

Where's the Beef from Klein's Grovelling

Ending the practice of feeding animals to animals would be a better fix to beef industry's problems

By Linda McQuaig

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"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for being so wonderful."

Although no transcript of Ralph Klein's meeting last week with US Vice President Dick Cheney was released, one suspects Klein's pitch went something like that.

The Alberta premier was down in Washington, ostensibly to push the US to lift its ban on Canadian beef. And, with a White House that prides itself in punishing the disloyal and rewarding the faithful, Klein certainly seemed to be well positioned to score.

It's hard to be much more faithful to the White House than Klein - whether it comes to accommodating US energy requests, serving as the Canadian point man in their fight against Kyoto, or supporting the US war machine. Speaking to an energy industry group during his Washington visit, Klein began with an extended thank you for the recent US invasion of Iraq. "Thank you for your leadership. Thank you for your courage. Thank you for your resolve and determination to achieve peace, security and freedom - not for your own country, justly - but for the entire world."

Klein has been talking like this for months, and his fulsome praise has not gone unnoticed in the White House. Last week he got his big reward - fifteen minutes with Dick Cheney.

(Meanwhile, Prime Minister Jean Chretien, who has shown less enthusiasm for the Bush administration, is being snubbed.)

It's possible that the subject of Canadian beef never even came up at the Klein-Cheney meeting, that, with all the excitement of being in the Vice-President's office, Klein just plain forgot about Canadian beef.

In any event, the Alberta premier seems to have failed to peddle a single steak south of the border. The ban on Canadian beef remains in place.

No matter. The *National Post*, keen to promote Canadian deference to Washington at every opportunity, treated Klein's Washington visit as a triumph.

"Klein tried his best not to gloat after the Cheney meeting," wrote *Post* columnist Don Martin. What on earth would Klein, coming home empty-handed, be gloating about? About seeing the inside of Dick Cheney's office?

(Former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney also gloats a lot these days about how his close relations with the White House paved the way for the Canada-US free trade agreement. But this suggests Washington signed that agreement because of warm feelings for Mulroney -- rather than because the deal gave the US undreamed-of access to our energy and new rules that allow US corporations access to previously out-of-bounds sectors of our economy.)

Washington pursues its own agenda, and any notion that it acts to accommodate the wishes of Canadian politicians is a fantasy in the minds of those politicians.

Accordingly, the US will lift the ban on our beef when it suits them to do so, regardless of how much Ralph Klein praises their heroism in Iraq.

In the meantime, we should be fixing our beef crisis - not just so our beef can be shipped south of the border, but so it's safe for us to eat.

There's an obvious solution - stop the industrial practice of feeding animals to animals, since we know that this has led to cases of "mad cow" disease elsewhere.

"It's tinkering with nature. There's a question of whether that's sensible," notes Tim Sly, an epidemiologist at Ryerson University.

After disastrous problems with mad cow disease, Britain adopted tough regulations banning animals being fed to animals. But Canada settled for a compromise - we don't allow ground-up cows being fed to cows, but we allow ground-up cows being fed to chickens and pigs, which can then be fed back to cows.

How about just letting cows eat grass?

Such a simple solution is rejected because having cows roam around on grassy land is more costly than stuffing them full of left-over animals parts, and we have no choice if we want to remain competitive in the global economy .Or do we?

How does that competitiveness look now - with our beef industry reeling from financial losses and our politicians desperately trying to reassure us that eating our homegrown beef won't lead to the disintegration of our brains?

Yet, the focus has been largely confined to tinkering with existing rules and working on regaining access to the US - in other words, ignoring the early warning signal that this one Canadian case of mad cow disease has offered us.

Rather than listening to the canary in the mine, we seem ready to feed it to the nearest cow.

If Ralph Klein would spend less time thanking the Americans, and more time working on fixing the cattle feeding system, he might actually have something to gloat about.

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