

# Vaughn Palmer: A bridge too far, a referendum too far gone

Shadow of B.C. Liberals' HST debacle looms over premier's election pledge on transit funding

BY VAUGHN PALMER, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST JANUARY 23, 2014



It hasn't been smooth sailing for Transportation Minister Todd Stone, who is navigating his way through the troubled waters of Metro Vancouver municipal politics as he promotes his boss's transit funding referendum vision.

**Photograph by:** Steve Bosch, PNG

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VICTORIA — For all the frustrations engendered by the standoff between the B.C. Liberals and Metro Vancouver mayors on the transit referendum, they are each dug into their positions for good reasons with no easy way out on either side.

Premier Christy Clark's position was defined by her election platform: "Any new revenue sources will be subject to a referendum to be held at the same time as the municipal elections in November 2014."

One can argue that the promise was arbitrary, should never have been made, and that referendums are no way to make tax policy. In our system, governments are elected to make decisions like how to fund transit.

But this particular government was elected on a promise to not make this particular

decision, but rather to delegate it to a referendum. Recent political history suggests that newly elected governments cannot easily brush off their election promises, especially those involving new taxes.

← This example seems contrary to the author's them! - cjk

One only needs to think back to the B.C. Liberal decision to harmonize the provincial sales tax with its federal counterpart, just 10 weeks after an election in which the possibility was barely mentioned and then only in passing as something not on the radar screen.

Lacking any shred of a mandate for the tax, the Liberals were accused of lying, promise-breaking and double-crossing the electorate. The fallout contributed heavily to Premier Gordon Campbell's departure from office.

The anti-HST backlash probably helped Christy Clark win the subsequent Liberal leadership race, for unlike her main rivals, she had not been part of the cabinet that was up to its neck in the debacle.

And all that over a promise that was merely implicit in the 2009 Liberal election platform.

Is it any wonder, then, that Clark has no inclination to repudiate the explicit promise she made in 2013 — namely, that before any new taxes are imposed to pay for transit, they will have to be approved by the electorate?

She and Transportation Minister Todd Stone both reiterated Thursday that the referendum is on. To say otherwise at this point would be to open the door to accusations that the Liberals were breaking their promise to the electorate.

However, Stone overreached when he argued that the Metro Vancouver mayors were therefore obliged to come to the table with the Liberals, agree on transit priorities and possible revenue measures, then help frame the referendum question.

The Liberal platform binds Stone and his colleagues. It doesn't bind the mayors. And notwithstanding Stone's call for them to "show some leadership," I don't see that the Metro mayors, as a contingent, are notably weak on that front.

Some of them — Burnaby's Derek Corrigan, Surrey's Dianne Watts, Coquitlam's Richard Stewart, to mention just three — are among the stronger local government leaders in the province.

Stone is right in saying that the mayors lack consensus on transit priorities. But that reflects the lack of consensus across a disconnected region where needs vastly outstrip revenues and where one municipality's much-needed improvement is another's cross to bear.

Think of the debate over the fate of the Pattullo Bridge between those who want it replaced and upgraded and those who fear the prospect of more traffic on a much improved crossing.

The province is sometimes forced to assume a leadership position on transit when the locals balk, the best example being the decision to impose construction of the Canada Line ahead of regional preferences for the Evergreen Line.

The Liberals are not proposing to go that route this time. Rather, they want to enlist local government leaders in setting priorities and promoting revenue sources that might well go against the interests of their own ratepayers.

Just as it is hard to think what Premier Clark could say to repudiate her referendum promise, it is equally difficult to imagine Mayor Gregor Robertson announcing to Vancouverites that the SkyTrain extension to UBC has been back-burnered in favour of light rail in Surrey, “but we’re still going to have to help them pay for it.”

Now imagine him saying that while he is also having to run for re-election.

So if the Liberals won’t back away from their referendum promise and local government won’t join in framing the question, where are matters headed?

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” said Stone, and dang, I wish he’d said “we’ll toll that bridge when we get to it.”

The transportation minister went on to say that the Liberals remain hopeful that the mayors will eventually decide to play ball. Meanwhile the province stands ready to introduce enabling legislation for the referendum and will also pay the incremental cost of distributing the ballots and tallying the result.

But if the mayors aren’t asking for new revenue sources to fund transit, it is not clear why the referendum would be needed. Instead the irreconcilables might, by default, shelve the matter until the civic election is over and pick up where they left off afterward.

Not the most constructive solution, but less of a setback for the transit system than going ahead with a referendum that looks to be dead on arrival.

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