

A PROVINCIAL PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

There are considerable similarities between the federal and provincial levels of government, as with the federal and state governments in the United States. One major difference between the two levels is that all provinces have a unicameral form of government—no Senate—unlike the federal government. Otherwise, the majority party in the Legislature forms the government and selects its key members for the Executive, or Cabinet, where most of the major decisions of government are made. The Minister of Agriculture in a province is the senior policy executive within the government, and as with the federal government, the senior civil service extends to all levels except for the Minister.

The Minister, as in the federal system, is responsible for the ministry's activities/policies/programs and must defend them in the Legislature. As a member of Cabinet, the Minister is also responsible for the policies of the whole government, and as a member of the Legislature, responsible to his/her constituents. There are a lot of duties and responsibilities, a lot of authority, and usually not enough time.

A key difference between the provinces and the states is reflected in the scale of intervention in agriculture and food policy by the provinces. Chart 1 indicates the amount of financial support to agriculture in the various provinces in 1994/95. In total, it matches the federal level of support, although it varies considerably by province. Over time, the support levels and provincial differences change, and the level of federal intervention by province varies. Unlike the United States system, provinces have been key players over the last 2-3 decades in agricultural policy development, implementation, and analysis.

In Canada, as in the United States, there is a significant dependence upon agencies, boards and commission (ABC's) to deliver, and sometimes even make, policy at both the federal and provincial levels. It is often overlooked that these quasi public bodies can carry out so much of a government's mandate. For example, in Ontario with a total budget of about \$50 billion, the various ABC's throughout the provincial government deliver about \$30 billion of the government's budget!

There is no single piece of farm/food legislation that dominates the provincial agriculture and food policy decision-making process. This is unlike the United States system, which utilizes the Farm Bill process to focus key activities in United States farm and food policy. At the provincial level, each province will have an Act to create the agriculture ministry which will usually have substantial authority to act on behalf of its agriculture constituents. This may vary by province, but the power to intervene can be considerable. Otherwise, many of the pieces of provincial legislation mimic the federal

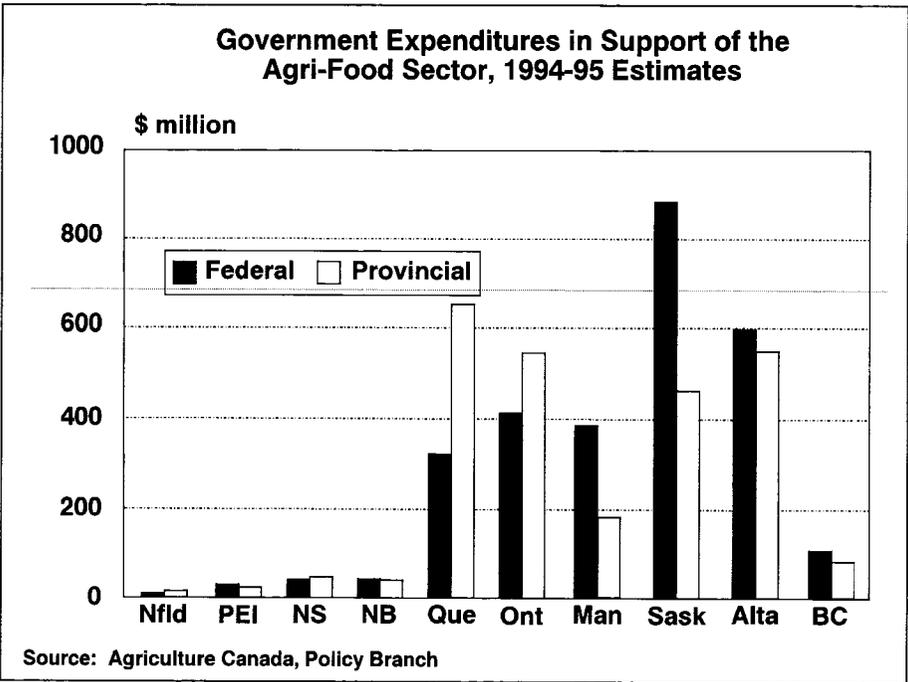


Chart 1

legislation, primarily in order that the two governments can act together on key issues/policies/programs.

THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS

To be expected, agriculture and food policy is very sensitive to farmers/farm groups and farm leaders, at the provincial and national levels. In many cases, there is a greater sensitivity to local commodity issues and groups, and as with state governments, there is a belief that the province is more receptive to the concerns of the citizenry, since it is

closer to the public. There is also more concern about consultation fatigue as there are usually fewer farm leaders involved in all the various consultations, especially if one recalls that the federal government is also regularly consulting on agriculture and food issues.

The provinces are also sensitive to the concerns of other interest groups, especially on the environment, natural resources (wetlands, diversity), the views of other ministries and other governments within Canada (the other provinces), agribusinesses, academics - although their involvement is usually very limited, consumer groups, media - particularly key media who truly understand the farm community and farm policy, which is not too frequent, and the policies of other countries, notably the United States.

The provinces, because of the shared jurisdiction, are very sensitive in policy making to the views and concerns of the federal government. This is usually necessary to improve the effectiveness of any programming or reduce overlap and duplication. However, it has been the case at various points in time that provincial policy has been undertaken to frustrate or delay federal decisions.

The key constraints on public policy in provincial agriculture and food decision-making are budgets, budgets, and budgets. The recent federal budget will affect the decisions and spending priorities of all the provincial governments, which will combine with the very tough constraints facing each individual province. Other constraints include public concern over equitable treatment by both levels of government by region and by commodity, the environmental impacts of agricultural and food policies, social and rural impacts, trade agreements—which have really brought home the limits of public policy within a more global interdependent marketplace, and actions of the other governments.

Despite what might seem to be a great deal of overlap, officials have succeeded in developing the necessary operating agreements (formal or informal) in order to efficiently and effectively provide services without undue interference or duplication by either level of government. This is true with our food inspection systems and our research capacities. It is also true that with both levels of government involved in policy making and programming, each level can at times coerce or co-opt the other, and producers/food sector are also quite capable of using the joint jurisdiction to maximize their benefits.

Finally, in evaluating the provincial system of public policy making, our systems are not as open as the United States system, but becoming more so over time. Transparency of decision-making is increasing, and there is considerably more responsiveness at the provincial level to local needs (like state governments) than at the national level. There is no time limit to many of the policies nor are there default mechanisms if certain policies are not renewed/revisted. The federal/provincial system does overlap, and can create duplication but it can also generate improved consistency and complementarity to better serve the public.

