

Notes for an address by
Senator Mike Duffy, to the
Canadian Federation of Agriculture
Chateau Laurier Hotel, Ottawa
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Mr. Chairman, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I could not be happier being here tonight to address this gathering in honour of the 75th Anniversary of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture.

Canadians owe a great deal to the Federation, its member organizations, and the producers who in turn make up their respective memberships. Of course, it has to be said, some of us owe more than others ... in fact, some of us a LOT more ... oh, so much more. So much.

But I think it's appropriate that I am here to speak to you tonight on the occasion of your 75th birthday. After all, I come to you from the Senate of Canada, where, when you celebrate your 75th birthday, they **stop** calling you, "... *that new guy*".

I come from this country's smallest province, a tiny speck of a sandbar in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Prince Edward Island. The Garden of the Gulf. The Million Acre Farm.

I'm not a farmer, but I come from a place where people are connected to the land by heritage, by tradition, by blood. It is inescapable. My family has been on the Island for generations, and my fondest childhood memories are of visiting my relatives on their farm.

It was the Hail farm in Middleton, Prince Edward Island. If you want to find Middleton on a map, you'll want to have a magnifying glass handy.

It's one of those places where they save money by having a single sign. On one side it says "Welcome to Middleton" and on the other it says "Thank you for visiting, please come again."

My folks would pack us up into the car for the long trip out. Now, remember, the entire Island is only 120 miles long, so when you grow up there, your idea of "far away" is sort of skewed.

Middleton is about 30 miles out of Charlottetown, but for Island kids in the early 1950s, that was a cross country excursion. We would pile into the car and Dad would take us up the Kinkora Road, through the very heart of Prince Edward Island.

Mile after mile of gorgeous, pastoral vistas; meadows, pastures, potato farms and wheat fields laid out like a patchwork quilt on the gently rolling landscape.

It wasn't a big farm, but my uncle Jim was fiercely proud of it. It was his land, and he wouldn't have anyone saying anything about it.

I remember one time we had a tourist stop by, an American from Nebraska or Iowa or some such place. He asked how many acres my uncle had, and my uncle told him.

The fella just laughed. He said, "Why that's just a postage stamp. You come to my farm some day. I can

get you into my truck and we can drive for hours and still not be close to the end of my land.”

My uncle reached down, scooped up a handful of red Island soil, let it slowly run through his fingers, and said, “Yeah, I used to have a truck like that. Ford, was it?”

Now, these were the days before Bob Brennan’s dad brought us “rural electrification”.

No electricity. They had a big battery radio and gas lamps for the early evening, and when those lamps went out ... well, so did you. You went to sleep. And the lamps went out early because there was work to be done, hard work that started at first light.

Those bi-weekly visits to my relatives on the farm taught me a lot about the ethics of hard work and the challenges of doing without – core values that still resonate on every farm across this country to this day.

They’re the same ethics and challenges you find on a sprawling ranch in the foothills of Alberta; in farmhouses across the Prairies, through Ontario and Quebec; in a vineyard in BC or an orchard in Nova Scotia.

They are the common ground for every farmer who ever lived.

The Canadian Federation of Agriculture came together based on one simple truth: food producers across this country have far more in common with one another than they have differences.

And because of that simple truth it only made sense that they join together to speak with a single voice; strong, articulate, and insistent. 75 years later, that voice is just as powerful.

And it needs to be powerful because people who don’t have farming bred into their bones just don’t understand what it means to live that life.

A few years back, a Communications Officer from the Department of Agriculture was on the Island for some meetings and used some of his down time to drive around and see the countryside. He came upon a farmer waving at him from the ditch.

This fella gets out of his rented car and walks over to the farmer to see what he needs. And there's a prize Jersey cow giving birth, but the calf is coming out, as we say, arse first.

"She needs help," said the farmer. "I'll pull on one leg, you pull on the other, and we'll see if we can get this calf out."

So after a few minutes of tugging and pulling and grunting and straining, they manage to help poor Bessie deliver.

The fella from the Department was overcome by the moment. "That was amazing," he said.

The farmer said, "Well, I'm grateful to you for helping and thankful you came along. I'd like to repay you in some small way."

"Nah, I couldn't take any money for this," said the city boy. "But I suppose there is one thing you could do."

"What's that?" said the farmer.

"Well, you can tell me, how fast this calf was going when it hit the cow."

I know. Of course that's a joke. But it is true that if you've never lived at least part of your life on a farm, you just don't get it.

You don't get what it means to have farming not just as a job or a career but as a life. You don't get how an old farmer can let a handful of his own dirt, soil he has worked for years, run through his fingers in the spring

and know, just know in his bones, what the year might bring.

If you have never experienced life on a farm, you just don't get the pain of watching the auctioneers set up their sound system on the lawn of your neighbour's home. How you want to be able to think, "There but for the grace of God go I", but it's not a day when you particularly feel the grace of God.

How what you feel instead is the power of the bank, the power of a hostile climate and bad luck and bad economic times. Not to mention the power of a Commons committee member who wrinkles his nose at the smell of a barn and considers his cottage in Muskoka "country living".

Early on in my reporting days I was interviewing a priest in Saskatchewan, Father Bob Ogle. He was running for the NDP against Otto Lang in Saskatoon. He told me he knew he would win, based on what he was hearing every day in confession.

I asked him to explain. He said every day he was talking to young adults, kids who didn't have a future on the family farm because of the government economic policy and had to move off to the city to find work.

They would come to the confessional riddled with guilt and shame and they would agonize about leaving the farm, leaving the life they had grown up to love, leaving behind their families.

They had lost contact with their past. They were hurt, troubled souls, and they blamed a callous and uncaring government.

"Why should I sell your wheat?" "Why should we keep unprofitable rail lines running?" Well, because every small town on the prairies has a grain elevator, but it also has a coffee shop, a gas station, a hardware store, a

barber shop, a church ... a **life** that ends when the heart is torn out of it.

If you've never lived on a farm, that can be an abstract concept, an economic model, if you will. But if farming is your life, there is nothing at all abstract about it.

It is real. It is a constant in your life. And it is deeply personal.

It is that way today, and it was that way 75 years ago when the Canadian Federation of Agriculture was formed at the Royal Winter Fair in 1935.

Farm leaders came together then because they knew food producers across this country needed to speak with a single voice. Needed to clearly articulate the issues facing farmers across this country. Needed to join together to advocate and argue positions to politicians of every stripe.

And that has always been a key tenet of what became the Canadian Federation of Agriculture: the absence of partisanship. The willingness to work with politicians of every stripe.

We're Canadians. Canada was built, not on hard and immutable positions, but on a willingness to compromise, take some water with our wine.

Is it me, or have a lot of us seem to forgotten how to compromise, how to listen and see the other side of an argument?

Here's a politician who would be pilloried on every news network: "I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors, and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views".

Can you imagine what his political opponents might say about him today? He flip-flops. He has no principles. He's wishy-washy.

He was Abraham Lincoln. Who did OK for himself.

But this Federation has spent 75 years with a single, pure purpose: to get farmers' views, farmers' issues, farmers' needs onto the radar of those who make public policy, regardless of who they are and what party they represent.

Over the years, that has meant being prepared to accept that things won't always go your way. But that's the life of a farmer, isn't it?

When you have, as Connie Kaldor puts it, "one eye on the banker and the other on the sky", you know that things won't always work out exactly as you want.

So you take the victories as they come and hope, in the end, they outnumber the losses.

But where the Canadian Federation of Agriculture has excelled, year after year, is in making sure your positions are at least understood by those in Parliament who make the final decisions.

That hasn't always been easy, because often there is not even a consensus among your own members. A potato farmer in PEI *does* have a lot in common with a rancher in Alberta or a wheat farmer in Manitoba. But not all issues cut on the same seam for all farmers.

And even where there is not internal agreement, the CFA has managed to put forward unified, cohesive strategies aimed at doing the best for the majority of its various members.

Compromise. The Canadian way. The willingness to compromise, to find common ground, has been the hallmark of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture since its inception.

It's becoming a lost art.

There are those who are terrified of compromise, afraid it shows weakness or lack of conviction. “We don’t want to be seen as willing to compromise! We will get walked all over.”

But is there anything more courageous than a willingness to listen to others’ views, to re-examine your own position, to find a middle ground that serves everyone’s interests more fully?

Ah, but when you compromise, you lose face.

Lesser minds cannot fathom the need for compromise. We can all thank God the Canadian Federation of Agriculture has not been run by lesser minds.

What worries me more than the demise of the noble art of compromise is a new cynicism that is becoming more and more pervasive everywhere you look.

Much of the satire today tweaks and chips away at the powerful, as satire ought to. But it doesn’t carry a call to action. It tears down, but leaves nothing in the place of what it sets out to destroy.

The not-so-subtle message being delivered to young people is, “Nothing you do or say is going to matter. Those politicians will do what they want.”

And young people are listening, make no mistake about it. In a recent poll, 21 percent of viewers under 30 listed the Daily Show, the Colbert Report, and Saturday Night Live as their main source of news. Only 2 percent more - 23 percent - of those viewers listed what we would call “real” news sources like CNN or CTV news.

Why should we care?

Well, we should care because we have an entire generation being raised on the notion that nothing they do or say matters. Those politicians will do what they want.

It is a message of despair. A message of hopelessness. It is blindly negative, a call not to action but to inaction, and most pernicious of all it *is just not true*.

Because those politicians do listen.

Not all of them, all the time. But enough of them, most of the time. Public opinion can be swayed by valid argument. Governments can be nudged and prodded in the direction their constituents want.

And we know that is true because for 75 years, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture has been doing just that. 75 years of getting those politicians to do what its members want.

And sure, along the way, a lot of water has gone into the wine. There have been compromises, bargaining, trade-offs. There have been slam dunk wins and yes, those occasions where nobody came away happy.

But the CFA keeps at it because you and your members know that what you're doing works. It is not just your right to challenge and guide your government. It is your responsibility.

The Canadian Federation of Agriculture has served for 75 years as a shining example of democracy in action.

This organization is a role model, not just to other groups working to influence the course of our national and international politics, but to an entire new generation being told that what you do does not make a difference.

Well, what you do *does* make a difference. You know it, those of us in various roles in government know it, and together we have to work to make sure this generation knows it, too.

You need to go on fighting for the needs of farmers across this country.

You need to seek out those in government who understand what farmers mean to our country, and convince them to join you in creating public policy that serves both your members and every other Canadian.

And as I leave, I want to remind you that you have friends in government, people who know the nature of what you do, and who will work with this organization to forge a new future for Canadians.

I'm proud to call myself one of those friends. And there are many more.

On their behalf and mine, thank you for inviting me here tonight. We look forward to working with you for another 75 years.