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## EDITORIAL

### The Politics of Food by Jackie Flanagan



MY MOTHER GREW A VEGETABLE GARDEN, as did many of our neighbours when we were kids. In summer we had new baby carrots, fresh picked peas, and salads of leaf lettuce, radishes and green onions. She canned beet pickles, peaches and plums from Penticton, and crabapples. The jars of red, purple and yellow globes gleamed on shelves in our root cellar, where we stored enough turnips, parsnips and potatoes to get us through the winter. We ate porridge for breakfast all year round.

Today people sashay into Safeway and buy Froot Loops in cardboard boxes and frozen french fries in plastic bags. Earlier generations had to be self reliant in the provision of food; today everything can be purchased. Our evolution from a rural to an urban culture, and changes in the role of women have had a dramatic effect on the food we eat. More and more families down a fast food supper of pizza, fried chicken or hamburgers. The documentary *Supersize Me* demonstrates the health consequences of this diet. Even the fresh fruits and vegetables in our supermarkets are 20 per cent less nutritious than such foods were 30 years ago. Genetic modification, chemical fertilizers and long-distance shipping affect quality.

Still, agriculture remains central to Alberta's economy. More than 30 per cent of the province's total land is used for crop or livestock production. Alberta is by far the largest beef province, with 72 per cent of Canada's cattle production. Thirty per cent of Canada's wheat is grown in Alberta. More than 90,000 people here are employed in primary agriculture or food processing. In fact, food processing is our most important manufacturing sector.

Sometimes, delving into the origin of our food is enough to turn a person off eating. Where does our food come from? How much of the food consumed by Albertans is produced here? How safe is our food? When candies and pill cap-

sules contain gelatin derived from rendered animal parts, it's difficult for even a vegetarian to avoid ingesting animal products. Though it is now against the law to feed cow parts to cows, it is still acceptable to feed rendered chicken and pig parts to cows and ground up cow parts to pigs and chickens. To make use of the unusable parts of animals for feed is a huge saving for agribusiness.

The BSE crisis has made us all more aware of the vulnerability of our food supply. One sick cow can close the border for exports to the U.S. and Japan, our largest export markets for beef. The government's handling of the situation doesn't inspire confidence. Financial aid enriched large American packing plants, not the ranchers who raised the cattle.

Policy for the marketing of grain is also questionable. The Alberta government has mounted a \$650,000 propaganda campaign against the Canadian Wheat Board. The end of the CWB would mean that farmers have the "freedom" to sell their own wheat independently. This might be an advantage for a producer near the U.S. border but it's hard to imagine how this is going to benefit the independent grain grower in the Peace River country. And who knows what effect it would have on the cost of a loaf of bread.

The choice of what to eat seems like such a personal and private decision. But large forces are at work. Today our food comes from multinational corporations with huge marketing departments. A certain manipulation affects our eating habits.

Food may seem to be an innocuous, non-political topic. But every mouthful we eat is affected by distant government and corporate decisions.