



News

What Drives TransLink's Biggest Hater?

Insights into Jordan Bateman, the meme maker opposed to the transit tax hike.

By Doug Ward, 9 Mar 2015, TheTyee.ca



Jordan Bateman has become the default leader of the No side in Metro Vancouver's ongoing transit plebiscite debate. Photo by David P. Ball.

I climbed onto a jammed westbound 99-B rapid bus on Broadway a few days ago and grabbed the one available empty seat. Turned out the guy next to me was being gently lobbied by a young woman hired by the regional mayors' council to inform bus riders why its \$7.5-billion transit plan is good for them.

I quickly found myself in a Jordan Bateman Moment.

Bateman, a political operative with the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, has become the default leader of the No side in the region's ongoing transit plebiscite debate because almost every other major civic leader and group in the region believes Metro Vancouver needs massive transit expansion to avoid crippling gridlock.

The Yes side campaigner asked the rider if he believed the current transit system could handle the one million people expected to move to Metro Vancouver over the next three decades. He didn't.

Then he blurted: "I just feel that I am taxed enough already. TransLink should just spend the money it has on transit and not on commercials and stuff like that."

His response -- blaming TransLink -- was pure Bateman.

Gordon Price, director of the City Program at Simon Fraser University, calls Bateman's strategy "The Great Dupe" -- persuading people that a negative vote in the upcoming plebiscite would be a "message" to TransLink rather than a rejection of needed transit expansion.

"It's the brilliance of Bateman's meme," said Price. "How do you get people, even a bus rider, to vote against their best interests?"

The plebiscite question asks residents of Metro Vancouver to vote on a new half-per-cent sales tax, called the Metro Vancouver Congestion Tax, which would finance the 10-year plan developed by the mayors. The proposed improvements include a subway in Vancouver's Broadway corridor, light rail transit connecting Surrey Centre with Langley, a new Pattullo Bridge and increased service on the SkyTrain, Canada Line, SeaBus and West Coast Express.

The proposal would also add more bus service to crowded routes, plus new routes in growing areas. The mail-in vote takes place over a 10-week period, from March 16 to May 29.

Price said Bateman's strategy has been to smear TransLink in order to defeat any proposed tax hikes to fund transit. The CTF spokesman launched a "steady beat of criticism, amplified for and by the media" over a range of TransLink controversies, said Price, including executive pay, free coffee, public art, fare evasion, the troubled Compass Card program and policing costs.

In stoking the public's distrust of TransLink, portraying it as bloated bureaucracy run by incompetents, Bateman has become the plebiscite's Dr. No, an ad hominem conservative attack dog. But he is also affable, verbally nimble and delivers great sound bites. His claim that TransLink is a basket-case has become accepted general knowledge for many people, rather than a claim disputed by most transit experts. "People just have a problem with TransLink," intone talk show hosts, further reinforcing the Bateman meme.

Yes side leaders from across the political spectrum argue that saying "no" to transit investment will lead to more gridlock, billions of dollars lost in productivity, and more jammed buses and SkyTrain lines. Former Vancouver city planning director Brent Toderian warns that a No victory would be Metro Vancouver's "Rob Ford" juncture, a point in time when a region known internationally for smart transportation planning pivots backward to a policy of more highways with more cars.

For his part, Bateman happily trots out the epithet "elitist" to describe Yes supporters such as Price and Toderian. In the CTF's

world, taxpayers know best how to spend their own dollars. It's a tactic used by Bateman's right-wing counterparts in the U.S., who constantly accuse Democrats of being "elitists" who think they know better than average people. The irony is that the anti-tax policies of Bateman's CTF and the Republicans serve to entrench social inequality.

Another irony is that the vast majority of transit users aren't members of the elite. The middle-aged guy I sat next to on the 99-B certainly wasn't.

THE BACKGROUND ON BATEMAN

Bateman is a 38-year-old former Langley Township councillor and Bible Belt minister who previously worked as a reporter at the Langley Advance.* Since becoming B.C. director for the CTF, he's been the go-to-guy whenever the media needs reaction to stories on government spending, taxes and, yes, TransLink.

I asked Bateman recently about the rumour that he gets a bonus for every media hit he scores. With a smile, he replied: "No, although after this campaign, I may want to renegotiate my contract." Bateman said his annual salary is \$75,000. "I'm not getting rich being part of the CTF. A lot of it is a labour of love."

Bateman's ubiquitous attacks on TransLink in the media gave the No side a big head start in the plebiscite. "We decided to come out strong as early as possible," said Bateman. "And once people are committed to a No vote, they are set." Indeed, more than one political expert has concluded that the advocate who makes the first impression has a huge advantage because voters don't want to admit their first opinion was wrong.

The secondary part of Bateman's hatchet job on TransLink is his claim that any new programs could be financed by cutting waste. This argument has resonated with a public skeptical about government and taxes, said former Vancouver city councillor Price, even though cutting the entire TransLink administrative staff (about four per cent of its budget) would hardly pay for a few bus routes, let alone proposed mega-projects such as the Broadway corridor subway, and light rail in Surrey and into Bateman's own Langley.

One of the leaders of the Yes side, Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore, said recently that Bateman morphed into a more extreme political animal once he quit Langley Township council in 2011 to join the CTF. Moore recalled that prior to his departure in Langley, Bateman voted for a nearly four-per-cent property tax increase, a hike well above inflation.

These days, now that he's an activist and not a politician, Bateman believes that any tax increase or project that imposes a tax burden above the rate of inflation should go to a public referendum or an extensive consultation process.

After joining the CTF, said Moore, Bateman began firing away at

TransLink. "He's a smart guy and he quickly figured out: 'If I say the word TransLink, I get in every media around the region. And it helps promote my brand, which is the CTF.' So to encourage his brand, he became the opposition. It's all been laid out for some time."

Moore has little respect for what he calls the "destructive" approach taken by Bateman since he joined the CTF.

"His only objective is to get to No regardless of the effects it will have on this region. And I think that is a dangerous argument," said Moore. "But that is the Canadian Taxpayers Federation mantra on everything. All levels of government should be able to fund a whole bunch of stuff with existing tax revenues.... But they never come forward with solutions. Just: 'No.'"

This is correct in essence, but not totally accurate. Broadly speaking, the CTF regularly argues that governments of all levels, but especially municipal ones, can save money by slashing public sector wages and pension plans. The group has also put forward an alternate plan to finance the proposed 10-year transit vision. The problem is not a single mayor in the region thinks it could work.

Bateman argues that Metro Vancouver could take 0.5 per cent from the projected 4.8-per-cent revenue growth in the region over the next 10 years to replace the 0.5-per-cent additional sales tax proposed in the mail-out plebiscite.

Moore, who is also chair of Metro Vancouver, counters that Bateman's plan would rob Peter to pay Paul, because any increased property tax revenue from the arrival of more residents will be spent to cope with new pressures on municipal services. "Growth in property tax revenue will go to police, fire, roads and sewage. Well, choose which one we are not going to do in order to fund transit."

Bateman dismisses these objections from Moore and other mayors. "The mayors don't like any out-of-the-box plan because they are dedicated to seeing this (sales) tax go through."



Jordan Bateman: 'I am very fiscally conservative but a little more libertarian socially than people might think.' Photo by David P. Ball.

Bateman wasn't always so vehemently anti-TransLink. During his time on Langley Township council, he regularly called for more transit south of the Fraser River and he spoke about TransLink in a manner that was more nuanced than the style he adopted once he joined the CTF.

Bateman was active with Get Moving B.C., an advocacy group which promoted the Gateway program, including the new Port Mann Bridge, which so far has been a financial disaster for the provincial government. (Bateman now says the Port Mann rollout was "mismanaged," but so far he has not demonized the people behind it, as he does routinely with every TransLink controversy.)

He even gave a cautious thumbs-up to the new governance model imposed on TransLink in 2007 by then transportation minister Kevin Falcon, which removed control of TransLink from the regional mayors and handed it to a group of unelected directors.

The idea was that TransLink would be run on a business model similar to that of the Vancouver airport or the newly privatized BC Ferries. Falcon argued that the new governance structure would stop local politicians from interfering with good transportation policy and put professionals in control.

Nowadays Bateman is scathing about the governance model, saying it needs to be "reformed" before TransLink is given any more money. But back when Bateman was a councillor, he had little interest in attacking Falcon's new TransLink model.

He wrote: "Having pros on board is a good idea from where I sit. They know the ins and outs of the business and, most importantly, have the time to invest in the operation. Having municipal politicians lead this thing in the time they cleave away from their city or regional duties has not been effective.

"I look forward to rolling up my sleeves and, as a municipal leader, being as helpful in this reorganization process as possible."

FAR FROM THE UNDERDOG

Bateman was raised in Coquitlam and Langley. He studied journalism at Langara College -- "going to Langara was a real eye opener, I had never seen women spelled with a 'y' before," he said -- before scoring his reporting job. He had a keen interest in city politics and was assigned to cover city hall. Eventually, Bateman decided he wanted to participate in politics, not just cover it.

He ran for Langley Township council in 2002 when he was 26 and lost. But he won election to council in the next vote and

remained there until his resignation in 2011 to join the CTF.

Asked about his overall politics, Bateman said he came from a strong Social Credit family where the NDP was anathema. He added: "I am very fiscally conservative but a little more libertarian socially than people might think. I don't really have an issue with same-sex marriage. But abortion is a tougher one. It's hard for me as a dad with three kids to get to that.... One thing about me that people don't know is: I love babies."

Bateman also dismissed suggestions that the CTF wants to tear down the social safety net. He points out that his wife Jenny is a co-ordinator for the YWCA's single-moms program in Surrey. "The people who claim I am anti-tax or anti-social services don't really know me at all. I think there is an important place for a social safety net. A lot of that comes from Jenny's experience with single moms."

Bateman and his wife are both wedding chaplains. They are currently pastors for the Langley Rivermen, a hockey team. For a while, they ran their own non-denominational church and they now attend the Living Waters Church in Fort Langley, a Pentecostal church.

Not that Bateman will need divine intervention to get a No victory in the plebiscite.

One of the best spin jobs doled out by Bateman to the media is that he is an underdog David, operating out of his home office, battling the Goliath of the political class of the region and their millions of dollars in advertising.

In fact, Bateman and the No side always had the advantage. Transit plebiscites are difficult to win, especially after years of negative news coverage of the lead transit agency. This is why the mayors' council was dismayed by Premier Christy Clark's surprise election pledge to hold a plebiscite. The mayors knew that convincing the public, especially motorists, to fork over more money on transit would be an uphill battle.

As Metro Vancouver chair Moore said recently: "This is a complex plan for a referendum, and to break it down to what it means for my neighbour or your neighbour is a lot more difficult than (Bateman) saying that guy wastes money."

When SFU'S Price heard about Clark's referendum plan, his first reaction was "this sucker is going down. It's a referendum, it was meant for that purpose. But even then I underestimated how bad it would be. If there is a No vote, this is discrediting the leadership class of the entire region. Who fills that void?

"Jordan Bateman?"

*Correction, March 10 at 10:30 a.m. This story previously misidentified the newspaper that Bateman worked at.



Doug Ward is a Vancouver-based freelance writer who was previously a reporter with the Vancouver Sun. Find his Tyee stories [here](#).

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