

# Don Cayo: Premier's new stance on referendum opens door for a better approach

Citizens' assembly could look in depth at all transportation issues facing the region

BY DON CAYO, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST    JANUARY 30, 2014



Proposed transportation referendum is a worthy subject for a citizens' assembly type of approach.

**Photograph by:** Stuart Davis, Vancouver Sun

Premier Christy Clark deserves kudos for the willingness she expressed this week to be flexible on the date for a referendum she wants held to determine future TransLink's priorities and future funding.

Because now there's a real opportunity — if she wants to seize it — to do it right.

Before her conciliatory statement, when the province was hell-bent on holding the referendum at municipal election time this fall with citizens asked to vote on a yet-to-be-determined question, there was a real prospect of an HST-like fiasco in the offing.

Tax measures are — as the premier herself noted in a conversation with me a year ago when I was researching a series on direct democracy — one of the worst-possible subjects for a referendum. Citizens are always unlikely to put their hands up for a tax increase, especially if and when the policy case for it hasn't been spelled out patiently and carefully in advance.

What happened as a result of the HST referendum — and what could very likely happen with one on Metro Vancouver transit — is that the best policy option was ruled out by voters who were fed up with

what they saw as political manipulation and betrayal. Thus the province was stuck with a much worse option, the perverse old PST.

But if tax policy isn't a good subject for a referendum, the future of transportation is. It's a key to both quality of life and economic growth. And what the region winds up with in the way of transportation infrastructure that will both shape and service its future needs will be either enabled or constrained by how much or how little money tax policy is able to raise.

So these two intertwined questions become, I think, a worthy subject for a citizens' assembly type of approach. This process, as was well demonstrated during the provincewide exercise in 2004-05 to assess potential electoral reform, has the ability to sift even-handedly through complexity and nuance. And the result virtually everywhere it has been tried is that voters trust the conclusions of their peers who participate in the assembly much more than the views of politicians who, most of us assume, have self-interest at stake or an axe to grind.

The citizen's assembly on election reform can be relatively unbiased. Not so for a citizen's assembly on the subject of transportation. Class warfare muddies the waters.

The electoral reform referendum, which asked voters to endorse a new system called the single transferable vote, was ultimately defeated. But this shouldn't be seen as a failure of the process. The measure won 57.7 per cent of the popular vote and majority support in 77 of 79 ridings; it failed only because it needed 60-per-cent support to pass.

A well constituted citizens' assembly could look in depth at all of the transportation issues facing the region: the competing priorities of new transit and new roads; more buses versus various types of and routes for rail; pros and cons of potential revenue measures; even which communities' needs should top the list.

The process of deliberation, which should be transparent, would build credibility as it unfolded. And the ultimate recommendations could — as the premier so ardently wishes — be put to the electorate for confirmation.

I've been sharply critical in the past of TransLink's flawed governance structure — both the provincially appointed board that oversees its affairs in secret, and the previous municipally appointed board that had some accountability, but not nearly enough.

I don't see much prospect of fixing TransLink for the long-term until this issue is resolved. But the shorter-term problem — the urgent need to get a viable plan and begin to run with it — can be solved very simply. The premier has taken a welcome first step, and I hope she follows through with next one.

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