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## BALDREY: Emotion will trump facts every time

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Sadly, the lack of "facts" - especially the costs and timelines for the various proposed projects, as well as how much this will "cost" each municipality, is what may well cause many to vote "no". Lacking "facts" causes people to use their emotions!  
- cjk

The transit plebiscite campaign has now officially begun in earnest, and already one can see parallels to the one about the HST a couple of years back.

And that is good news for the No side, and bad news for the Yes side.

The HST debate saw the pro-Harmonized Sales Tax folks put forward seemingly reasoned, factually based arguments for keeping the tax. The anti-HST side was led by former premier Bill Vander Zalm, who relied on emotional arguments that were often short on facts.

As is so often the case in referendums, the emotion-based campaign won over the fact-based campaign and the HST went crashing down to defeat.

In the transit debate, the Yes side is throwing all kinds of facts and figures out there, hoping that at least some of them stick in peoples' minds. Raise the sales tax, they say, and life will generally be better all-around.

Rather than simply sticking to talking about transportation projects, the Yes side has gone even further to suggest raising the sales tax will save lives. It has enlisted the voices of Vancouver health officers to make the argument that more transit services will translate to averting 400 deaths a year and reduce obesity, since more people will walk, cycle and take transit.

The health officers are relying on a World Health Organization measuring tool for their argument, but I suspect many potential voters will view this as an overreach. The captain of the No side, Jordan Bateman of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, has dismissed the health officers' comments as nothing more than "scare tactics."

For his part, Bateman is accused of inflating the potential cost to the average family should the sales tax hike go through, and making various other kinds of misleading comments. He is also pumping up the risible anger and frustration many people feel towards TransLink, and some on the Yes side think that's unfair.

But Bateman has zeroed in on a flaw in the Yes side's argument: that there is no Plan B should the sales tax be defeated.

While there may be no official Plan B, defeating the sales tax increase does not mean proposed transportation projects and transit improvements will die on the vine.

For example, Premier Christy Clark has made a major political commitment to replace the Massey Tunnel with a new bridge and she no doubt looks favourably on helping to bring rapid transit to voter-rich Surrey.

Even if the sales tax hike fails with the voters, her government's three-year fiscal plan earmarks \$325 million over the next two years to be spent on "rapid transit, buses and other transit priorities" (granted, not all of that will be spent in Metro Vancouver).

And does anyone really believe the Pattullo Bridge will not be replaced if the sales tax plebiscite fails?

Where there is no Plan B is in how these projects will be funded if the tax hike is defeated. The sales tax increase would generate about \$1 billion in new revenue over every four years, which, when matched with provincial and federal funding, would begin to pay for some of those projects and transit improvements.

Without that new tax revenue, mayors and their municipalities will have to go back to the drawing board and look at things like even higher property and gas taxes and things like a vehicle levy and parking taxes (all of which are unpopular) to pay for improvements.

In any event, as both sides continue to make their pitch to the voters, the campaign will continue to evolve into a debate that pits statistics versus emotions.

And emotional arguments usually defeat statistical ones, whether it's during an election or a referendum.

As I noted in this space a few weeks back, the Yes side's chief strength is its own "infrastructure," which consists of more than 90 organizations representing more than 250,000 people. If it can mobilize those folks to vote Yes before May 29, it has a good shot at winning.

But if not — and to be sure, a lot of those 250,000 people no doubt have strongly-held No views — the anger and frustration that is the base of so much of the anti-tax attitudes out there will prevail.

No amount of reasoned argument can deal with that emotion, it seems. The pro-HST folks learned that the hard way, and the pro-transit sales tax folks have to hope they aren't in for a similar lesson.

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