

# EXTRA SATURDAY

**BOOK EXCERPT**  
**FRAMES**  
 from an  
 Afghan  
 mission

The story told in *The Photographer* begins in Peshawar, Pakistan, as photojournalist Didier Lefèvre and a Médecins Sans Frontières team prepare to enter Afghanistan. **Page B5**

**REPORT ON ...**

## WAR CRIMES ACT on trial

In six days, a verdict will be handed down in the case of Désiré Munyaneza, alleged to have participated in the Rwandan genocide in 1994. **Page B3**

**MONTREAL DIARY**

## YUP, CYCLING is their cause

Vélo Québec public relations director Patrick Howe reacts to suggestions that the Tour de l'Île should raise funds for charity. **Page B2**



PETER McCABE THE GAZETTE

The Union des producteurs agricoles, which represents all of Quebec's farmers, has launched a billboard campaign to protest against any change to the subsidies program.

# PROPPING UP OUR FARMS

Story by MARK CARDWELL Special to The Gazette

**MICHEL ST. PIERRE WAS SITTING IN A FARMHOUSE KITCHEN** last fall when the plight of agriculture in Quebec suddenly hit him – subsidy programs had created an “artificial economy” and along with it an uneven playing field for farmers.

A few months earlier, he had been asked by the provincial government to take a hard look at financial support programs for farmers – a key recommendation contained in last year's Pronovost report on the future of agriculture in the province.

He accepted and visited four vegetable growers near Joliette who had called him and asked for a meeting.

“We spent the afternoon talking about their lives and their future,” recalled St. Pierre, who has worked mostly in Quebec's agri-food industry – and who officially retired as deputy minister of agriculture yesterday. “They told me, ‘It's not that bright.’”

Their pessimism, he learned, stemmed primarily from their inability to obtain financing to buy the farmland they needed to expand their operations and take advan-

tage of growing market demand – and economic opportunities – for produce like broccoli, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts.

Instead, available farmland was being snapped up by local producers of grain corn (used for animal feed), soy bean and some of the dozen other kinds of crops and livestock that are covered by Quebec's Farm Income Stabilization Insurance program – better known by its French acronym ASRA – which ties payment to production rather than market demand.

“It was very sad to see these entrepreneurs with established businesses and customers unable to compete with neighbours whose productions are not dependent on market realities,” said St. Pierre.

“The simple fact is bankers prefer to loan money to producers who are guaranteed

payment for what they grow, not what they hope to sell.”

The growers' predicament, he added, was just one of many examples he heard in 50-plus meetings with some 700 producers and agricultural experts or read in several previous studies of the perverse effects that ASRA is having on agriculture in Quebec.

And the horse medicine he recommends in his 60-page report – the gradual abolition of the ASRA program over the next six years – is becoming the focal point in a growing debate that could have far-reaching social, political and economic consequences across the province and the country.

The Liberal government is “considering many options and possibilities,” said Jack Roy, a spokesperson for Agriculture Minister Laurent Lessard. “The only thing that we're not considering is keeping the status quo. Changes are coming, that's for sure.”

Christian Lacasse, a plain-talking dairy farmer and president of the Union des producteurs agricoles, had this to say: “We're telling the government, if you change the model according to St. Pierre, you will increase the danger for family farms and begin tearing down an economic sector that generates \$7.5 billion annually (and) creates 60,000 jobs. ...

“People say we want the status quo, but what we want is to keep the essential, which is aid based on the evolution of the cost of production. That's what we have

now, and we will do everything we can to keep that.”

♦ ♦ ♦

At another farmhouse kitchen table, this one at Ferme Éboulmontaise in the picturesque village of Les Éboulements in the heart of Charlevoix, sheep producer Lucie Cadieux conceded it might be time for a change – even though the St. Pierre report goes straight to the heart of her business.

“Several small sectors like lamb and veal have never covered their production costs since the creation of the program (in the 1970s),” said St. Pierre. “They have never developed markets and are a drain on the economy. We are living in a bubble. If we don't do anything, it will burst.”

While upset with the tone of St. Pierre's remarks, which she called “disrespectful,” Cadieux said she knows better than most that major changes are needed in agriculture in Quebec.

Opening up her books and her heart, Cadieux showed that she and her husband receive about \$20,000 a year under the ASRA program. That works out to roughly \$180 per animal and represents a substantial 15-20 per cent of the farm's total annual revenue.

Please see **SUBSIDIES**, Page B4  
**How the UPA sees it. Page B4**  
**SOS-Pronovost calls for change. Page B4**



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