

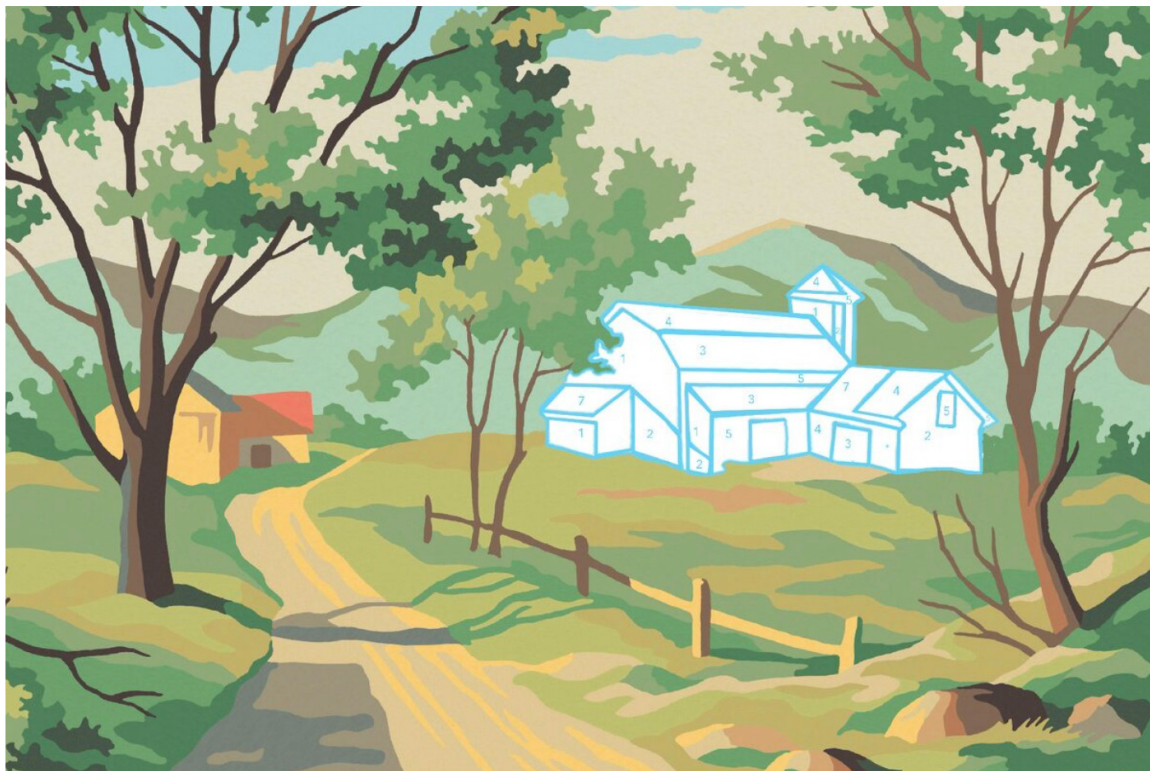
OPINION

Family farms are disappearing in Canada. Is this the cost of progress?

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Canadian farms are disappearing, not by magic but perhaps by sleight of hand. Between 1941 and 2021 the number of farms in Canada fell by approximately 75 per cent. Urban Canadians might seem untouched by these patterns, but those who enjoy food should take note.

Superficial explanations for these patterns abound, including the inevitability of technological innovation, small-producer inefficiency or bad management. Such factors are occasionally contributory, but they fail to explain these massive transformations. A more productive approach is placing agriculture and farming in the context of the needs and priorities of the national economy.

Such an approach to family farming in Western Canada, specifically, suggests three distinctive periods or phases of federal agricultural policy between Confederation and the present, each with identifiable legislative orientations related to changing national economic priorities. The first phase, post-Confederation to 1930, was an era of nation-building in which Western family farms were a centrepiece. The dual crises of the Great Depression and the Second World War mark the beginning of the second phase, during which Western states played an active economic role including, in Canada, supporting Western family farms. The third phase, the era of neoliberalism, brought fiscal austerity, deregulation, and the veneration of the blunt forces of the market regardless of the consequences. The economic crisis of 2008-09 reinvigorated state action but without significantly altering the direction of neoliberal agricultural policies.

In the beginning, federal governments encouraged the establishment of family farming in Western Canada as integral to the creation of an industrial economy by national policy. In the West the displacement of [Indigenous people](#) by force, malfeasance and treaty cleared the way for promoting and establishing Western family farms that served as producers of export cash crops and tariff-protected markets for Canadian industry. Activist federal governments of all stripes undertook a series of deliberate actions to facilitate Western settlement through legislative initiatives that made land available to white settlers, built a transportation system, encouraged immigration, regulated the grain trade in the interests of producers, fostered innovation through experimental farms and negotiated freight-rate reductions. The national policy stimulated the unprecedented economic expansion in Canada between 1900 and 1930; however, the onset of the Depression brought the national policy and this era to a close.

Between 1930 and the 1960s, drought, depression and war demanded a range of state actions including various efforts to maintain and stabilize family farms. Numerous policies and legislative actions addressed land rehabilitation, water security, global wheat market instability, farm credit and enshrined orderly marketing through the Canadian Wheat Board. Even as governments, including that of John Diefenbaker, the first Western Canadian prime minister, supported family farmers, the growing dominance of large multinational implement and chemical companies, commodity specialization, and differences in farm size and capitalization fragmented farmers as a class. Additionally, the Allied war effort and the mobility of multinational capital increased the integration of the Canadian and American economies resulting in a unique form of “continental drift” with north-south commerce replacing east-west.

As the 1970s arrived, global competition, financial instability, the restructuring of the international oil industry, decolonization, inflation, taxation allergies among the wealthy, and growing unemployment gave rise to a new economic and political orientation: neoliberalism. Regardless of party affiliation, neoliberal federal governments reduced state spending, privatized enterprises and services, and deregulated markets while venerating individual responsibility and entrepreneurship.

In the West, many family farms bore the brunt of neoliberal agricultural policies and actions as governments unleashed the market. Many of the measures that had encouraged and maintained Western family farming in earlier decades were eliminated. Grain freight-rate deregulation and rail-line abandonment increased producer costs, essential services were privatized and the elimination of the Canadian Wheat Board exacerbated the impact of rising costs. Protests proved ineffective and agricultural policy became market-oriented and often relied on ad hoc producer-funded insurance and stabilization programs. Farming became a part of the agri-food sector with no sustained government action addressing declining farm numbers and increasing farm size. To be sure, some farms grew and prospered, applying every possible technological innovation regardless of cost, occasionally transforming erstwhile neighbours into hired hands.

The declining farm numbers represent real farm families abandoning their legacy land and leaving behind withering communities bereft of services and businesses. Are these transformations simply the cost of progress, efficiencies and modernization, the sometimes-cruel back of the invisible hand of the market and therefore inevitable and positive? Or are they cause for pause since

we do not yet fully understand all the social implications of the disappearance of rural and smaller communities or the long-term economic, ecological and environmental consequences of large-scale high-input agriculture perhaps soon to be under the control of a multinational with head office offshore? Perhaps ask these questions the next time you sit down at the dinner table.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-family-farms-are-disappearing-in-canada-is-this-the-cost-of-progress/>

Murray Knuttila has been busy! A book too. He does a nice job here; packing so much readably into these few words is very hard to do. Good for him!

Murray is from New Finland Colony West of Rocanville. My parents, sister, and I have long been friends with his sister (Audrey) and her husband (Gordon Dixon). Murray began academic life as a Ph.D. sociologist with NDP leanings. When Roy Romanow became Premier after the Devine era debacle, with the NDP retaining no seats in rural SK, he tapped Murray to chair the Health Authority that began gutting Health services out here. Murray has never been forgiven here for that, even if he would have viewed this as just being a "loyal soldier" trying to protect "his people" as best he could within the circles of power.

New Finland has always been a unique and interesting place, just like Finns and Finland remain. Finland always has one of the best school systems in the world, if not typically the top performing one on basic indicators. Genetically, like Hungarians, they differ significantly from everyone around them.

I would add though, that in a certain sense, Murray is a little late: "The bull long ago got out of the barn"—had his pen door opened, then was driven out by saboteurs—and no one knows where he went to put him back in. He's probably been "bologna" for a long time.

TJB