

# Canada's Rotten Egg Scandal: The Politics of Food in the 1970s

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*During the early 1970s, a Canadian marketing board's mismanagement of national egg supplies during a period of rapidly rising food prices generated a media sensation. The "rotten egg scandal" of 1974 resulted when the recently created Canadian Egg Marketing Agency (CEMA) failed to properly store millions of eggs, causing huge quantities to spoil. CEMA was the first national marketing agency to be established under the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act (1972) and as such faced both intense scrutiny and significant challenges as it attempted to establish an orderly market in a sector of the food industry that had previously been characterized by instability and crisis. Although CEMA remedied its early missteps and its system of supply management remained intact, this episode in Canada's postwar history illustrates growing divisions between urban consumers and rural producers and between those who advocated for regulated markets and those who championed unrestricted ones. Highly publicized debates between government officials, industry stakeholders, and the public over the affair also demonstrate the gendered politics of food pricing and increased concerns about wasted food during a period of resource scarcity.*

*Au début des années 1970, la mauvaise gestion des approvisionnements nationaux en œufs par un office de commercialisation canadien, au cours d'une période de hausse rapide des prix alimentaires, a fait sensation dans les médias. Le « scandale des œufs pourris » de 1974 s'est produit lorsque le nouvel Office canadien de commercialisation des œufs (OCCO) n'a pas réussi à entreposer des millions d'œufs convenablement, occasionnant ainsi la détérioration d'énormes quantités. L'OCCO a été la première agence de commercialisation nationale à être établie en vertu de la Loi sur les agences de commercialisation des produits agricoles (1972). En conséquence, elle a dû faire face à un examen minutieux et à des défis importants tout en tentant d'établir un marché ordonné dans un secteur de l'industrie alimentaire caractérisé par l'instabilité et la crise. Bien que l'OCCO ait remédié à sa faute et que son système de gestion des approvisionnements soit demeuré intact, cet*

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*épisode de l'histoire du Canada d'après-guerre illustre des divisions croissantes entre les consommateurs urbains et les producteurs ruraux, ainsi qu'entre ceux qui prônaient les marchés réglementés et ceux qui défendaient le marché libre. Les débats très médiatisés entre les représentants gouvernementaux, les parties prenantes de l'industrie et le public, issus de cette affaire, témoignent également de la politique genrée qui régit la tarification des aliments et des préoccupations croissantes concernant le gaspillage de la nourriture en période de disette des ressources.*

THE 1970S WERE A TUMULTUOUS PERIOD in Canada. From 1962 to 1973, the country saw a period of exceptional growth, but by 1974, concerns about inflation had intensified, unemployment rates had grown, and the Liberal government's conflicting policy initiatives to combat "stagflation" (the combination of stagnant economic output, high unemployment, and high inflation) had caused considerable unrest in Canadian society.<sup>1</sup> Historians writing about this period have tended to focus on the political crisis of Quebec separatism and the socio-economic disruption that resulted from the first oil shock, but turmoil and public discord also resulted from rapidly rising food prices and a host of food-related issues. In response to alarm over inflation in the food sector, the federal government created the Food Prices Review Board in May 1973 and appointed economist and past president of the Consumers' Association of Canada, Beryl Plumptre, as its chair. From early on in her tenure, Plumptre was widely criticized for her inability to affect the rising cost of food, and at the same time she became "one of the most newsworthy figures" in Canadian public life in large part due to a series of headline-grabbing disagreements with federal Minister of Agriculture Eugene Whelan.<sup>2</sup> Plumptre and Whelan clashed early and often, with their public conflict growing as Plumptre came to represent the concerns of the consumer and Whelan the concerns of the farmer. The conflict between these officials resulted from a broader competition between interest groups in Canada's postwar food supply chain wherein consumers sought cheap food while farmers attempted to secure a fair income for their labour and investments.

Plumptre's and Whelan's divided interests were further crystallized by a strong ideological rift. Whelan had supported the passage of the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act (1972) and was a promoter of supply management in the dairy, poultry, and egg sectors. He and others believed that supply management, which controlled production through regional quotas, import restrictions, and pricing formulas, was the best option available for ensuring stable supplies in these notoriously volatile agricultural sectors and assisting producers who had long suffered from cyclical

1 Christo Aivalis, *The Constant Liberal: Pierre Trudeau, Organized Labour, and the Canadian Social Democratic Left* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), pp. 109–138; Dimintry Anastakis, *Re-Creation, Fragmentation, and Resilience: A Brief History of Canada Since 1945* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 268–272; Alvin Finkel, *Our Lives: Canada After 1945* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1997), pp. 141 and 145–152; Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, *Canada since 1945: Power, Politics, and Provincialism*, rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), pp. 338–358.

2 Charles Enman, "Inflation Fighter Beryl Plumptre, 99, Dies," *Vancouver Sun*, April 10, 2008, p. C11.

boom and bust prices as well as an increasing cost-price squeeze. Plumptre, on the other hand, believed that the new powers awarded to marketing boards came at the expense of ordinary consumers and a more “efficient” system of production. Whelan and Plumptre were demonstrative of the opposing views of the new act and neither side could agree on the best course forward in those sectors now marked by supply management.

The Canadian Egg Marketing Agency (CEMA) was the first of the newly created national marketing boards tasked with instituting orderly marketing when little order had existed in the egg industry before. The national egg marketing board, in the first such plan outside of milk marketing, instituted provincial quotas based on the five-year production average from 1967 to 1971, amounting to 475 million dozen eggs nationally.<sup>3</sup> CEMA had significant challenges from the start, the most pressing of which was divesting itself of a huge stockpile of eggs that had accumulated before the Canadian Egg Marketing Proclamation in late 1971. CEMA ultimately failed to do so, and when inadequate storage facilities caused millions of eggs to go bad, the “rotten egg scandal” became headline news. Beyond the poor public image this crisis created for the newly established CEMA, the incident became a lightning rod for controversy about wasted food and wasteful bureaucracy, while also raising questions about whose interests were being served by systems of controlled production. This discourse intensified during the egg scandal as supporters of CEMA and those opposing the agency continued to debate which food policies best served Canadians.

Despite the intense and focused controversy surrounding this episode, it has been largely ignored by historians. What little has been written about rotten eggs simply acknowledges that it was one event in a series of public spats that arose “now and then” between Plumptre and Whelan over food prices and policies, and that while it “should ... have been a public scandal,” ultimately, it “was copy for the journalist, nothing more,” or so one account believed.<sup>4</sup> To dismiss it as such, however, ignores the broader societal concerns and tensions it represented, including concerns about food waste, fears about a new and deteriorating Canadian economic context, and even the gendered nature of food politics.

More scholarly attention needs to be paid to the history of food waste especially. Although some interest has been paid to the cultural, social, and political mechanisms that condition our attitudes to waste more broadly, and food waste is becoming an increasingly popular topic of study in sociology and geography, it remains generally under-researched and under-theorized across the social sciences and humanities.<sup>5</sup> As sociologist David Evans has noted in his 2014 book *Food Waste: Home Consumption, Material Culture and Everyday Life*, the dearth of engagement

3 Jodey Nurse and Bruce Muirhead, “The Long Road to Stability: Egg Farmers in Canada and Fair Farm Pricing,” *Agricultural History Review*, vol. 68, no. 2 (2020), p. 304.

4 Bothwell, Drummond, and English, *Canada since 1945*, p. 349.

5 David Evans, *Food Waste: Home Consumption, Material Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 7. See also Hugh Campbell, David Evans, and Anne Murcott, “Measurability, Austerity and Edibility: Introducing Waste into Food Regime Theory,” *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 51 (2017), pp. 168–177; and David Evans, Hugh Campbell, and Anne Murcott, “A Brief Pre-History of Food Waste and the Social Sciences,” *Sociological Review*, vol. 60, no. S2 (2012), pp. 5–26.

by scholars working on this topic in the social sciences is “surprising given the prevalence of these concerns in food policy, cultural politics, and environmental debate.”<sup>6</sup> Historians who have investigated the history of food waste have tended to do so in the context of war, and especially waste reduction campaigns on the home front, which were typically undertaken by women.<sup>7</sup> A deeper historical analysis of attitudes toward food waste in the period after the “Green Revolution” of the 1950s and 1960s is needed, however, to better assess our contemporary concerns about modern food systems and wasted food at both the micro- and macro-levels of food production, distribution, and consumption. Canada’s rotten egg scandal of the mid-1970s provides one such informative study.

Another variable that was central to the rotten egg scandal was the rise of more widespread bureaucracy that attracted attention and criticism, at least among certain segments of society. In Canada, agencies of the state expanded, and new policies and programs were implemented to bolster the welfare state apparatus.<sup>8</sup> The rotten egg scandal, however, came at a moment in time when some Canadian policymakers were undecided about whether to expand or curb the welfare state. Some farm advocates who wanted to see farmers’ incomes rise in a fashion similar to workers in the manufacturing and industrial sectors believed that, for some commodities, supply management was the answer. This was especially true for the notoriously volatile egg and dairy sectors.<sup>9</sup> The early mismanagement of egg supplies, however, provided ammunition to critics of supply management to argue that the new scheme was misguided. Supporters, on the other hand, believed that the new system needed improvement, but was essentially sound.

Finally, amid fears of wasted resources and fiscal challenges was another growing concern: the tension between farmers and consumers. Certainly, this tension was not new, but this episode reveals growing concerns about an increasingly urban society in which fewer and fewer individuals had a personal connection

6 Evans, *Food Waste*, p. 7.

7 Despite the importance of these waste reduction campaigns and that they were a major component of women’s home front mobilization, as Rebecca Tompkins has noted in her study of Japanese women’s wartime campaigns to encourage thrift and frugality in the wartime economy, this topic too has received relatively little attention. Rebecca Tompkins, “‘Uncovering the Waste of the World’: Women and the State in Japanese Wartime Waste Campaigns, 1937–1945,” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal*, vol. 53 (2018), p. 28. Other studies of women’s efforts to reduce waste during wartime include Heike Weber, “Towards ‘Total’ Recycling: Women, Waste and Food Waste Recovery in Germany, 1914–1939,” *Contemporary European History*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2013), pp. 371–397; Chad Denton, “Récupérez! The German Origins of French Wartime Salvage Drives, 1939–1945,” *Contemporary European History*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2013), pp. 399–430; and Anna Ascenzi and Marta Brunelli, “Accomplishing ‘the Silent Mission of Italian Women at War’: The Fascist ‘Pedagogy of War’ for Women: From the Kitchen Front to the War Garden,” *History of Education and Children’s Literature*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2016), pp. 497–522. In Canada, Ian Mosby discusses the conservation efforts aimed at converting household waste products into useful materials and reducing waste more generally; see Ian Mosby, *Food Will Win the War: The Politics, Culture, and Science of Food on Canada’s Home Front* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), pp. 97–132.

8 Anastakis, *Re-Creation*, pp. 54–57.

9 For discussions of the price instability farmers suffered in these sectors, see Jodey Nurse, “‘Milk is Milk’: Marketing Milk in Ontario and the Origins of Supply Management,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2017), pp. 127–196; and Nurse and Muirhead, “Long Road to Stability,” pp. 286–306.

to food production.<sup>10</sup> Farmers believed the consumers did not understand the complexities of their livelihoods and the challenges of food production, while consumers believed that farmers used their political privilege to shape economic policies in their favour.<sup>11</sup> Although the Second World War had been an important turning point for Canadians' acceptance of more government intervention in the market,<sup>12</sup> by the 1960s, consumerism in Canada was taken for granted and one's ability to buy things meant one's ability to achieve "the good life."<sup>13</sup> Policies that were seen to benefit farmers' incomes by increasing farm prices were therefore assumed to harm consumers' ability to buy cheaper goods.

Beyond the geographical division, this tension between the consumer and the farmer also had a significant gendered dimension, in which the female suburban and urban housewife's interests were pitted against the male farmer's welfare. While more women were also working during this period, women continued to be the primary grocery shoppers and meal planners, and they were generally the ones who were tasked with defending the rights of the consumer.<sup>14</sup> In the case of the egg saga, this resulted in women complaining about wasted eggs and advocating for cheaper food, while egg farmers and their supporters (largely represented by a male-oriented leadership base), advocated for sustainable prices paid to producers. These gendered stereotypes ignore the significant role that women farmers played in the egg and poultry industries and their contributions to food production on farms more broadly,<sup>15</sup> and the contemporary controversies surrounding women's economic roles and contributions, such as the *Murdoch v. Murdoch* case in 1973,<sup>16</sup> but this

10 For some discussion of these early tensions between farmer and consumer prices, see Magda Fahmi, "Counting the Costs of Living: Gender, Citizenship, and a Politics of Prices in 1940s Montreal," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4 (2002), pp. 483–504.

11 Thomas Lyson argues that Americans remained apathetic toward the farm crisis during this period because, in addition to the fact that few consumers had little direct contact with farmers or farm life, consumers had also come to "view 'bad' news from a farm sector as a recurring theme in the nation's economic events." I would argue the same can be said for the Canadian context. See Thomas A. Lyson, "Who Cares About the Farmer? Apathy and the Current Farm Crisis," *Rural Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 4 (1986), pp. 490–502.

12 See Mosby, *Food Will Win the War*; and Julie Guard, *Radical Housewives: Price Wars and Food Politics in Mid-Twentieth Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), pp. 50–80.

13 Bettina Liverant, *Buying Happiness: The Emergence of Consumer Consciousness in English Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), p. 7.

14 Joy Parr and Gunilla Ekberg, "Mrs. Consumer and Mr. Keynes in Postwar Canada and Sweden," *Gender and History*, vol. 8, no. 2 (August 1996), p. 213. See also Guard, *Radical Housewives*; and Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). While a number of works have been published recently about women's consumer practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more historical studies of women's postwar consumer activism are needed.

15 Jodey Nurse, "Farming Diversity: Women's Past, Present, and Future in Canadian Egg Farming," (unpublished Mitacs Accelerate Internship Final Report, January 2018); see also Wendee Kubic, "Farm Women: The Hidden Subsidy in Our Food," in Brenda Cranney and Andrea Medovarski, eds., *Canadian Woman Studies: An Introductory Reader* (Toronto: Ianna Publication and Education, 2006); Charlotte Van de Vorst, *Making Ends Meet: Farm Women's Work in Manitoba* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002); Jane Knowles and Wava Haney, eds., *Women and Farming. Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988); and Carolyn Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983).

16 In a 1973 Supreme Court Case, Justice Ronald Martland, writing for the majority, denied Irene Murdoch a proprietary interest in the family ranch that she had helped to build into a prosperous operation during her 25-year marriage. This denial led women's groups across Canada to mobilize a matrimonial property law reform movement, stimulated a renewed farm women's movement, and fuelled conversations about

dichotomy played out time and time again in the media coverage of this scandal. Furthermore, Eugene Whelan and Beryl Plumpre often personified the “his” versus “hers” nature of the producer versus consumer debate. Such divisions furthered the notion that the interests of consumers and producers were incompatible. These competing interests were believed to be at the heart of the conflict in food systems—consumers wanted cheaper food prices, while producers wanted sustainable prices for their food products.

### **What Came First? The Canadian Egg Marketing Board**

The Canadian egg industry had a long history of instability before supply management was enacted in the 1970s. Cyclical boom and bust periods intensified in the 1920s, when increased production resulted from technological innovation, improvements in animal husbandry, breeding, and nutrition, and increased demand from rapidly growing urban markets. Commercial egg production had been promoted by those in the industry and by government agricultural representatives as an industry that new farmers could enter without a great deal of land or capital. Egg farming also remained an important supplementary enterprise for farm women who, often with the help of their children, were usually the primary managers of flocks on mixed farming operations.<sup>17</sup> By 1960, however, egg farming was much more commercialized and specialized, yet producers suffered increasingly volatile cycles of depressed prices due to cycles of overproduction. Egg producers were active participants in postwar discussions held between Canadian farmers, farm advocates, and government policymakers about the so-called farm problem, which saw farmers’ incomes steadily decreasing.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, egg producers had to contend with increased competition from cheap international imports and increased interprovincial trade.<sup>19</sup> This competition intensified during the 1960s, with the result that in the early 1970s a “Chicken and Egg War” broke out among poultry and egg producers across Canada, particularly those located in the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, and Manitoba. This trade war resulted in the confiscation of eggs and chickens intended for transport across provincial borders and raised serious concern

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women’s economic roles and contributions. See Mysty S. Clapton, “*Murdoch v. Murdoch*: The Organizing Narrative of Matrimonial Property Law Reform,” *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2008), pp. 197–230. See also Monda Halpern, *And On That Farm He Had a Wife: Ontario Farm Women and Feminism, 1900–1970* (Kingston and Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), pp. 134–135; and Pauline Rankin, “The Politicization of Ontario Farm Women,” in Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, eds., *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 319.

17 Nurse, “Farming Diversity”; Karen Sayer, “‘His Footmarks on Her Shoulders’: The Place of Women within Poultry Keeping in the British Countryside, c. 1880 to c. 1980,” *Agricultural History Review*, vol. 61, no. 2 (2013), pp. 301–329; and Jane Adams, “Modernity and U.S. Farm Women’s Poultry Operations: Farm Women Nourish the Industrializing Cities, 1880–1940,” (paper presented at The Chicken: Its Biological, Social, Cultural, and Industrial History: From Neolithic Middens to McNuggets conference, Yale University Program in Agrarian Studies, May 17–19, 2002), accessed September 30, 2020, [http://www.dgorton.com/farmsite/chickens\\_modernity/adams-pg\\_1.html](http://www.dgorton.com/farmsite/chickens_modernity/adams-pg_1.html).

18 Nurse and Muirhead, “Long Road to Stability,” p. 275.

19 Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 17, vol. 3765, file 611.9E1 pt. 3, Eugene Whelan to Pierre Trudeau, June 30, 1970.

among government officials and political commentators about the balkanization of Canada's economy.<sup>20</sup>

To combat the persistent issue of overproduction, low farmer incomes, trade disputes, and the immediate problems related to the Chicken and Egg War, the federal government passed the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act in 1972, which made possible the establishment of the CEMA that same year. CEMA was intended to foster cooperation instead of competition among egg farmers and coordinate a national plan of production. The National Farm Products Marketing Council (NFPMC)—the public interest body that was also created through the 1972 act in order to provide oversight to these national marketing boards—declared that CEMA was “a major milestone in Canadian agricultural history” and represented “the culmination of many years of planning and negotiation within the egg producing industry and among provincial and federal governments.”<sup>21</sup>

The passage of the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act (1972) had been controversial—opponents to controlled production argued the act infringed on individual producers' rights and a “free market” system—but, as NFPMC member and farmer Ralph Ferguson observed in 1973 when he addressed the New Brunswick Poultry Council, the legislation finally allowed Canadian farmers to cooperate nationally and plan their production in “an orderly manner.”<sup>22</sup> He, like others who supported supply management, emphasized the benefits that orderly marketing had for the egg industry, including protecting farmers and consumers from seasonal fluctuations in prices and allowing for “economic justice” by giving “the rural community [a] share in the national prosperity” and the chance to participate in policy decisions.<sup>23</sup> Paul Babey, the chair of the NFPMC, was hopeful that a formerly divided industry would now work together, which he predicted would benefit not only producers and processors but also consumers, who would be assured “the availability of high-quality, Canadian-produced food at stable and reasonable prices.”<sup>24</sup>

As the first marketing agency to be established under the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act, CEMA was scrutinized by critics and supporters alike to see how it would manage implementing a national supply management system. In addition to setting provincial production quotas, the agency was tasked with establishing egg prices that would allow producers a reasonable return on their labour and investment. This meant an immediate increase in egg prices. In British Columbia, for example, a 6–7¢ per dozen increase (depending on egg size) was instituted. To mediate concerns, the BC Egg Marketing Board informed various levels of industry stakeholders, including government officials, processors,

20 Nurse and Muirhead, “Long Road to Stability,” p. 280. See also Jodey Nurse and Bruce Muirhead, “A Crisis in National Unity? The Chicken and Egg War, 1970–1971,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* (forthcoming in 2021).

21 LAC, Eugene F. Whelan fonds, R12298, vol. 374, file 2, National Farm Products Marketing Council (hereafter NFPMC), “Subject: Egg Agreement Signed,” November 30, 1972, p. 1.

22 LAC, Whelan Fonds, R12298, vol. 374, file 2, Ralph Ferguson, “Address to N. B. Poultry Council Annual Poultry Conference Sussex, N.B.,” April 25, 1973, p. 1.

23 LAC, Whelan Fonds, R12298, vol. 374, file 2, Ferguson, “Address to N. B. Poultry Council,” p. 14.

24 Paul Babey, quoted in LAC, Whelan fonds, R12298, vol. 374, file 2, NFPMC, “Subject: Egg Agreement Signed,” p. 3.

wholesalers, food columnists and commentators, and the general public, about the impending changes and the reasons for them—particularly increases in production costs.<sup>25</sup> Although CEMA and the provincial egg boards knew a backlash from consumers in light of increasing egg prices was forthcoming, supporters of CEMA appealed to what they believed was a widespread public belief in the idea of a fair wage.<sup>26</sup> Proponents argued that just as minimum wages in the non-farm sector had increased over the years to allow for fair worker compensation, food prices similarly needed to be adjusted so as to provide for fairer farmer compensation. For instance, the long-time editor of the leading Canadian poultry journal, *Canadian Poultryman*, Fred Beeson, wrote an open letter to MP Grace MacInnis after she criticized the increase in egg prices. Beeson pointed out the hypocrisy he believed the Vancouver-based NDP politician had demonstrated when he noted how she wished to keep food prices down but also encouraged increased wages, all the while protesting increased prices paid to farmers as their own costs increased. Beeson also noted that in the case of recent milk price increases, “over one half goes to the dairies, not the milk producers, because of increased labour costs.”<sup>27</sup> Farmers were acutely aware of this double standard, which was commonly heard in discussions about food prices, and they resented urban consumers who demanded their own wages be increased but ignored the need for increased food prices when farmers’ production costs rose—costs that were almost always beyond the farmer’s control. Beeson unapologetically supported increased commodity prices, which he argued were long overdue and still too often benefited processors and other middlemen more than farmers.

The inequity in negotiating power between processors and producers had had, in part, led to the implementation of supply management. In response to a Saskatchewan farmer’s letter complaining about the low egg prices farmers continued to receive in 1973, Whelan noted that since CEMA had been established, egg prices were higher than they had previously been; he also reminded the letter writer that before CEMA, egg producers in Canada had too often suffered returns below the cost of production as prices “bounced up and down like a yo-yo” and that the spread between prices at the farm gate and the consumer’s point of purchase had resulted from profit taking by middlemen, not producers.<sup>28</sup> He argued that “these production and price swings were no help to anyone in the system up to and including consumers who ultimately paid the shot for the economic waste brought on by the driving of producers and their facilities out of business, followed by the later replacement by others.”<sup>29</sup> Whelan defended the system of supply management

25 LAC, Whelan fonds, R12298, vol. 374, file 1, Canada Poultryman Industry Relations Division, “B.C. Egg Board’s Public Relations Effort Softens Reaction to News of 7c Price Hike,” March 14, 1973, p. 1.

26 Ontario Egg Producers’ Marketing Board, “Report on Pricing Committee,” *Canada Poultryman*, April 1974, p. 15.

27 LAC, Whelan fonds, R12298, vol. 374, file 1, Fred W. Beeson, “An Open Letter to Mrs. Grace MacInnis, M. P.,” March 14, 1973, p. 1.

28 LAC, Whelan fonds, R12298, vol. 374, file 1, Eugene Whelan to Mr. D. Patrick, Porcupine Plain, Saskatchewan, February 21, 1973.

29 LAC, Whelan fonds, R12298, vol. 374, file 1, Whelan to Patrick, February 21, 1973.



as necessary for stability in the egg sector and advocated for similar agencies in other agricultural sectors as well.

### **A Whiff of Scandal: Rotting Eggs Revealed in a Hungry World**

Most egg producers had agreed that changes were required in their industry. While they did not all agree on what those changes should be, many saw the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act (1972) as an opportunity to create a marketing system in which cooperation would replace competition and create stability where there had been little before. However, drawing up and implementing a national plan had substantial challenges. Significant problems soon surfaced, including the issue of production quota allocations, that is, the volume of egg production assigned to each province. The quota that CEMA initially allocated was based on pre-1972 production numbers, which were cumulatively higher than the current demand. Inflation and higher egg prices—approximately 79¢ per dozen in June 1974 as compared to 23–37¢ per dozen in January 1971—meant fewer eggs were being purchased.<sup>30</sup>

By 1974, many Canadian consumers were complaining about egg prices, and in July of that year, a new cause for complaint emerged. Newspaper reports claimed that eggs surplus to market demand were going bad due to improper storage conditions.<sup>31</sup> To store surplus eggs from the previous production regime, CEMA had previously sought out new warehouse facilities. Unfortunately, not only were storage periods growing longer than normal, but the new facilities were inadequately refrigerated. The result was thousands, and ultimately millions, of rotten eggs. This news led the Consumers' Association of Canada to demand lower retail prices for eggs and that CEMA be abolished so that there could be a "return to the law of supply and demand."<sup>32</sup> It and other consumer advocacy groups had already taken the position that supply management unfairly privileged farmers at the expense of consumers, and now the mismanagement of egg storage led these critics to challenge Canada's nascent national egg marketing system on another basis—that of waste.

Millions of eggs going bad was particularly troubling for Canadians because of widespread news coverage about food shortages and hunger around the world. These concerns were amplified by a growing environmental movement that, although not new, experienced a growth and diversification that saw a range of groups emerge to tackle issues such as population growth, diminished natural resources, urban sprawl, agriculture, human health, and pollution.<sup>33</sup> The waste of any food, not just eggs,

30 John E. Mahoney, letter to the editor, "Egg prices," *Globe and Mail*, June 26, 1974, p. 6; "The Week in Commodities: Bacon and Eggs Much Cheaper," *Globe and Mail*, January 1, 1971, p. B3. Producers needed government subsidies during the 1970–1971 period in order to survive the devastatingly depressed egg prices that saw them realizing significant losses with each egg produced and sold; "\$200,000 Fund: Nova Scotia to Subsidize Losses Suffered by Eggmen in 1970–71," *Canada Poultryman*, March 1972, p. 50.

31 Ross Henderson, "Thousands of Eggs Rotting as Agency Keeps Price Up," *Globe and Mail*, July 31, 1974, p. 1.

32 Henderson, "Thousands of Eggs Rotting," pp. 1–2.

33 Darcy Ingram, "Governments, Governance, and the 'Lunatic Fringe': The Resources for Tomorrow Conference and the Evolution of Environmentalism in Canada," *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 51 (2015), p. 77. For additional overviews of environmentalism in Canada during this period, see Judith I. McKenzie, *Environmental Politics in Canada: Managing the Commons into the Twentieth*

during a period of food scarcity in various countries in Africa and Asia was seen as immoral. Although Canadians were generally worried about food waste during this period,<sup>34</sup> rotten eggs were particularly upsetting because of the scale of the waste and because it was the result of bureaucratic and organizational error. As editorialized by the *Globe and Mail*, “No matter what may be said about the necessity for orderly marketing of Canadian eggs, it is immoral that Canada should be letting large quantities of food rot while half the world goes hungry and the prospect is for widespread famine.”<sup>35</sup> One Toronto resident deemed it “obscene” that eggs were left to rot “to maintain an economic law while a third of the world’s population starves to death.”<sup>36</sup> Another declared the waste a “social injustice” and argued that the surplus eggs should have been shipped to those in need and questioned why “the rest of the world [should] starve because of a couple of stupid bureaucrats.”<sup>37</sup>

Further, drought was taking a devastating toll in large parts of the world, leading experts to forecast that, without massive aid, places like India would see millions of people starve at the same time that “in Canada eggs rot.”<sup>38</sup> The “wanton destruction of scarce foods” was unforgivable to many in a world where half the population was reportedly “struggling to ward off starvation” and global climatic instability was putting pressure on available food supplies.<sup>39</sup>

To complicate CEMA’s situation further, previous agreements obliged it to export eggs to the United States at a reduced cost. The idea that American consumers would be able to secure cheaper Canadian products than Canadians generated further public anger.<sup>40</sup> By August, the number of eggs destroyed reportedly reached 9 million, and the *Globe and Mail*, one of the most vociferous critics of CEMA, called for the federal opposition parties to take action. It listed CEMA’s “inept” choices, including its allocation of quotas, the increased price paid to producers, the improper storage of eggs, and missed market opportunities that led it to be “taken to the cleaners by some smart Yankee traders” who arranged contracts at costs lower than what would have been received on the domestic market.<sup>41</sup> The newspaper condemned this “shocking mismanagement” and demanded the opposition “ask what was so wrong with a free market that Canadians had to have this bungling visited upon them.”<sup>42</sup>

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*Century* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Laura Sefton MacDowell, *An Environmental History of Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012). For a global assessment, see Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Longman, 2000).

34 Sid Chudle, letter to the editor, “Food Wasted on Places, Traveller Says,” and Isabelle Foreman, letter to the editor, “Restaurants Could Cut Food Waste,” *Toronto Star*, January 16, 1975, p. B5.

35 “Eggs Rot in a Hungry World,” *Globe and Mail*, August 1, 1974, p. 6.

36 Brian C. Pape, letter to the editor, “Letting Eggs Go Rotten Is a National Obscenity Writer Declares,” *Toronto Star*, September 9, 1974, p. C5.

37 George Colby, letter to the editor, “Why Let World Starve,” *Toronto Star*, September 9, 1974, p. C5.

38 “Eggs Rot in a Hungry World,” p. 6.

39 Ronald Anderson, “Canadians Only,” *Globe and Mail*, November 1, 1974, p. S2.

40 Ross Henderson, “9 Million Bad Eggs Destroyed, Price to Processors Jumps by 15 Cents,” *Globe and Mail*, August 27, 1974, p. 1.

41 “A Time for Opposition Egg-Throwing,” *Globe and Mail*, August 28, 1974, p. 6.

42 “Time for Opposition Egg-Throwing,” p. 6.

### Consumers versus Farmers

CEMA's early mismanagement of egg surpluses created distrust of the agency and the broader system of supply management. It also contributed to animosity between farmer and consumer groups during these years. Conservative consumer watchdog James McGrath described the destruction of the 9 million eggs as evidence of CEMA's "ineptitude" and "immorality,"<sup>43</sup> while Beryl Plumtre, as the head of the Food Prices Review Board, expressed disapproval of the organization and its "mismanaging the egg market to the detriment of Canadian consumers."<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, Eugene Whelan defended the principle of supply management despite the errors made by CEMA. Whelan criticized Plumtre for her inability to understand the complexities of the agricultural sector and of the egg sector in particular.<sup>45</sup> When recollecting this period, Whelan contended that "the biggest battle [he] fought for farmers" was against Plumtre, with her attacks on the farming community and belief that the "egg marketing board should be killed almost before it was hatched."<sup>46</sup> As he noted, he and Plumtre became very popular with the media because "nearly every day we were in a controversy about the price of some food product. She'd make a statement and I'd make a statement counteracting it."<sup>47</sup> Whelan believed strongly that Plumtre, like many other bankers, bureaucrats, and big-city residents he battled in and outside of government, did not understand the complexity of agriculture, the need for marketing boards to balance competing interests in the food supply chain, and the general unfairness of the marketplace for primary producers.<sup>48</sup>

Unlike most ministers in Pierre Trudeau's cabinet, Whelan was a farmer and had also worked various blue-collar jobs in manufacturing industries. He had grown up in a poor family in Amherstburg, Ontario, a rural community in the southwestern corner of the province near the mouth of the Detroit River. He did not complete high school but had years of experience in local politics prior to being elected an MP. Whelan complained that many politicians and bureaucrats knew very little about the challenges farmers faced.<sup>49</sup> He regarded Plumtre, with her privileged and bureaucratic background, ignorance of farming communities, and disregard for the regulatory systems he believed to be essential for supporting Canadian agriculture, as a prime example of "the kind of thinking that [he] had to deal with throughout [his] career."<sup>50</sup>

Not all farmers supported orderly marketing as strongly as Whelan did. The passage of the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act in 1972 had divided many agriculturalists, typically along lines related to their specific commodity production. For example, most beef farmers in Western Canada were generally opposed to

43 "Egg Action Called Inept," *Globe and Mail*, August 28, 1974, p. 11.

44 Donald Grant, "Whelan Chops 'That Plumtre,' Defends CEMA against Attack," *Globe and Mail*, August 31, 1974, p. 5.

45 "Whelan, Again, Supports Poultry Industry," *Canada Poultryman*, October 1974, p. 34.

46 Eugene Whelan with Rick Archbold, *Whelan: The Man in the Green Stetson* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1986), p. 153.

47 Whelan, *Whelan*, p. 153.

48 Grant, "Whelan Chops 'That Plumtre,'" p. 5; see also Whelan, *Whelan*, pp. 119–121 and 147–154.

49 Whelan, *Whelan*, p. 72.

50 Whelan, *Whelan*, p. 153.

marketing controls. Other farmers occupied that part of the ideological spectrum where they worried that the act would lead to more bureaucracy and too much regulation and control.<sup>51</sup> And farmers were consumers too. Generally, however, it was consumer advocate groups and newspapers such as the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* (whose editors were vocal critics of supply management) that published articles lamenting the new legislation and marketing boards. For instance, *Star* reporter Ellen Roseman mistakenly described CEMA as an “economic bonanza” for farmers and an “unmitigated disaster” for consumers and highlighted how groups, such as the Consumers’ Association of Canada, fought a vigorous campaign against the system their leadership argued allowed farmers to profit “at the expense of consumers.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the president of the Eglinton Federal Progressive Conservative Association, Robert S. Tebbutt, was unsympathetic to producer precarity in the marketplace, declaring that “No quasi-government body [was] going to tell the Canadian housewife how many eggs she must buy and what price she is to pay.”<sup>53</sup> Such anti-regulatory sentiments were typical of many newspaper articles that pitted farmers against consumers. Egg farmers’ voices were not as prominent as consumers’ in these big-city dailies, but when they were included they often noted that the present situation was “a lot better than the boom-and-bust cycles we used to have, when a few good years were followed by several bad years in which everyone was losing money.”<sup>54</sup>

Unlike many journalists, farmers and their representatives understood the history of their industry. When consumer groups suggested that farm marketing boards be replaced with direct subsidies to farmers, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture president Gordon Hill asked, “Where were these consumer advocates during the ’50s when surpluses piled high and kept farm prices low?”<sup>55</sup> Hill and other farmers remembered how in “the mid ’60s, the Consumers Association of Canada was urging government against paying large subsidies to Canadian farmers.” Farmers believed much of the criticism they received was unfair and continued to support marketing boards as necessary if they were to have “equal bargaining power with the large food corporations.”<sup>56</sup> As Hill declared, “I for one will not farm, will not produce food in a system that destroys my bargaining power.”<sup>57</sup>

Eggs were not the only food that cost consumers more during these years. By the end of August 1974, the wholesale price of sugar reached a record high of 42.8¢ per pound, up from 31¢ just a month earlier.<sup>58</sup> But egg prices made headlines because some Canadians were sceptical of the new system of supply management and angered by the discovery of wasted eggs. Even though Eugene Whelan’s defence of CEMA and a farmer’s right to earn a fair income was generally popular in rural

51 Don Baron, “The Agency that Laid 15 Million Rotten Eggs,” *Toronto Star*, September 11, 1974, p. B3.

52 Ellen Roseman, “The Egg Industry’s ‘in a Mess’ and Consumers deplore Prices,” *Toronto Star*, August 14, 1974, p. E11.

53 Robert S. Tebbutt, letter to the editor, *Globe and Mail*, September 19, 1974, p. 6.

54 Hubert Shillings, quoted in Roseman, “Egg Industry’s ‘in a Mess,’” p. E11.

55 “Farm Chief Assails Consumer Critics of Market Boards,” *Toronto Star*, November 26, 1974, p. B6.

56 “Farm Chief,” p. B6.

57 “Farm Chief,” p. B6.

58 “Cakes, Cookies to cost More Bakers Predict,” *Toronto Star*, August 28, 1974, p. A3.

communities where residents understood the challenges in agriculture, he continued to anger consumers who labelled him “the Farmers Friend and champion of higher food costs.”<sup>59</sup> Whelan’s support of marketing boards was regularly criticized by consumer advocates and free marketers who wished to reduce regulatory intervention in the economy.

Whelan and the marketing boards he supported suffered their share of criticism during this scandal, but not everyone was supportive of Plumptre either. Some people openly questioned the fairness of Plumptre’s criticism of farmer marketing boards when food was not the only rising cost. “Do we really need someone to tell us egg prices are a rip-off, when they aren’t the only rip-offs?,” questioned one *Toronto Star* reader. “Mrs. Plumptre seems to cast the blame on the farmers but other things such as housing, appliances, paper products have also jumped in price.”<sup>60</sup> The reader argued that Plumptre’s annual salary of \$40,000 was also a strain on the public purse, especially when Plumptre’s recommendations seemed to have had little effect.<sup>61</sup>

Farmers also believed that Plumptre spread misinformation about the nature of the food supply chain and who was benefiting most from increased food costs. OFA president Gordon Hill contended that Plumptre had been “too charitable in finding that food processors and retailers—whose costs and markups constitute the bulk of retail prices—were not to blame for an inflation which has increased food prices 40 per cent in a little more than two years.”<sup>62</sup> Hill noted that the boom-and-bust cycle was real and something consumers needed to know more about, and that, in a “supposedly free market” system, farmers had little bargaining power. He also explained that excess production had drastic market consequences, that output could not be as easily controlled as in factories, and that regulations and altered purchasing habits meant “skipping around” middlemen and selling directly to consumers was difficult, indeed impossible, for some.<sup>63</sup> Hill recognized that the rotten egg scandal had hurt the farmer’s image, but he reminded everyone that farmers were consumers too, and that, when working properly, the stability offered by marketing boards meant “more stable production, less danger of shortages and fewer ulcers for producers and eaters.”<sup>64</sup> Farmers felt attacked by Beryl Plumptre and other consumer advocates because they were often painted as greedy despite earning regularly low incomes. They did not believe that Plumptre’s calls for a deregulated market would solve their issues because they were well aware that that had not worked in the past and would only make matters worse.<sup>65</sup> Generally, egg farmers were upset that a “truer picture” of their circumstances was not reported

59 E. Sedgwick, letter to the editor, “Release Those Storage Eggs in Canada, Consumer Says,” *Toronto Star*, September 2, 1974, p. C5.

60 Veronic Shawarski, letter to the editor, “Mrs. Plumptre Is a Big Rip-Off,” *Toronto Star*, September 2, 1974, p. C5.

61 Shawarski, “Mrs. Plumptre,” p. C5.

62 Gordon Hill, quoted in Jack McArthur, “Farmers Feel Their Security Blanket’s Threatened,” *Toronto Star*, February 25, 1976, p. D8.

63 McArthur, “Farmers Feel,” p. D8.

64 Gordon Hill, quoted in Jack McArthur, “He’s One Big Reason Farmers Make Waves,” *Toronto Star*, November 15, 1975, p. D10.

65 McArthur, “Farmers Feel,” p. D8.

in the urban-based newspapers such as the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*, and they protested the idea that they were taking advantage of the consumer.<sup>66</sup> This tension carried over to public meetings, where it was not uncommon to hear a “city dweller” blaming farmers for wasted eggs and dollars, while farmers blamed “high-living consumers” for failing to appreciate the increased costs of food production and the complexity of food systems.<sup>67</sup>

The divisions between consumers and farmers also had a gendered dimension. The harshest critics of CEMA in the media were often housewives who resented the increased cost of eggs. Some women threatened to reduce their consumption of eggs unless the cost was reduced. For instance, one woman, Marilyn White, wrote to the *Star* to complain that she had to change her family’s eating habits because of their reduced egg consumption. She noted how her family’s “breakfast favourites, scrambled eggs or French toast, are now Sunday treats,” while her “sumptuous waffles, feathery angel cakes, golden sponges” were a very rare indulgence. “But worst of all,” she complained, “my prize-winning country fair egg bread, formerly a daily item on our menu, is now simply “bread”—good enough, but not the nutritious meal-in-itself it used to be... Surely many housewives must, like myself, be learning to do without eggs.”<sup>68</sup> White’s tantalizing description of the prized recipes she could no longer afford to make demonstrated how changes to one’s diet—especially done unwillingly—were distressing to consumers. Women were angry about the increased cost of food because it affected their grocery budgets and meal choices. Some women blamed Whelan personally, citing his support for CEMA and lack of oversight for their operations, and suggested that he should “hang his head in shame over this rotten egg business.”<sup>69</sup> Whelan, however, remained steadfast in his support for CEMA and warned that without the national egg marketing agency the industry would be in greater chaos, the domestic egg market would fail, and consumers would “really be in trouble.”<sup>70</sup> In contrast, Plumptre announced that she cared, first and foremost, about the welfare of “the low-income housewife,” who she argued had been harmed by CEMA and the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act for increasing egg costs.<sup>71</sup> Whelan and Plumptre remained adversaries on this issue, and by the end of 1974 Whelan was reportedly not addressing Plumptre by her name, but simply as “the woman.”<sup>72</sup>

Although this battle was certainly not entirely gendered—Whelan also quarrelled with his male colleagues, such as Consumer Affairs Minister Andre Ouellet, over the marketing legislation, and Beryl Plumptre was criticized by farm women who believed that their “urban consumer counterparts” were not receiving the true facts—the gendered dimension of their disagreements over food policies

66 LAC, Whelan fonds, R1298, vol. 374, file 9, Roy and Ed McEwan to Paul Dick, August 1974, Lanark, Ontario.

67 “Farmers, Consumers Can Work Together,” *Toronto Star*, September 28, 1974, p. B2.

68 Marilyn White, letter to the editor, “Learning to Do without Eggs,” *Toronto Star*, September 25, 1974, p. C5.

69 Marjorie Cooney, letter to the editor, “Eugene Whelan Is Zero to Me Housewife Says,” *Toronto Star*, September 25, 1974, p. C5.

70 Grant, “Whelan Chops ‘That Plumptre,’” p. 5.

71 Mary Janigan, “Beryl Plumptre’s Taking No More Flak,” *Toronto Star*, February 13, 1975, p. F6.

72 Janigan, “Beryl Plumptre’s Taking No More Flak,” p. F6.

was further emphasized by the gendered discourse many newspaper columnists used to cover these exchanges.<sup>73</sup> From the beginning, Beryl Plumptre had a mixed reception as the head of the Food Prices Review Board. Initially, she was believed to be overpaid and ineffective in her efforts to advocate for lower food prices. In time, some journalists argued that she had demonstrated “hitherto undetected spunk” in taking on Eugene Whelan and that she held “her own” during their public disputes.<sup>74</sup> Others, such as *Star* reporter Dennis Braithwaite, believed that Plumptre’s “lady-like” demeanour meant that she was no match for the passionate and opinionated Minister of Agriculture. He explained that “Beryl is a lady in the old-fashioned sense ... the very kind of woman I like, but in the line of work she is into now, gentility is a fatal weakness.” He believed that Plumptre was losing the battle with Whelan because she was not the “right” type of woman for the job. Instead of the “new breed” of women Braithwaite argued was represented by the likes of Barbara Frum, Judy LaMarsh, Laura Sabia, Adrienne Clarkson, June Callwood, or Betty Kennedy, he suggested Plumptre was not “tough enough, bitchy enough, if you like, to take on a human foghorn like Agriculture Minister Eugene Whelan” (the implication being that these other women were “bitchy enough” for such a public role).<sup>75</sup> He argued that the “confrontation between Beryl and Eugene ... was pathetically one-sided, something like putting a darling Jersey cow against a fire-breathing Spanish bull.”<sup>76</sup> The conflict between Whelan and Plumptre represented another example of the “battle of the sexes” that compared men’s and women’s abilities and made regular headlines during the 1970s.<sup>77</sup>

### An Expanding Bureaucracy

Another element of controversy that emerged from the rotten egg scandal was the idea that this episode was the result of an unrestrained and expanding bureaucracy. Although agricultural marketing boards were commonplace during this period,<sup>78</sup> CEMA’s opponents cited the wasted eggs as evidence of the problems associated with

73 Dalton Camp, “The Bogus Battle with Whelan Isn’t Funny,” *Toronto Star*, September 12, 1974, p. B6. In November 1974, Ouellet made opening remarks to the Parliamentary Committee on Egg Marketing that his department was concerned that the powers granted to agencies covered in the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act (1972) were not being exercised to the benefit of the public interest and requested more accountability and consumer representation; LAC, Whelan fonds, R12298, vol. 17, file 3, Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada, “Opening Remarks by the Honourable Andre Ouellet to the Parliamentary Committee on Egg Marketing,” November 14, 1974. For an example of farm women’s criticism of Plumptre, see Mrs. D. E. Ferguson, “Farm Wife’s View of Egg-Price Structure,” *Canada Poultryman*, April 1974, pp. 28–29.

74 Dalton Camp, “It’s Every Man for Himself These Days,” *Toronto Star*, September 5, 1974, p. B6.

75 Dennis Braithwaite, “Beryl Plumptre’s Too Nice for the Job,” *Toronto Star*, September 5, 1974, p. B6.

76 Braithwaite, “Beryl Plumptre’s Too Nice,” p. B6.

77 In 1973, the Battle of the Sexes tennis match witnessed top women’s player Billie Jean King beat former No. 1 ranked men’s tennis player Bobby Riggs. This match has been credited with enhancing women’s status in North American sports as well as instilling “the belief that a woman could succeed in a man’s world”; Nancy E. Spencer, “Reading Between the Lines: A Discursive Analysis of the Billie Jean King vs. Bobby Riggs ‘Battle of the Sexes,’” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 17 (2000), p. 387.

78 Farm marketing boards were commonplace in the 1960s and 1970s. In Ontario, for example, there were 22 marketing boards with various powers, some like the milk and egg boards could allocate production and set prices based on the cost of production, while others, such as the Ontario Apple Marketing Commission, set retail rather than producer prices. The list of commodities regulated by Ontario marketing boards included “seed corn, wheat, white beans, soybeans, pork, milk, eggs, started pullets, broiler chickens, turkeys,

trying to manage markets and of the ineffectiveness of an expanding bureaucratic state. By September 1974, another 5 million eggs had reportedly gone bad because of improper storage and problems with production controls, which brought the total to 14 million and climbing.<sup>79</sup> Whelan and his ministry continued to defend the principle of supply management, noting that egg prices were lower than general food prices and one of the few commodities that had decreased in price, down 6% from the start of the year. He also explained that corrective actions had been taken and a complete review and overhaul of provincial supply programs had been made, and that losses caused by the destruction of eggs were producers' losses, not consumers'.<sup>80</sup> But despite these reassurances, criticism remained. Wayne Howell, an Ottawa physician and freelance writer for the *Star* wrote that "tales of government boondoggles—extravagance, inefficiency and waste—come and go. Many enjoy a brief notoriety in the press and then are quickly forgotten," but that the "Great Egg Break of '74" was a "boondoggle that will rank right up there with the great boondoggles of the past."<sup>81</sup> For Howell, the absurdity of the waste (by then an estimated 15.5 million eggs) coupled with the reality of food scarcity elsewhere in the world had hit a nerve with the public and met any reasonable measure of what was considered ludicrous.<sup>82</sup> Although the reasons behind the surplus egg production were complex and reflected problems that supply management was trying to correct, the perception was that all of this waste was caused by new regulatory controls gone amok.<sup>83</sup> The *Toronto Star*, for example, continued to publish critical editorials and articles that blamed the scandal on "a system of marketing that allows huge quantities of food to spoil." It was "the system" and "not just the poor managerial decisions of past CEMA staff," they argued, that had helped to create this situation.<sup>84</sup> Many of those who opposed CEMA believed that only free trade would guarantee low-cost food, and they had little sympathy for farmers who experienced regular periods of market depression because they considered this a natural function of the market—they believed there was little difference between the farm and the factory.

Groups such as the Committee to Reform Egg Marketing, who were against supply management, hired legal counsel to challenge the system as well. Herman Turkstra, one of the group's lawyers, wrote a lengthy piece in the *Globe and Mail* condemning the system and arguing that marketing boards forced egg producers to work "under a marketing system that can only be described as a duplication of a Russian or Chinese communal farm. Egg-marketing today in Ontario is expensive,

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apples, tobacco, grapes, peaches, pears, plums, onions, greenhouse cucumbers and greenhouse tomatoes."; see "Farm Market Boards Have Many Powers," *Toronto Star*, September 3, 1974, p. A4.

79 Ross Henderson, "14 Million So Far, More Expected: Another Five Million Eggs Found Rotten in Ontario," *Globe and Mail*, September 6, 1974, p. 1.

80 LAC, Whelan fonds, R12298, vol. 17, file 3, Agriculture Canada, "Egg Facts," September 5, 1974, pp. 1–2.

81 Wayne Howell, "The Egg Boondoggle Ranks Right Up with the Past Great," *Toronto Star*, September 9, 1974, p. C4.

82 Howell, "Egg Boondoggle," p. C4.

83 "Rotten Management Gives Rotten Eggs," *Toronto Star*, August 28, 1974, p. B4. During this period, the correspondence Eugene Whelan received from CEMA and the NFPMC showed that the new agency was having difficulty enforcing provincial quotas, pricing formulas, and other rules and regulations among provincial boards. The priority for the organization was ensuring the supply was not in excess of demand; see LAC, Whelan fonds, R12298, vol. 17, file 3.

84 "More than the Eggs Are Rotten," *Toronto Star*, September 6, 1974, p. B4.



inefficient, artificial, corrupting and full of incompetence.”<sup>85</sup> According to Turkstra, only the small, inefficient farmer would be harmed by removing egg marketing boards, which he argued was “infinitely better than a system which collectivizes the whole egg industry... [and] puts it in the hands of politicians and civil servants who tell the farmer how much to grow, where to sell what he grows and how much he can get for it.”<sup>86</sup> The *Globe and Mail*'s enthusiasm for articles that criticized marketing boards and supply management was commonplace, and although farmers complained about the newspaper's “reluctance to publish any factual contribution by a practical farmer engaged in egg production” and inform Canadians that they still ate from “one of the cheapest, most abundant food supplies in the world,”<sup>87</sup> the general perception caused by these articles was that consumers were being harmed by new marketing boards and their enlarged powers.

While some critics of CEMA called for its outright dissolution, others recognized the stabilizing effects a marketing board could have and instead suggested that reforms were needed rather than the agency's removal. The main proposal was for consumer representatives to have more input into marketing board decisions.<sup>88</sup> Few farmers welcomed this idea, however, because they did not believe that consumers understood the challenges of their industry and they believed such representatives would only care about policies that led to the lowest possible food costs regardless of farmer welfare.<sup>89</sup> Others believed that the problem was not that too much control had been given producers but rather not enough. They believed more regulation was needed in the system at all levels—from the hatchery to the processing plant—and that more legislative powers were necessary in order to “get tough” with producers who broke board regulations.<sup>90</sup>

As the number of reported rotten eggs climbed to 27.9 million, calls for change mounted. The conflict between Plumptre and Whelan also grew as the Minister of Agriculture continued to defend egg prices and policies while the head of the Food Prices Review Board continued to criticize them.<sup>91</sup> Demands for more accountability led the government to announce changes to the NFPMC whereby consumer representatives would be appointed to the supervisory body that oversaw CEMA. Initially the NFPMC was composed of four farmers and a former

85 Herman Turkstra, “Ontario Policies Torment Egg-Producers,” *Globe and Mail*, September 20, 1974, p. 7.

86 Turkstra, “Ontario Policies,” p. 7.

87 William Hodges, letter to the editor, “Eggwash,” *Globe and Mail*, October 21, 1974, p. 6. Similar ideas were also expressed in Michael Sage's letter to the editor, “Publicity May Spark Egg Shortage,” *Toronto Star*, January 16, 1974, p. B5.

88 Jack McArthur, “Canada's Egg Crisis Is Just So Much Rot but Is It a Sin?,” *Toronto Star*, September 10, 1974, p. C7; and Ross Cavers, cited in Baron, “Agency That Laid 15 Million Rotten Eggs,” p. B3.

89 Gordon Hill, letter to the editor, “Hypocritical Policy on Egg Marketing,” *Toronto Star*, September 25, 1974, p. C5.

90 Don Baron, “Agency That Laid 15 Million Rotten Eggs,” p. B3. Egg producers were aware that CEMA needed to improve its operations and financial position early on, but they also realized “the immensity of the task of setting up a national organization to CONTROL and regulate domestic requirements and market egg surpluses, thus maintaining a profitable price for EVERY producer throughout the year, was great; far greater than first conceived,” and after a year had passed they believed CEMA was making the necessary reforms; Fred Beeson, editorial, “CEMA Re-formed,” *Canada Poultryman*, May 1974, p. 3.

91 “Surplus Eggs: Million More Are Going Rotten,” *Toronto Star*, September 6, 1974, pp. A1–A2; “Mrs. Plumptre and Whelan Clash Again,” *Toronto Star*, September 6, 1974, pp. A1–A2; and “A New Rooster Needed at the Top,” *Toronto Star*, September 13, 1974, p. B4.

provincial deputy agricultural minister, but now consumer representatives would be included in this group.<sup>92</sup> A great deal of distrust had been created by CEMA over its mismanagement of surplus eggs. Those who recognized that agricultural marketing boards had “helped to level out the economic peaks and valleys which farmers traditionally have had to put up with” believed that because the boards were “made up entirely of producer representatives... [there was] really no way the general public can know whether they’re working well.”<sup>93</sup> The new consumer representatives appointed to the NFPMC were considered an important step in ensuring that more accountability and balance between farmers’ and consumers’ interests would be had.<sup>94</sup>

In a Food Prices Review Board report published later that year, Plumptre did recognize that food prices would have risen regardless of CEMA and that the general rise in food prices in both Canada and the United States was the same during the four-year period, but she continued to criticize marketing boards and insist that the federal government “act immediately to do something about the egg marketing situation.”<sup>95</sup> In addition to Plumptre, groups such as the Conservation Council of Ontario and the Consumers’ Association of Canada also continued to express anger over the spoiled eggs,<sup>96</sup> while the Ontario Anti-Poverty Organization/Coalition even went so far as to threaten to file a class action lawsuit against CEMA “for the deliberate waste and destruction” of millions of eggs on behalf of consumers.<sup>97</sup> Opposition parties also used the scandal as proof that the Liberal government was not doing enough to protect Canadians from the increasing cost of living and were, in fact, making matters worse.<sup>98</sup>

Egg farmers were as unhappy as anyone about the mismanagement that had taken place at CEMA in its early years. They too were angry about the waste and the distrust that resulted from CEMA’s actions and the continued problems managing supplies at the provincial level.<sup>99</sup> Jim Johnson, the Ontario Egg Producers Marketing Board chairman, noted that it was “unbelievable that any modern business, no matter how incompetently run, could lose track of its inventory” and allow perishable products to rot.<sup>100</sup> While everyone regretted the mistakes CEMA had made, the fact remained that farmers’ costs of production were increasing and higher prices, not lower, were needed in order for producers to realize a profit. CEMA’s past mistakes, however, made provincial egg marketing boards and governments reluctant to increase egg prices to compensate for those increased costs because they realized

92 Mary Janigan, “Consumer to Get Marketing Voice Ouellet Says,” *Toronto Star*, September 20, 1974, p. A1.

93 “Farmers, Consumers Can Work Together,” *Toronto Star*, September 28, 1974, p. B2.

94 Mary Janigan, “Whelan Defends Agency, 3 Consumers Joining Marketing Body,” *Toronto Star*, October 4, 1974, p. A4.

95 “Food Cost Would Have Risen Even with Controls: Plumptre,” *Globe and Mail*, September 7, 1974, p. 2.

96 “Poverty Group Calls CEMA ‘Rotten Egg,’” *Globe and Mail*, September 11, 1974, p. 11; Ross Henderson, “Rotten Egg Total 27.9 Million; New Surplus Policy Announced,” *Globe and Mail*, September 13, 1974, p. 1.

97 “Suit Threatened Over Eggs,” *Toronto Star*, October 14, 1974, p. C2.

98 William Johnson, “Broadent Hesitates at Ritual of Criticizing Living Cost Rise,” *Globe and Mail*, September 12, 1974, p. 9.

99 Fred Beeson, editorial, “Pinpointing the Egg Problem,” *Canada Poultryman*, October 1974, p. 3.

100 Jim Johnson, quoted in Ross Henderson, “15 Million Rot: Possible Egg Switching Swindle Probed,” *Globe and Mail*, September 11, 1974, p. 5.

“it wasn’t a good time, from the public relations point of view, for an increase.”<sup>101</sup> Ontario Agriculture Minister William Stewart agreed that increased production costs justified higher egg prices but that it was “not wise” to put that increase into effect when consumers were still angry about the recent egg scandal.<sup>102</sup> The scandal had shaken the public’s trust, which caused governments and marketing boards to worry about instituting any further price increases despite the need to do so. Furthermore, because of the embarrassment caused by earlier surplus supplies, marketing boards were hesitant to increase levels of production later on when needed, and CEMA suffered some shortages which drove prices up in 1975. These issues were corrected in time, but in 1975, mistakes continued and provided additional fodder for the news press.<sup>103</sup> While the media sensation of the rotten egg scandal abated, egg farmers remembered this crisis as one of the most difficult episodes in CEMA’s history and Whelan remembered it as “one of the worst experiences” he underwent during his 11-year tenure as minister of agriculture.<sup>104</sup>

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the rotten egg scandal led to an inquiry that included 53 witness accounts taken over 60 days of hearings in the fall of 1974.<sup>105</sup> The committee conducting the inquiry concluded that tougher ministerial controls in egg marketing were needed, that a stronger executive committee managing CEMA should be implemented, and, perhaps most importantly, that CEMA must “exercise more control over quotas handed out to the agency’s 4,600 producers, a function now fulfilled by provincial egg boards.”<sup>106</sup> Indeed, the National Farm Products Council had already identified the need for stronger quota enforcement, more uniformity in provincial egg boards’ rules and regulations, and greater authority delegated to the Canadian Egg Marketing Agency as necessary measures for strengthening the current marketing plan.<sup>107</sup>

Following the inquiry, opposition members continued to question Whelan about his actions during the scandal, while Beryl Plumptre continued to disapprove of CEMA and maintain that it was “essential” to have “a free-flowing market.”<sup>108</sup> This was not the end of the problems CEMA faced—criticism over the cost of eggs continued, opponents alleged “Gestapo-like tactics” were used to ensure producer compliance to production controls, and periods in which managing production

101 Ross Henderson, “Ontario Overrules Egg Board Decision to Increase Prices,” *Globe and Mail*, September 14, 1974, p. 1.

102 Raymond About, “‘Regardless’ of Government Ruling: Eggs Will Go Up 3 Cents in Ontario, Board Says,” *Globe and Mail*, September 16, 1974, p. 1.

103 “A Rigged Shortage to Push Up Egg Prices,” *Toronto Star*, July 9, 1975, p. B4.

104 James Hale, *From Farm to Plate: Egg Production in Canada, 1972 to 2012* (Ottawa: Egg Farmers of Canada, 2012), pp. 72–76.

105 Jonathan Manthorpe, “Egg Inquiry Report to Commons Faces Delay as Members Disagree on Recommendations,” *Globe and Mail*, December 12, 1974, p. 8.

106 “Probe Likely to Urge Tougher Egg Controls,” *Globe and Mail*, December 14, 1974, p. 12.

107 LAC, Whelan fonds, R12298, vol. 17, file 3, NFPMC, “Memorandum to the Minister, Re: Canadian Egg Marketing Agency,” August 18, 1974.

108 Jonathan Manthorpe, “Protest Minority Report Planned: Insufficient Time Allotted Egg Inquiry, Tories Charge,” *Globe and Mail*, December 12, 1974, p. 8; “Probe Likely to Urge,” p. 12; “Three Months Before Whelan Discovery: Knew of Bad Eggs in May, Consumer Group Says,” *Globe and Mail*, November 1, 1974, p. 10.

was difficult remained<sup>109</sup>—but eventually the public uproar caused by the wasted eggs subsided and CEMA was able to better coordinate provincial production to meet local demand.

But during a period when more Canadians reportedly worried about their economic futures than since the Second World War, increased food costs were troubling.<sup>110</sup> In the case of eggs, rising prices were combined with a new system of production control and missteps from a new national marketing agency. CEMA's mistakes resulted in wasted food when many around the world were suffering food scarcity and famine. Egg farmers were forced to defend the prices they received for their eggs against consumers who wanted cheaper food, while governments were sometimes divided between those who supported the new system of supply management and those who did not. Newspapers such as the *Toronto Star* or the *Globe and Mail* were overwhelmingly critical of any system that went against the tenets of the “free market” and many of the articles they published served to drive a wedge deeper between consumer and farmer groups.

And yet, despite CEMA's inauspicious start, the marketing agency and the system of supply management survived. Whelan's and other policymakers' resolve to support supply management was undoubtedly important, but broader ideas about social and economic justice during this period were also significant. Despite concerns about waste and a growing neo-liberal discourse, there was still enough support for alternative systems and a general suspicion of the free market's ability to meet farmers' needs to allow CEMA to continue and other marketing agencies to be created in following years. Despite supply managements' opponents' best efforts, the Farm Products Marketing Agencies Act remained intact. Moreover, CEMA and the supply management system have since been recognized for reducing waste rather than contributing to it by eliminating the chronic issue of overproduction that had previously seen large numbers of eggs destroyed when no market could be found.<sup>111</sup> The stability provided by supply management is also important, as uncertainty is considered a key structural determinant of food waste.<sup>112</sup> As the global effects of our food production systems become a growing concern and more demands are made on the planet's finite resources, we must consider how to better allocate them. Reducing food waste is an increasing priority and how we structure our agricultural systems is central to this effort.

While the problems that caused Canada's rotten egg scandal were unique to the period and represented the challenges of instituting a supply-managed system

109 Eon Fraser, letter to the editor, “Egg Board Likened to the Gestapo in Keeping Prices Up,” *Globe and Mail*, July 23, 1975, p. 7.

110 “Oh! Canada,” *Globe and Mail*, October 1, 1974, p. 6.

111 Nathan Pelletier et al., “Sustainability in the Canadian Egg Industry—Learning from the Past, Navigating the Present, Planning for the Future,” *Sustainability*, vol. 10, no. 10 (2018), pp. 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10103524>; and Bruce Muirhead and Hugh Campbell, “The Worlds of Dairy: Comparing Dairy Frameworks in Canada and New Zealand in Light of Future Shocks to Food Systems,” in Reidar Almås and Hugh Campbell, eds., *Rethinking Agricultural Policy Regimes: Food Security, Climate Change and the Future Resilience of Global Agriculture* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2012), pp. 147–168.

112 Zsuzsa Gille, “From Risk to Waste: Global Food Waste Regimes,” *Sociological Review*, vol. 60, no. S2 (2012), pp. 27–46.

when few controls had existed before, it is also true that the scandal crystallized many of the tensions that were growing in Canadian society at the time. This episode powerfully caught and held the public's attention because it spoke to important divisions between urban consumers and rural producers, between those who advocated for regulated markets and those who championed unrestricted ones, the gendered politics of food pricing and holding public office, and broader concerns about wasted food and other resources at a time of perceived and real scarcity.

