

GARY MASON

## How not to conduct a transit plebiscite

**Gary Mason**

The Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Mar. 20 2015, 3:00 AM EDT

Last updated Friday, Mar. 20 2015, 3:00 AM EDT

Viewed from afar, the transit plebiscite Metro Vancouver is in the midst of conducting seems enlightened. Here is a metropolitan region that has moulded a sensible and forward-thinking transportation vision seeking permission from citizens to introduce a tax vehicle to fund it all.

How progressive. How democratic.

### More Related to this Story

- [B.C.'s refusal to reform TransLink raises mayor's ire](#)
- [Vancouver transit vote 'case study' in national transportation funding crisis](#)
- [What Vancouver can teach Toronto about leading on transit](#)

Up close, the sight of this referendum is not so awe-inspiring. And after it's over, it's likely to become a case study in what happens when you don't have the time to properly lay the groundwork for such a vote: Bad strategies are devised. Panic sets in. Blunders are made. And eventually, a colossal opportunity is wasted.

Recent polls have shown the No side with an almost unsurmountable lead. Vancouver's Yes supporters can only hope that the pollsters are as wrong about the outcome of this ballot measure as they were about the provincial election in 2013, when all predicted that Premier Christy Clark's Liberals were going to be crushed by the New Democrats and it turned out to be just the opposite.

Somehow, though, I don't think the pollsters have it wrong this time.

Last year, I took a look at how these types of transit referendums are conducted in the United States, where they are common. In virtually every case, successful campaigns are conducted over a period that spans a year or longer. Carefully strategizing takes place to design the best possible "Vote Yes" operation. Deep consideration is given to obvious vulnerabilities and measures are taken in advance to address them. Careful plans are put in place to ensure that the opposition doesn't get an unsurmountable head start in the debate, enabling it to define what the vote will ultimately be about.

The Yes side in Metro Vancouver's transit plebiscite enjoyed no such luxury of time. It literally had a couple of

months. And that is entirely the fault of a willful provincial government that insisted on the referendum and its ridiculously short time frame. It then backed off to watch the Yes side mostly falter with the entirely avoidable mess of a situation it was handed.

The litany of mistakes Yes organizers have made has been well chronicled. Chief among them was allowing a one-man opposition – the Canadian Taxpayers Federation's Jordan Bateman – to make the plebiscite about the region's often-maligned transit authority, TransLink. And then the Yes campaign played right into Mr. Bateman's hands by applauding (some would say orchestrating) the firing of TransLink's CEO right in the middle of the debate, instantly justifying everything the enemy camp was saying about the organization.

If the Yes folks had been supplied with more time to design their playbook, they would have surely devised a sounder strategy for dealing with the criticisms of TransLink they had to know were coming. If there was a time to make a scapegoat out of the CEO, it was a year before the campaign started, not smack dab in the middle of it.

In the United States, programs to educate the public on the merits of a transit plan often last a year or longer. In B.C., the Yes side didn't start ramping up its publicity efforts until a couple of weeks ago. Consider that mail-in ballots went out this week. (Voting ends on May 29.) It was like the Yes side thought it had better not peak too early. Or perhaps someone suggested that this plebiscite was like a general election and that people wouldn't start thinking about the issue until just before voting began.

Meantime, the No side has been out there for months, demonizing everything the Yes side stands for.

In the end, however, if the No forces prevail it will be because the Yes side failed to make its case persuasively enough, not simply because of TransLink. With the plan containing no new major transit lines running from the suburbs into downtown Vancouver, many car commuters feel like there's nothing in it for them – so why vote in favour of a 0.5 per cent regional sales tax? This is a group that encompasses tens of thousands of voters.

As a Yes supporter, it's all been very dispiriting to watch. This has been a wonderful chance to build a better transit future that will benefit future generations, but it's slowly going down the drain. In the end, the best we may be left with is a textbook example of how not to wage a successful transit plebiscite.

## Topics:

- [Vancouver, British Columbia](#)
- [Christy Clark](#)