

Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
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Title: The Future of Prison Farms II

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Jon Steinman: And welcome to Deconstructing Dinner, a syndicated weekly radio show and podcast produced in Nelson, British Columbia and Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY and heard on radio stations around the world, including CHMA Sackville, New Brunswick. I'm Jon Steinman.

Back in July 2009, we aired a one-hour feature on the now in-process closure of Canada's prison farm system. That episode came only months after it was discovered in February of that year that Corrections Service Canada alongside Public Safety Canada, had already planned the closure of the program, which has been a mainstay of the country for the past 150 years. With six prison farms having been operated in New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, the closures have sparked an active campaign of opposition seeking to halt the closures. On today's episode we revisit with that issue, and listen to audio from the February 1st democratic dialogue that was hosted in Steinbach, Manitoba, and that Deconstructed Dinner helped host through an online interactive webcast. And also on the show: segments from a rather feisty exchange on the issue from Canada's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. On November 17th, 2009, Liberal Member of Parliament Wayne Easter tabled a motion requesting that the Committee explore the closure of the prison farm system. An interesting intense discussion ensued. Stay tuned.

increase music and fade out

A quick heads up for listeners on southern Vancouver Island, Deconstructing Dinner and yours truly will be delivering a presentation in the community of North Saanich on Sunday February 14th at 2pm. The event is being hosted by the North Saanich Food for the Future Society and will take place at The Muse Winery. Again, that's Sunday February 14th at 2pm in North Saanich. And more information is posted at our website at deconstructingdinner.ca.

soundbite

JS: For the past 150 years, Canada has successfully operated a number of prison farms across the country. The farms are part of CORCAN, a program of the Correction Service of Canada that offers rehabilitative programs in job training to prepare inmates on minimum security prisons for release back into the general public. The history and current state of the prison farm system was first explored on Deconstructing Dinner in July 2009, and certainly if you haven't already, take a listen to the archive of that show on our website, as it's definitely become one of the more

popular ones of 2009. But what has transpired since then...since that episode? As was the case that show was left with many questions still up in the air. On one hand was the government of Canada and the Minister of Public Safety determined to phase out the farm program, and on the other a coalition of groups and individuals wishing to not only stop the closures, but to encourage enhancing the farm program beyond where it was prior to the decision. Opposition to the closures has come from farmers, farm organizations, employee unions, inmates, and the general public. And as far as the future of the program is concerned, the farms continued to be dismantled and the hope of saving them diminishing each day. But for some, hope has not been abandoned. Some interesting events have taken place since our July episode. For one, Canada's national newspaper the Globe and Mail conducted an online poll asking the question, "Should Canada's prison farms be kept." The results were pretty clear from the 11,447 votes, with 92% of those voting yes, leaving a paltry 8% voting no.

And more notably was November 17th when Canada's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food convened as they do every two weeks. The Committee is made up of members of parliament of all political parties who are tasked with discussing issues of agricultural and food importance to Canadians. It was at that November 17th meeting when Liberal Agriculture Critic and Member of Parliament for the riding of Malpeque, Prince Edward Island, Wayne Easter tabled a motion that resulted in a very tense debate with Wayne Easter having an extensive background with groups like the National Farmers Union and having also acted as Canada's Solicitor General under the Chretien government. Wayne Easter has a pretty good understanding and concern for the prison farm program. Here is Wayne Easter on the November 17th 2009, proposing that the Committee study the prison farm closures.

Wayne Easter: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The motion reads: "That the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food undertake a study into the activities of Corrections Canada's prison farm operations; and that the committee travel at least to the facilities located in Kingston, Ontario, in order to hear testimony from those involved in the operations of the facility from across the country; that the study's conclusions and recommendations be reported back to the House; and that the Committee comment on the government's attitude toward the farming community as reflected in the statements by the Minister of Public Safety."

Let me start with the comments from the Minister of Public Safety, because while the government members on the other side argued earlier that I was filibustering, the fact is that I was not. If you're going to bring young people into the industry, you have to have a government that shows it cares about the farming community. If there was ever a statement by the Minister of the Crown that shows that the government doesn't care, it was the statement made by Peter Van Loan when he was trying to defend himself against the closing of prison farms across the country. Why that's important to this Committee is that about 300 farms in the Kingston area depend on that farm. I've been there, it's efficient, it's productive.

But Minister Van Loan had this to say about prison farms and inmates who work and learn on prison farms: "We felt that money could be more adequately redirected to programs where people would actually gain employable skills, as virtually nobody who went through those prison farms ended up with employable skills, because they were based on a model of how agriculture was done 50 years ago, when it was labour intensive, and not capital intensive, as it is today."

What Minister Van Loan has clearly shown is really the government's attitude towards the farming community in general and its condescending attitude that shows through. The fact of the matter is that I've been on that prison farm; in fact I was in charge of it as Solicitor General. I know it makes money and I do know the abattoir on that farm provides services to 150 farms in the area and close to 300 businesses. The farm has one of the most highly productive herds—it's called the Pen Farm Dairy Herd. If the farm is sold out from under the prison farm system, we will lose one of the top producing herds in the country, genetics that go back to 1942, genetics that win prizes at shows across the country. And the Government wants to close it down.

I think the motion is important from the point of view that it shows the government attitude. The other point that I guess I might as well make is that while the Minister said they're losing \$4 million—which they're not, but that's nothing new from this government, because it's all about messaging; it doesn't matter if it's true—Corrections Canada, in response to an order paper question from me, did not reference the \$4 million annual losses that the Minister has referenced without providing any evidence to support that claim. I believe it's another case that this government has become extremely good at, which is about messaging, whether it's factual or not.

JS: Liberal Member of Parliament Wayne Easter, introducing a motion to Canada's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food in November 2009. As Easter continues his comments in this next clip, he's soon interrupted by Conservative MP Pierre Lemieux. Because there were some people in the room who were invited as witnesses on another issue tabled for the meeting that day, Pierre Lemieux chose to address the time that was left to hear those witnesses. And also heard are Liberal MP and acting chair of the meeting, Mark Eyking, and a short interjection is also heard from Conservative MP Randy Hoback.

Wayne Easter, Mark Eyking, and Randy Hoback in the House of Commons:

WE: Corrections Canada, in its response to the order paper question I presented, stated: "Alongside farming skills attained by those participating in the program, offenders also gain employability skills such as responsibility, teamwork, accountability and punctuality."

Pierre Lemieux: Chair, I have a point of order. Just before the witnesses feel this might go on to 5:30 and might think they should leave, I want to make the offer that certainly we on this side of the table would like to hear from our witnesses. We are willing to stay an extra hour to listen to our witnesses at the end of this meeting. I thought they should hear that before they slip away.

Mark Eyking: The meeting is going to be over at 5:30—

PL: Well, I'm making the offer, Chair.

ME: No, you have already made a motion that we do this business, so we're doing this business, so I don't know what you're trying to do here. I know what you're trying to do, but it's not going to—

PL: All I'm trying to do, Chair, is move ahead efficaciously with committee business. We were blocked for an hour, but we're glad to stay and listen to witnesses if the concern is that the witnesses will not be heard.

WE: You know, Mr. Chair—

ME: Just one second, Mr. Easter. Everybody in this room and this committee knows the meeting is going to 5:30. That's when the meeting is going to end. You made the decision that we're going to stick with the business and that's what we're going to do now. Mr. Easter has the floor, and it's his motion.

Randy Hoback: I guess you guys aren't too sincere, are you?

ME: Go ahead, Mr. Easter.

WE: I guess we are sincere, Mr. Hoback. We're very sincere. The meeting was supposed, as we said in the beginning, to start at 4:30 to hear witnesses.

An hon. member: You've been playing games all day, Wayne. You've been playing games with your witnesses. That's all you've done—play games. I'm tired of it.

WE: I haven't played a game here. Mr. Chair, back to the motion. There's no sense in your trying to cover your butt now, because you caused the witnesses to have to go without being heard.

RH: You've cost an hour of time, wasting our time. You keep it up.

An hon. member: It was your decision.

WE: Back to the motion, Mr. Chair.

ME: Mr. Easter, I'm sorry for the interruption. Go ahead.

WE: The point is, Mr. Chair, as I said, that I was on that farm and saw that the people have learned teamwork and skills.

What really struck me most about the last time I was on that farm is how some of those inmates get up at 5:30 in the morning, really learn rehabilitative skills from working with cattle, and take great pride in the operation. As a number of them said to me, although they may not be employed in farming when they leave, it's the attitude they learned by working with cattle, with equipment, and with crops that has improved their personality or attitude so they'd be able to get out into the workforce and find a reliable job. In fact, there is one guy there from Summerside who said if it weren't for his being moved to this prison farm, he wouldn't have learned the computer skills he's learning now, and in three years when he gets out he thinks he'll be able to get a job in bookkeeping or accounting with those computer skills.

My point is, Mr. Chair—and I'll close at that, but there are a lot more points I could make—I really think the Minister of Public Safety in this country, with his remarks, has quite literally insulted any working farmer, not to mention those involved in agriculture generally. So that is why I have two points: one, we should go to visit the operation, because it shows how misguided the government is in terms of their closing down those farm operations; and two, with respect to the mandate of this committee, it's an operation that's productive and it's utilized by the farm community in the area. In fact, the main ones pushing for the prison farms not to close come from the farming community in the Kingston area, and we should support them in doing that.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner, where we're listening to audio from the November 17th meeting of Canada's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. Heard in that last clip was Member of Parliament Wayne Easter proposing to the Committee that they study the now in process closure of Canada's prison farm program which has been operated at six institutions across the country. Deconstructing Dinner examined the issue back in July 2009 and throughout the episode today we're revisiting with the efforts to stop the closures. Following Wayne Easter's remarks, it was time for other members of the Committee to share their perspectives, such as this next one from Conservative MP James Bezan, who was sitting in for Blake Richards. Bezan represents the Manitoba riding of Selkirk-Interlake, where one of the prison farm institutions is located.

James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I do want to speak against this motion. Wayne, I have experience with prison farms because there is one in my riding. I do spend some time there talking to CORCAN, talking to inmates, talking to Correctional Services management.

There are a number of issues surrounding the prison farm in my riding. One is employability skills that the individuals are getting off the farm. There's no doubt they have had a great experience working on the prison farm. The prison farm in Stony Mountain includes a very good dairy farm, and it used to have a hog operation, a 2,000-head feedlot, and an extensive grain farm. Unfortunately, the inmates coming out of there, when they go back into the public, are having difficulty finding employment. There are only so many jobs out there in the agriculture sector that they can apply for, and many of them want to return to their home communities where a farming job is not an option.

If we want to have a proper transition of inmates back into society, so they are productive participants in society, we have to give them employable jobs back in their home situations, where they'll have family support, where they can take pride in having a job and earning an income and not having to look at criminal ways to generate revenue.

I think it's important. I know from my discussions with CORCAN that they want to make sure these guys do have some marketable skills. They can pick up some of the things from a farm, like welding skills and things of that nature, but we need to do more in skilled trades and education and maybe changing the business way CORCAN operates. That's what they're looking at: how do they teach inmates on a prison farm like Stony Mountain with more skills in heavy

equipment operations, how do they get them doing more in fabricating, specific machining skills, and so on? That's where they're headed.

I think we have to support that because it's about making sure the inmates, when they go back into society, have skills they can offer to their local community. That's the big reason for doing this. It has nothing to do with what Mr. Easter has been alluding to. I think all of us have seen the benefit of the prison farms in our communities, although with respect to Stony Mountain, the surrounding area is changing as well. One reason they don't have a hog operation anymore is because of the nuisance of odour and flies and everything else that's associated with that, when the town borders the prison. It's the same thing with the dairy herd; it has been cut back, and the feedlot has been reduced almost in half because of the issue of nuisance odours and flies. So we have to be cognizant of the communities surrounding the prison farms as well.

For those reasons, I think we have to support the decision by CORCAN management at Correctional Services. I think we have to support them in knowing what's best for the inmates and getting them better established for returning into society.

JS: Conservative Member of Parliament James Bezan, speaking on November 17th among Canada's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. Also speaking to the motion suggesting that the Committee study the ongoing closure of Canada's prison farms, was NDP Member of Parliament Carol Hughes. Hughes was sitting in for MP Alex Atamanenko and she represents the Ontario riding of Algoma-Manitoulin-Kapuskasing.

Carol Hughes: I can tell you that I certainly support this motion. Having worked in the probation and parole services for about 13 years, I know how important it is to ensure that criminals coming out of jail have some skills. Over and over again, at both the provincial and federal levels, we have seen the difficulties they have in getting counselling, in getting proper support when they come out, and in getting proper skills while they're in there.

These farm prisons have proven to be quite a benefit to society as a whole, not only to the perpetrators at the time but as well as to the community.

I'm going to read a bit of what my colleague Alex Atamanenko would have liked to share with you. He believes that the objective of our prison system is to enhance public security and to increase the inmates' chances of a positive return to Canadian society it would be hard to imagine a better way to achieve both of these outcomes. Many of the mechanical skills learned in these programs, such as welding and equipment operating, are readily translated into other livelihoods, such as construction and road building. Most important for the inmates is the opportunity to be involved in meaningful work, which can only bring value to their lives and enhance their chances of rehabilitation. In light of the growing demand for leadership on food security and food sovereignty issues in our country and concerns about the future of farmland, this course of action is incomprehensible.

That's why I believe it is important that we actually keep these farm prisons active. We should not be looking at destroying them but at building more. That's why it's important to do this, and that's why I'm supporting this motion.

JS: NDP Member of Parliament Carol Hughes. Also addressing the Committee on the ongoing closure of Canada's prison farms was Bloc-Quebecois MP André Bellavance who represents the riding of Richmond-Arthabasca. André is heard here through a translator.

André Bellavance: Thank you Mr. Chairman. I will be voting in favour of this motion. What I see is that the Conservative government is against anything that has to do with rehabilitation. They want to close down these prison farms and what a responsible government should be doing at the very least is to try and improve the situation. There's nothing perfect in this world but this conclusion that we have to shut down the prison farms rather than trying to improve the situation. Rehabilitation is not part of the ideology of this government. This government looks more like the Republicans in the United States. We should however go to Quebec and look at the rehabilitation programs in that province. However, just keeping people in prison or putting them to death such as the case in certain American states, that is no way to proceed. We have to try and focus on rehabilitation so there will be good members of society. In my riding I don't have a prison farm, but I do have a school farm for dealing with troubled youth who want to learn about agriculture. They work with goats, all kinds of animals, and the young people do the work, which won't necessarily lead them to working on a farm, but they learn discipline by working on a farm. Animals have to keep to a certain schedule and learning to care for animals is a big responsibility. So this farm is a place that is quite exceptional for teaching young people discipline because young people don't have a choice. They work with animals, they work with nature, and you have to manage that whole aspect, and it leads to very good results.

So I ask the members of this Committee to be prepared to visit this prison farm so that they can see for themselves what's going on. No doubt there are ways to improve the situation but before we shut everything down and throw everything out, I fear that we may be throwing out the baby with the bath water. We should assume our responsibilities and ensure that we can take a comprehensive view of what's going on in these prison farms.

JS: Bloc-Quebecois Member of Parliament André Bellavance, heard there through a translator on November 17th, 2009, as part of Canada's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. While Canada's Conservative government support the ongoing closure of the prison farm program, opposition parties as heard there oppose the closures. Speaking next and in support of the closures was Conservative MP Pierre Lemieux who represents the Ontario riding of Glengarry-Prescott-Russell. This clip is an interesting one to pay attention to because perhaps the most controversial statements that have been made by Canada's previous and current Minister of Public Safety were their references to the farms being, "outdated" and, "based on a model of farming that is labour intensive and not capital intensive as farming is today." But despite this position by Canada's Conservative government, the Minister's Conservative colleague Pierre Lemieux appears to disagree with the Minister, because as heard here, he believes that the prison farms are in fact, "too capital intensive."

Pierre Lemieux: Thank you Chair. To say at the outset that we have to target programs and the problem here, yes we do want to rehabilitate inmates but we want them to be able to use their skills, their talents in society and we recognize that many of the people in prison, not many prisoners who move after their period of incarceration, work on farms. We're already

recognizing, as a committee, that it's very challenging to enter farming. Prisoners face the same challenges, if not bigger challenges. Basically I'm saying that we should be developing skills and talents for them to actually fit into a trade or a line of work once they leave prison, and not many of them go into farming.

The second thing is that it's not free to the correctional system. They must purchase, maintain, update, and overhaul farm equipment. There's a lot of money tied up just in the capital costs of running a prison farm, and there are six of them. It's a program that costs money. That money can be used to better fund other programs and to support better programs.

The third thing I want to say is that Mr. Easter mentioned that all surrounding farms will lose because of this, but I actually think they will gain because of this. The prisoners are working on prison farms and they probably consume most of what they produce. If those farms were not there, the prison would be buying local produce, supporting farms in the surrounding area. So I want to correct that, because I don't believe that was an accurate statement made by Mr. Easter.

JS: Conservative Member of Parliament Pierre Lemieux. Now Pierre Lemieux introduces the subject of “accurate” statements, but just as was mentioned back in July 2009 when *Deconstructing Dinner* first aired an episode on the prison farm issue, it was quite convincingly demonstrated that the likelihood of these institutions purchasing product from local farms is, well, highly unlikely, when institutions are almost always served by one of only a handful of national and multinational food service companies.

But moving onto the November 17th meeting was once again Liberal MP Wayne Easter sharing some final remarks on what he believes is the government’s “real objective” of what they would like to do with the farmland soon to be left vacant by the prison farm program.

Wayne Easter: I think the real issue here, in terms of why these particular prison farms are closing.... I might say, Mr. Chair, that the 2007 study, “A Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety”, is the only study that has been done and released, and it never even referenced the prison farm. As in so much of what this government does, they move ahead on perceptions and assumptions without any real evidence. That's what we're seeing here again.

I think the real point, the Minister of Public Security said it in response to an order paper question tabled on October 6th on what the plans were for the land on which the prison farms currently reside. The answer was, and I quote, “Future additional capacity needs may make it necessary for some of the land to be used for prison constructions.” In an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, Peter Van Loan stated on October 16th, “It wouldn't be prudent to dispose of the land if you may have potential plans in the future to build super regional prisons.”

So the real objective here, Mr. Chair, in closing down these prison farms, which give rehabilitative effect to inmates, which give training and skills in terms of farming, which teach a lot of skills in terms of teamwork, etc.... I think the real impact is that the government doesn't care about that. They might want to sell some of the land as an asset to cover the deficit they're driving this country into. They may want to use some of the land to build a super-prison, so we

can throw more people in jail without the rehabilitative impact that provision farms can provide. That's really the whole thrust of this government.

As the Minister of Public Safety had said, and it's indicative of the government as a whole in terms of everything from their agriculture policy to everything else, they really don't believe.... as Mr. Van Loan said, "We felt that money could be more adequately redirected to programs where people would actually gain employable skills...". It's just another insult to the farming community.

For all those reasons, Mr. Chair, I believe we should do this study. I do expect the government members will likely vote against it, because if there's one thing about these government members, it's that they don't want to find out the facts. Thank you very much.

JS: Liberal Member of Parliament Wayne Easter. As is the process when a motion is put forward in Committee, members are then invited to vote on the motion, which, in this case was Easter's proposal for the committee to study the ongoing closure of the farms and visit the prison farms in and around Kingston, Ontario. But November 17th was an unusual day for the committee, because while *opposition* members usually maintain a majority, November 17th was a rare occasion when Conservative Committee Chair Larry Miller was absent. His absence placed a *Liberal* MP as the *acting* chair and because committee chairs are not allowed to vote, this left Conservative MPs with a majority on that particular day. Wayne Easter has suggested Miller's absence as being a deliberate move to prevent his motion from being passed. And so the outcome of the vote came as no surprise.

Mr. Chairman: Question has been called. All those in favour of the motion? All those against the motion? Motion is defeated.

JS: A full unedited recording of that November 17th prison farm dialogue as part of Canada's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food has been archived online at deconstructingdinner.ca and posted under the February 4th, 2010 episode.

soundbite

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner – a syndicated weekly radio show and podcast produced in Nelson, British Columbia at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY. I'm Jon Steinman.

On today's episode we're revisiting with a controversial issue first introduced on the show back in July 2009 – the Future of Canada's Prison Farms. While seven months have now passed *since* that episode, the future of the farms does not look any better for those who are opposing their closures. The most vocal opposition has come from the National Farmers Union and the Union of Solicitor General Employees. Opposition has also come from many of the inmates themselves – some who we heard back in July have publicly shared their thoughts through letters. And the Canadian public *also* seems to, quite convincingly, oppose the closures. Canada's national newspaper The Globe and Mail conducted an on-line poll with well over 11,000 people responding. Of those 11,000 people, 92% opposed the closures, while only 8% supported them. And so we arrive at February 1st just days before this broadcast goes to air, when opposition

groups coalesced to host an event in the riding of the recently appointed Minister of Public Safety, Vic Toews. With Prime Minister Stephen Harper's recent Cabinet Shuffle, event organizers quickly responded to host the event just blocks from the Minister's Office in Steinbach, Manitoba. Deconstructing Dinner partnered with event organizers to host a live and interactive video webcast and even with the last-minute nature of the event, an estimated 100 people tuned in from across the country to view and participate in the panel discussion which hosted Liberal MPs Wayne Easter and Mark Holland, the NDP's Niki Ashton, and Green Party candidate Kate Storey. Minister Toews was invited to the event in light of it being hosted in his very riding, but the Minister declined the invite. Introducing the event and commenting on the Minister's absence was John Hutton of the John Howard Society of Manitoba. The Society works with men in conflict with the law, before, during and after incarceration.

John Hutton: We're very much concerned with this particular decision because we think the prison farms provide an excellent opportunity for inmates to develop very useful skills related to employment that they need when they're released and if they don't have an opportunity to learn some of these employment skills, it may hinder them in finding a job when they're released in the community and that may lead to them coming back into jail or prison in the future. And we don't like to see that. The event is being co-sponsored by the John Howard Society, the coalition to save the prison farms, and it's an all party discussion. Unfortunately one party is absent and we have invited Vic Toews who is the Member of Parliament for this area which is why we're in Steinbach today, and also the Minister responsible for prisons to participate. He declined to take part and apparently declined to have anyone to fill in on his absence.

JS: John Hutton of the John Howard Society. Also helping organize the event was Andrew McCann of Urban Agriculture Kingston. We first heard from Andrew on our July 2nd, 2009 episode on prison farms and here he is again on February 1st, 2010 in Steinbach, Manitoba.

Andrew McCann: My name is Andrew McCann and I'm from Kingston, Ontario where two of the six prison farms are located. I'm here today on behalf of the Save our Prison Farms Campaign and we organized this to be in the Minister's riding. Actually it was going to be in Peter Van Loan's riding, the former Minister, on Saturday, when Wayne could make it up, but when the cabinet shuffle happened we quickly tried to reorganize to be here. The key thing about it is not only are we here physically in the Minister's riding just down the street not too far from his constituency office, but we are also live on the internet with, I see right now, 68 Canadians watching from across Canada. Well it's probably a lot more than 68 because I know at least people in Kingston are kind of in a group watching it on one computer. So there's probably 100 Canadians watching live online which is an interesting way to do democracy.

But thank you all for being here, local people from Manitoba and concerned probably about all the farms but about the Rockwood Institution north of Winnipeg. So the reason I'm up speaking right now is to try to give a bit of background behind the campaign. The campaign started in March. The prison farms – there was actually no announcement from the federal government. A Kingston reporter dug out the story and the reason it's a big deal in Kingston is because two of the six farms are in Kingston. Frontenac Institution and Pittsburgh Institution are both in Kingston, Ontario. Frontenac Institution in particular has a 160 if I'm correct, cattle dairy herd, and that herd is a prize winning herd, one of the top 10%, in the top 10 percentile in the province

of Ontario and it has almost 900 acres of land, some of the best farmland in Kingston. Unlike Manitoba, in eastern Ontario we farm between the rocks so 900 acres of good land is hard to come by. It's probably the best urban farm in Canada. So we'd rather see it growing food than houses. It's an excellent program and we would like to see it continue.

So we worked hard, local farm organizations, I represent urban agriculture Kingston but we've worked with the national farmers union and the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul to organize a campaign. The union of Solicitor General Employees of Canada has also been very involved in supporting the campaign and they've given it a bit of a national presence. We organize events in Kingston about 250 farmers came out to an event in early March at St. Lawrence College and the reason so many came out was because there was an abattoir at Joyceville, Pittsburgh Institution just north of Kingston. There's not really an operational farm there anymore but there is an abattoir that is the main abattoir for cattle slaughter for small scale farmers in our area who aren't sending their cows off to the feed lot. It's a very very important resource and farmers were certainly upset. Now Minister Van Loan did actually say he would keep that open, although there has been no time commitment in terms of how long it's going to stay open.

There has been a lot of activism in Kingston but not really in other areas, so I just want to list off the farms, so there's in Kingston as I said there's Pittsburgh and Frontenac Institutions. Starting in the east working west, there's Westmoreland Institution in Dorchester, New Brunswick, which also has a dairy herd. Then we're here in the Rockwood Institution in Stony Mountain which is north of Winnipeg. In Saskatchewan near Prince Albert there's the Riverbend Institution and near Calgary in Innisfail there's the Bowden Institution. I actually myself probably know less about those other farms across the country than the MP's and others who are here today, some of whom, Mark and Wayne in particular have recently this morning visited the Rockwood Institution so I'm sure they'll tell us a bit about the dismantling process there because we understand that it's pretty much a done deal. So I guess that's the other reason why we've organized this event in the Minister's riding despite several events in the Kingston area and in Ottawa, a barbeque that thousands of people were at on Sparks Street in downtown Ottawa. Despite events being organized in New Brunswick as well, really there's been no change in direction on this policy which kind of surprises me because the reasons the federal government for shutting it down included "we're losing 4 million dollars a year on our prison farms" and our answers have been, "well wouldn't prisons make money" and is, "4 million dollar really a lot of money in a 300 million dollar plus budget" and, "isn't it worth spending 4 million dollars for prisoners to grow their own food isn't that a good rehabilitative program". The other answer that they've given when we press them on the money is, "well it's not really relevant training" and Minister Vic Toews on the radio this morning was interviewed in discussion with John Hutton and myself and he gave the same argument, "it's not a relevant training" and what I wanted to say back but I didn't get a chance was, "how can you say that in Manitoba, that farming is not a relevant training for rehabilitation and developing a work ethic and a commitment to work on behalf of prisoners."

The truth is that very few prisoners who participate in training programs get work in that field. It's not really about the specific job skills although you learn a lot of job skills working on the farm everything from welding to some computer work if you're managing the herd etc. But it's

really not about the specific technical skills as much as it's about getting up in the morning, going to work, having the respect as a prisoner is probably not had a great experience of paid employment, the respect of your coworkers and most importantly the farmers who you're working with. So we encourage all the listeners to go to the National Farmers Union and Union of Solicitor General Employees website and learn to write letters, hand written letters, to Minister Vic Toews to try to turn this thing around before it's too late. Before the dairy herd in particular in Westmoreland and Kingston are sold off. Because when those cows are gone as any farmer knows, you can't rebuild the dairy herd just like you can't just train farmers overnight.

JS: Andrew McCann of the Save Our Prison Farms Campaign speaking on February 1st, 2010 in Steinbach, Manitoba. The location of the event was strategic by the event organizers as it happens to be the political riding of the recently appointed Minister of Public Safety, Vic Toews. Minister Toews was invited to the event to join fellow Liberal and NDP Members of Parliament but he declined and sent a letter to the organizers. That letter is posted on our website at deconstructingdinner.ca and posted under the February 4th episode. But here's John Hutton of the John Howard Society reading a segment of that letter.

JH: Before I bring up the next speaker, I was handed a few minutes ago, a statement from the Minister and I've been asked just to read it and our remaining panellists would have an opportunity to address it. This is from Minister Toews. He writes, "I would like to assure you that the government of Canada recognizes the valuable contribution of farming to the Canadian economy, while there is no doubt that work on prison farm operations offers meaningful activity for offenders, the decision to close these operations was based on the need for offender training to be more appropriately aligned with the new vision for transforming federal corrections in Canada. Furthermore, I'm pleased to report that the Correctional Service of Canada intends to continue the operation of the abattoir was mentioned earlier Pittsburgh Institution's abattoir in Kingston under an arrangement with an independent operator. The prison farms are based on an agricultural model from an earlier era. Agriculture has changed as in many other sources of the economy, capital has replaced labour. As a result, very few inmates ultimately find jobs in the agricultural sector despite time spent on prison farms and the significant cost invested, 4 million dollars annually. Holding a job after returning to the community is one of the strongest factors in keeping individuals from reoffending. As such, we would better serve prisoners and society by having training focus on skills that lead to actual jobs in the community. Prison farms training does not do that any longer. Although these farm operations will close, new training opportunities and alternative employment programs will be implemented at these minimum security institutions. These new programs and activities will provide a broader array of employment opportunities to offenders beyond agriculture and will enhance the ability of offenders to obtain employment upon release. It should also be noted that the land will remain the property of Correctional Service of Canada."

JS: John Hutton reading a letter from Minister of Public Safety Vic Toews. Despite the Minister not attending the event, he did field a radio interview that day on CJOB 68, a radio station in Manitoba. The Minister echoed the controversial comments made by the previous Minister and his Conservative Colleagues, but this time Minister Toews amplified those remarks this time referring to the prison farms as being right out of a pre-industrial era.

Vic Toews: The skills that are generally speaking being offered in these facilities are not technologically relevant. It's like training people for the horse and buggy days.

JS: Canada's Minister of Public Safety, Vic Toews. Also at the February 1st, Save Our Prison Farms event was NDP Member of Parliament Niki Ashton. Ashton represents the Manitoba riding of Churchill and is the NDP's Rural and Community Development Critic. Here are just a few segments of her remarks.

Niki Ashton: I work closely with our agricultural critic Alex Atamanenko who has been part of this campaign as well. But certainly I'm here not just as the rural critic but also as a Manitoba MP and as somebody who's very concerned about what the closure of prison farms means to the way we deal with corrections, the way we see corrections, the way we deal with food security in our regions and in our country, and really the overall question of how we're moving forward in Canada at this point in time. But besides the rehabilitative element which goes without saying and the value of that, an even greater issue of this discussion of this campaign is our approach as a country to food security, to food sovereignty.

Prison farms are a snapshot of a system that's been built over years in Canada where we create a way that we provide for our own needs in terms of food. Much of the food that prison farms grow, much of the product that comes out of prison farms whether its cattle or whatever it might be, goes back into feeding people in prisons and penitentiary. Not only that, they have formed linkages to local communities providing food and feed back into neighbouring networks. The Rockwood facility has an arrangement with I understand a large grocer to make sure that much of what they throw out goes into composting and they compost the leftovers that come from this grocery chain and use it as fertilizer back in the Rockwood facility that goes to create the food that is used. And this model of food self sufficiency is one that we as a country are moving further and further away from. Whether its our increased dependence on global networks, whether it's the way our hands have been tied when it comes from free trade agreements and dependence we have on other countries, specifically of course the US and Mexico in terms of much of the produce, and whether it's the overall loss of jobs and a livelihood that Canada was built on.

JS: The NDP's Niki Ashton. Also attending the February 1st, Save Our Prison Farms event was Liberal MP and Agriculture Critic Wayne Easter who we heard from earlier. In this next clip you'll hear segments from Easter's remarks (and also just to note, there is a slight technical difficulty where one of his comments cuts out and I'll also note that you'll hear Easter use the word "burn" which for those unfamiliar with his accent... is barn). Here's Wayne Easter.

WE: And as well, I'm also a former Solicitor General in Chretien's cabinet, so I've seen the prison system up close and personal. I've been on the farms and I can tell you the inmates, the correctional officers, the CORCAN people who actually work on the farms, not the manager who doesn't visit them but the people working the farms are proud of the work they do, and they're extremely proud of feeding the prison system. So I guess the first question that one needs to ask, is why should you be concerned whether the prison farms close down or they don't. Why should you be concerned. Look, we have a criminal justice system in Canada; we have a corrections system in... (Audio clip cuts out)

Fighting crime agenda and they're using the politics of fear to scare Canadians that you just got to throw those criminals in jail and basically lock them up. Niki made the point earlier on looking at super jails. And that is the way this government is going. So why should you be concerned. Look, in the United States system and our own system, people that go to jail are eventually going to come out on the street. So what is the best approach you can take on people that go in the system so that they can come out and be a member of your community where they're going to come back to some day, come back rehabilitated so that they can be a productive member of society once again. But you know, some of the people that end up in our prison system didn't have a hope in hell just to put it bluntly. Come out of broken families, gotten drugs, made a mistake, ended up in the system. Does society owe them the opportunity to try and come out of the system and be productive again?

So I'll say this, when Vic Toews was appointed, to be honest with you I was hopeful. Nobody could work with Peter Van Loan. Nobody could work with Peter Van Loan. But Vic Toews, he comes from Manitoba, he understands I think somewhat the agricultural industry, and you would think a new Minister when he comes in would look through the issue with different eyes. But that hasn't been the case. Because as the letter that John read and I've got it here and I just want to do a critical analysis of that letter in a second or two, he's not looking at it through different eyes. It's the same old rhetoric that some bureaucrat in the system wrote the letter for Vic Toews before he even had an opportunity to look at his briefing books and he certainly didn't go out and visit the farms.

But having been Solicitor General I've looked at the system up close. On the farms and others have mentioned it there's a whole work ethic issue, getting up in the morning going to work doing your thing. There's the skills and there's all kind of skills on the farm. Whether it's feeding cattle whether it's growing a crop it is working with living things whether it's crop or animal. It's welding. It's fixing equipment. One guy was in Kingston, the Frontenac Institution in the summertime, did a tour, and they have their dairy herd is the ninth best producing herd in Ontario. Their genetics go way back to the late 1930's early 1940's. They've got some excellent cows. High BCA.

They have a dairy processing operation, and you know one of the things that struck me, since I'm a dairy farmer myself or was, in going through that barn I seen this cow that was standing there and she was not in great shape, and so I asked the manager what's wrong with the cow. She's got foot rot. Why don't you just slaughter her? Because the inmates won't let us. The inmates were getting up babying; now this is some of them hardened criminals who might at one point in time might've rung our neck. But they worked with that animal. You're in tears when the animal is sick. Bathing that animal's foot during the night and during the day trying to bring back that animal to good health. That's rehabilitation. And you know you've heard all kinds of stories of people with mental problems working with horses or working with dogs. It's working with other life forms that has a rehabilitative impact. There's nothing better. And that's what you get on the farm. And so it isn't just the farm and these farms as I've said feed the system.

JS: Liberal Member of Parliament Wayne Easter. And the last panellist we'll hear from who spoke at the February 1, Save Our Prison Farms panel in Steinbach Manitoba was Liberal MP

Mark Holland. Holland is the Liberal party's Opposition Critic on Public Safety and National Security and he brings some unique perspectives to the prison farms debate. Holland represents the Ontario riding of Ajax-Pickering.

Mark Holland: Well you know the reality is we've changed Ministers. We were going to have Peter Van Loan, we were going to be in his riding, and instead we're here in Vic Toews riding. We may have switched Ministers but we didn't switch talking points. The reality is the Minister began the job immediately reiterating those points, and as my colleague Mr. Easter said that's a terrible shame. Because I think upon reflection and investigation he would find that this direction makes no sense. But in his letter if you read it, lies the real reality of what's happening here. He's talking about a new direction in corrections and this does not fit with their new direction. So one has to ask the question what is their new direction. And when you take a look at it, when you peel back the surface of their tough on crime agenda, it is nothing more than a rehashed version of what was tried by Republicans in the United States to enormously disastrous impact. Wayne talked about the huge discrepancy between our way of incarceration and the United States, but let's understand the origins of where that came from. In 1981, the rate of incarceration in the United States was roughly two times that of which it is in Canada. Wayne mentioned that it is now, that it was 600% higher. It's now 700% higher. So the United States incarcerates its citizens at a rate of 700 times, 700% rather, than in Canada. Contemplate that figure.

Now if one could demonstrate that our communities were actually made safer by this action, then that would be one thing. We could have an honest debate about it. But in the American experience, they are literally being crushed by the weight of that system. States like California are finding themselves having to release prisoners directly into the streets because they have no more room for them. The cost of housing all of these prisoners, incarcerating them, is so crushing, that they're finding that their budgets are bursting at the seams. They have no money for social programs; the very programs that in fact stop crimes from happening in the first place, creating a vicious cycle where to pay for new prisons, you have to cut from the programs that stop crimes happening in the first place. And if you wonder if it's happening here, take a look at how the Conservatives are spending on crime prevention. Most people don't realize that over the last number of years since 2004, excuse me since 2005 when they came in power, that the crime prevention budget spending has dropped by more than 50%. So the money we spend to stop crimes from happening has been cut by more than half. And at the same time we see an embrace of a US Republican style system that has met disastrous impact. In fact if there's any doubt about how poorly the system in the US works, consider the recidivism rates in California; the rate at which people reoffend. In California that rate is 70%. Imagine that. That means 7 out of every 10 inmates who are released in California reoffend. Now, why would we follow a model that is that disastrous. Particularly if we stop and consider the fact that more than 90% of inmates will be released. You can increase the sentences, you can make them more tough, but the reality is they're going to be back on the street.

So the real question each and every citizen needs to ask is who do we want released. Do we want the person that is released from prison to be better, to be ready to make positive contributions to our society, to be a good citizen, or do we want that person to exit worse than they were before. And if we have a prison system where we slash the programs and services that make people better, get them ready to work and make a positive contribution to our community, then we can

guarantee this, we will have more crime, it will cost us more, and we will have a less safe, secure and prosperous society as a result. So this direction defies all common sense, upon reflection. It defies all evidence, and it's just plain wrong.

So where do prison farms fit in this? Today, Wayne and I had the opportunity to tour the facility at Rockwood and to go through the prison. And I can tell you it breaks my heart to see it being systematically shut down. Different pieces of it slowly peeled away and cut back. In particular so, when I've been in places like Dorchester or Kingston here and talked to inmates who've gone through those programs. One courageous inmate in Kingston went up to the microphone and talked about the difference it made in his life. The life skills that it gave him, the perspective that it gave him, the empathy and compassion that he learned through animal husbandry; that we would slash programs like this. That we would cut them defies all logic. Even if I accept the numbers that they refuse to prove of 4 million dollars a year. How much does it cost if a person isn't rehabilitated, if a person comes out of a prison and commits another crime. What's the cost of that victimization. What's the cost of that person not getting a job and paying taxes, what's the cost of that person not making a positive contribution to our society. That's only one person. Multiply it against all the people who participate in the prison farm program and the cost argument is preposterous.

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner and that was Liberal MP and Public Safety critic Mark Holland speaking on February 1st, 2010 in Steinbach Manitoba. Unedited recordings of that 2-hour event have been posted on our website at deconstructingdinner.ca and listed under the February 4th episode. And be sure to check out those recordings which include many more interesting stories and comments from the panellists including Green Party candidate Kate Storey as well as questions posed by those who attended the event and who also tuned into the live webcast. The episode's web page also includes a number of additional resources as well for you to explore including links to the organizations who continue to work on saving and enhancing Canada's prison farm program. And closing out today's show, here once again is Liberal Member of Parliament, Wayne Easter

WE: And one other thing I met a young guy from Summerside who's been in the institutions something like 14 years he's got 2 more to go. And Summerside's in my province of Prince Edward Island. And he said, "look, I'm so lucky that I got sent to this institution where I got to work on this farm, and he did ever job going but now, he's the bookkeeper, runs the computer he took computer training, and he's learning management skills on a farm operation."

So don't tell me Vic Toews or CORCAN Canada, that you don't learn important skills. Of course as Vic says in his letter, very few inmates ultimately find jobs in the agriculture sector. What's that got to do with the issue. How many of you people in this room when you took education in the primary, and college system or university system, we don't all work in the field we thought we were going to work in. Things change in life, you go to different areas. So that's just bull to be honest about it.

ending theme

JS: And that was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman.

I thank my technical assistant John Ryan. The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

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