

Vaughn Palmer: Jordan Bateman's lone voice has most people listening

If the transit tax is defeated in the plebiscite, we'll go back to bickering

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Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, Vancouver Sun

VICTORIA — As voting by mail commences on the transit plebiscite, the Yes and No campaigns have already settled into strategies that reflect the uneven balance of resources between the two sides.

The Yes side, drawing on leadership, staffing and more than a few dollars from government, labour, business and interest groups, emphasizes the broad-based coalition of support for the campaign to reduce congestion.

The No side, short of resources (including dollars) and organizational support, is largely reliant on the lone, admittedly articulate, voice of Jordan Bateman of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

Which raises the question: Is it possible that all those prominent folks at the head of all those worthy organizations are all wrong and he's all right?

"It is extremely possible," replied Bateman when I put it to him recently. "Just because you have the endorsement of these big organizations, doesn't mean you have every single member's support of

those organizations ... You have the heads of those groups, absolutely — big government, big labour, big business. That's a big money, big tax that they're trying to bring in. We're the underdog, no doubt about it."

Or as the province's legendary populist premier W.A.C. Bennett used to say, "everyone's against us but the people."

Nor was there any overlooking the latest evidence on that score, in the form of Monday's release of a survey of public opinion from the Angus Reid Institute.

"The No side enjoys a two-to-one lead over the Yes side," announced senior vice-president Shachi Kurl, summarizing an online survey conducted Feb. 25 to March 5. "No is a sentiment widespread across Metro Vancouver. No voters are more likely to be firm in their choice. Distrust of TransLink is a major factor for those inclined toward voting No."

Pollsters, Reid included, sometimes get it wrong. And any survey is only a snapshot of where things stood when the questions were asked, as Kurl acknowledged.

Still, a two-to-one margin is a lot to overcome, particularly when the gap has been widening in most samplings of public opinion.

Indeed, the challenge facing the Yes campaign recalls another uphill fight from two decades ago — in the 1992 referendum on the proposed changes to the Canadian constitution known as the Charlottetown accord.

The whole country was involved in that one and constitutional change is, of course, more substantive than a half-point increase in the sales tax.

Yet there's one valid point of comparison in the way the accord was supported by the political and economic establishment, while the antis relied on populists, leaders who were out of power, and others on the margins of political and economic influence.

The Yes side raised the stakes by denouncing No-siders in personal terms and claiming they were bent on breaking up the country or worse.

The latter accusation provoked some gallows humour. Here in B.C., someone on the Yes side suggested a radio spot that would open with a long burst of automatic weapons fire. In voice-over, a little girl would be heard crying: "Daddy, daddy, why didn't you vote Yes?" Followed by an explosion of atomic proportions.

When the Yes side took to running newspaper ads featuring the many great and good Canadians who supported the accord, one No-sider quipped: "You realize that you are telling ordinary folk that they can poke a finger in the eye of all those highfalutin types by voting No."

The demonizing and scare talk backfired, here in B.C. most of all. "No, No, No," as the front page story in The Vancouver Sun had it on the morning after the vote. "B.C. sent the loudest message of rejection Monday to the elites that run this country." That margin of rejection being two to one.

Dark consequences were imagined at the time. But No-siders being all over the map on their reasons for opposing the accord — some thought it gave Quebec too much power; others not enough, and so on — there was no consensus on how to proceed.

So the main outcome was a consensus-by-default that we should never again speak of the constitution and for the most part we haven't.

To the degree that the vote on the accord provides a teachable moment for the transit referendum, it should counsel the Yes side against talking down to No-siders and overstating the consequences of a negative outcome.

But the aftermath of that earlier vote also suggests that one shouldn't draw too much meaning from the likely event that the tax is rejected.

"We know what will be written the morning after," Bateman told me, already working up the talking points in anticipation of a win for his side. "All the opinion shapers will go: "TransLink was the issue here. We need to make over TransLink."

Sure. While others would say it only proves that people feel overtaxed, others that the fault was in the choice of a regressive measure like the sales tax, still others that the Liberals should never have forced a referendum on the region in the first place.

Consensus? What consensus? If the polls hold and the tax is defeated, the most likely outcome is that we'll go back to bickering about priorities, funding sources and the most perfect structure for a regional transportation authority.

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