

Stephen Hume: Anti-tax group has hijacked transit debate

Pressure group: The Canadian Taxpayers Federation, based in Regina, has no legitimate say in transit plebiscite

BY STEPHEN HUME, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 2, 2015 10:44 AM

How is a minuscule, Prairie-based, fundamentally non-democratic special interest group that operates like some self-appointed secret society able to develop such traction in framing the current Metro discussion of public transit funding?

Judging from the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, you'd think Metro residents were staggering under intolerable taxes and about to be crushed by yet another.

Yet competitiveness studies show that after Alberta we enjoy the second lowest provincial tax in Canada. Our sales tax is lower than all but two provinces - and would retain that rank even with the proposed transit increase. Corporate tax rates here are second lowest in Canada. Small corporations enjoy a tax rate 20 per cent lower than Alberta's. Residential taxes in Metro are lower than in Victoria.

No matter. The seven-member CTF, which claims to represent 84,000 Canadians, has effectively inserted its anti-tax agenda into a discussion that applies only to Metro residents.

Just to put that in perspective, even if you take CTF at its word regarding "supporters" - as opposed to "members" - it represents 0.2 per cent of Canada's population. Members represent 0.00002 per cent of Canada's population. If all CTF "supporters" lived in B.C., they'd represent only 2.6 per cent of the province's population and even if they all lived in Metro Vancouver they'd represent only 3.3 per cent. So this is a bit like the city council of Lethbridge - it represents about the same number of people - coming to town to harangue residents of Metro Vancouver over public transit planning.

Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson, by comparison, tallied almost 84,000 supporters - proportionally that's 6,850 per cent more supporters than the CTF can claim - and they

live here and not in Hairy Hill, Alberta, Country Cat Pond, Labrador, or wherever CTF's undisclosed "supporters" reside. The CTF demands transparency for "donation disclosures" and "access to voters lists" in one broadside that recently arrived, thundering for "election rules" for the transit plebiscite.

However, CTF declines for "privacy" reasons to disclose exactly who its own supporters are or who provides its funds and in what specific amounts.

Why the secrecy? Because, its website says, vindictive bureaucrats, politicians, union activists "and other stalwarts of the entitlement state" might retaliate. "Over the years CTF staff members have been called in the middle of the night to be told off, received horrifically offensive letters and emails, been threatened with protests at their homes, bomb threats at our offices and even death threats."

Sorry if I'm unsympathetic.

Columnists put their names to opinions. Getting berated after work, reading nasty correspondence and experiencing all the other unpleasantness that generates CTF distaste for raucous hurly-burly just comes with the territory. That's the thing about free speech in a democracy - it doesn't have to be genteel.

Yet here is the CTF, this tiny, unaccountable, unidentifiable pressure group, spouting demands for transparency in the coming plebiscite and choosing language that suggests a lack of legitimacy in the process all while implying some onerous tax decision.

Well, it's not an election. It's not a referendum. It's a plebiscite. And it's not a vote authorizing a tax, because the results aren't binding. In fact, you're only voting because your cowardly provincial government seeks to evade difficult decisions which arise when its narrow ideology founders on the reefs of reality. So, it's simply a memorandum of advice to elected officials about what voters in specific municipalities think about a proposed regional policy for funding transit infrastructure that if left as is will be inadequate to service rapid population growth in a critical economic zone.

In a healthy democracy, any dog is entitled to yap about anything it likes. That doesn't mean every yap deserves equal consideration.

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