages and benefits — communities themselves will not sustain.

And perhaps most importantly, situated on the edges of cities long "evolved" from when neighbours knew and looked out for neighbours, farmers may well be the lone keepers of heritage values once held to be self-evident by all communities.

(While meeting with Saanich Peninsula farmers to help them develop an agricultural strategy for the Peninsula, I met one such example of these heritage values: Babe. Babe makes honey. In fact, Babe is the largest honey producer in B.C. And when she and Charley got married many years ago, they agreed on two rules: "Don't buy until you have the money", and "As long as you can get through the winter, don't worry if you break even or maybe even lose a little if it can help someone else." And they lived by them. Starting out with a few dozen hives, they today operate 3,000. "We have enough to run 3,600" says the great-grandmother with the erect posture and the sparkley eyes, "but at 78, we're slowing down a little.")

Unless we learn to appreciate and support (read: nurture) the "collective independence" of our farm sector, farming will not survive in this province.

Evans is quoted in last month's Country Life as saying "most of the things my mother would have done in my position are now against the law."

I like Evans' reference to his mom. She sounds like a nurturer. And, like mother's everywhere, I bet she would've first tried to change the law and, if need be broken the law before placing at risk the health and well-being of her children.

Corky's right when he says the answer lies in industry-led initiatives. But this is only part of the answer. The other half of the equation is an agriculture minister who fights for the sustainability of this province's farmers. Creatively.

For example, how about directing water districts to consider the needs of agriculture in the management of their supplies? (By spring, all farm groups should have endorsed a resolution calling for legislated rights to economically priced irrigation water at a rate reflective of cropping options and efficient irrigation methods.)

How about entering into long-term power contracts with B.C.-based agri-food processing companies at hydro rates equivalent to the deal just signed with Bonneville Power?

Getting back to Gwynne Dyer's priority on more egalitarian, democratic processes, how about linking long-term power contracts to farmer participation; creating significant "capital" for farmers bring to the table in pursuing strategic joint venture opportunities to rebuild our processing capacity?

How about resolving, on the threshold of this New Year, to put the "Why BC?" behind the "Buy BC?" so that farm men and women can continue to proactively participate in steering a course which ensures a competitive, independent and sustainable community future?