

JUN 12 1987

OVERNIGHT CANADA/DU JOUR AU LENDEMAIN

Hope in Venice

Canada is well placed to help grain farmers through tough times, thanks to the diplomacy of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and External Affairs Minister Joe Clark.

Against strong odds, Canada won a commitment from Europe and the U.S. to end the destructive cycle of farm subsidies which have sent agricultural prices plunging. Not only did the the leaders of the seven major capitalist economies commit themselves to freer trade in agriculture, they set a timetable for change.

While the process will take years to complete, it will begin in 1988. Normalcy should be restored to agricultural trade by the mid-1990s.

The Venice summit's commitment to relatively quick change will help the Mulroney government plan relief for hard-hit grain farmers. Canada need not play the subsidy game; prudent and effective short-term help will suffice.

At the same time, all western countries will have to examine the scope of farming: over-production can be controlled only by luring inefficient farmers to pursue other livelihoods. This is of particular importance in West Germany and France, whose farmers are paid hundreds of millions of dollars for growing food that isn't needed.

Even in Canada, rationalization may be needed. Recent government plans to help some farmers move off the land are commendable. It will take careful consideration to ensure a smooth transition. Viable farms must be kept alive, no matter how severe temporary debt constraints may be; some borderline operations may merit saving. Yet some farms might be better off in other hands.

Farming wasn't Ottawa's only success at Venice. Canada also got a declaration calling for an end to apartheid and a transition to democratic government in South Africa. It's significant progress; previously, West Germany had been loath to support any such statement.

The value of diplomacy is sometimes overlooked in a world dominated by the apparently relentless might of superpowers. Yet Canada's performance at Venice shows that small nations can make things happen. This is as much a tribute to the superb work of the External Affairs Department as to the expertise of Mulroney and Clark.