

AG COMMITTEE TOUR | AN EYE-OPENER

MPs on road to meet young farmers hear straight talk and get better manners

NATIONAL VIEW



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Federal agriculture committee members haven't heard much optimism so far on tour

It costs money, can be a logistical nightmare and doesn't guarantee that the views expressed will be representative.

Still, if last week's western and

Ontario start of a cross-country tour by MPs on the House of Commons agriculture committee is any indication, MPs should travel out of Ottawa more often.

They behave better. And they hear some unvarnished truths from farmers not accustomed to delivering "political speak."

The hearings featuring farmers young and old talking about the difficulties of attracting and keeping young farmers in the industry were fascinating. The views expressed, often by people who had never testified before MPs, often were blunt and bitter.

Entry costs are too high for most young farmers if they are unwilling to put their parents in debt. Farm safety net programs do not work for young farmers. Some want special program

treatment or no programs at all.

While optimism often is the preserve of the young, there was little optimism in the testimony.

In Manitoba, 23-year-old Drew Baker surprised MPs by saying he doubted he would want his kids to follow in his footsteps.

"I don't think I would tell my kids to farm and I've only been doing it for five years," he said.

In British Columbia, 32-year-old rancher Doug Fossen said the end is near for his dream to ranch.

"If prices do not double in the next year or two, I will be getting out and I am the youngest rancher in B.C.," said Fossen. "The only thing I have ever wanted to do is be a rancher."

No one seriously believes cattle prices will double.

That kind of blunt personal assess-

ment seemed to catch some MPs by surprise. True, some witnesses used the occasion to spout the arguments and solutions of their organizations.

But for many MPs, the most powerful moments came in blunt personal assessments from young farmers who said they can't make it, or their parents, who said they don't want their kids in the business.

MPs are more accustomed to testimony from national farm politicians in Ottawa who speak in generalities, being careful (usually) not to offend and talk in the language of Ottawa's bureaucratic class, where a demand is an "ask" and policy people who don't communicate are in "silos."

Few ever challenge the fundamental underpinnings of government policy for farmers.

A dose of straight talk about

unworkable programs is a good thing for MPs who are supposed to try to keep government honest.

Besides, outside the partisan bear pit of Parliament Hill, the MPs on the road presented a more functional face to the voter-witnesses they met.

Political wrangling was almost nonexistent. Partisan barbs were few.

The Blackberries, until recently ubiquitous during Parliament Hill hearings when witnesses were often ignored as MPs read messages on their communication devices, were almost nowhere to be seen.

MPs were collegial and attentive, and asked questions based on the evidence, not just to elicit responses helpful to their political cause.

So that's how committees are supposed to operate!

Refreshing.