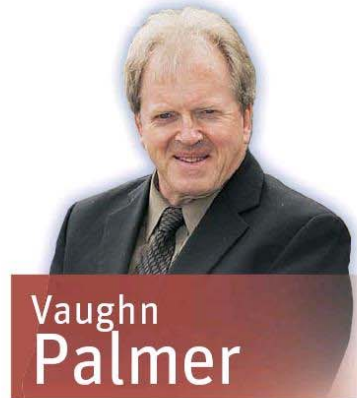


# Clark's vote take-away: TransLink, taxes anathema

**Watch out: Liberals should proceed with caution if they're contemplating blowing up transit authority once again**



Vaughn  
Palmer

## VICTORIA

As Premier Christy Clark sees it, the transit plebiscite “told us two things,” both rooted in the political past with implications for the future.

Lesson one, the premier told a media scrum Wednesday: “People didn’t want to pay a new tax.” Lesson two: “Citizens told us they don’t trust TransLink. They don’t trust it to do its job with their money.”

Taking those lessons in turn, her B.C. Liberal government learned the hard way, via the citizen-initiated referendum that overturned the harmonized sales tax back in 2011, that folks feel taxed to the max.

One of the ironies of the transit plebiscite was watching some of the same people who’d helped torpedo the HST argue that this particular change in the sales tax was a good thing and fume about the “misinformation” spread by the anti-tax side.

The HST experience also left the B.C. Liberals well-schooled in the dangers of promise-breaking on taxes.

The possibility of harmonizing the provincial sales tax with its federal goods and services counterpart was barely mentioned in the 2009 election campaign, and then only as something not on the radar screen.

But when the Gordon Campbell-led Liberals made the shift 10 weeks after the election, they were accused of having flat-out lied to the public.

This time around, having specifically spelled out in their 2013 election platform that “any new revenue sources for transit improvements in Metro Vancouver would be subject to referendum,” the Liberals were not about to be diverted by calls for them to abandon that promise.

One other point of comparison worth noting is the margin of defeat in the balloting by mail on the two taxes. The HST was ousted by a vote of 55 per cent to 45 per cent, while the proposed half-point boost in the Metro Vancouver sales tax to pay for transit services was rejected by a more decisive 62 to 38 per cent.

The difference may have been that the government brought greater resources of time and money to bear in campaigning for the HST, though even that was not enough to rescue the tax.

The more overwhelming margin against the regional sales tax may also provide confirmation for Clark’s second lesson: that the outcome expressed a complete lack of trust in the entity that manages the transit system.

“They didn’t want to deliver that new tax to an organization that they didn’t trust to spend it (and) that means there are going to have to be changes at TransLink.”

She said those changes should begin with completion of the current hunt for a new CEO to succeed the ousted Ian Jarvis and replace interim boss Doug Allen: “But there will need to be more change than that because whether or not TransLink got more money, the fact is people don’t trust the organization.”

Some of those proposals for change will come from Allen, some from the mayors’ council that is overseeing the selection process for the new CEO. Nor did Clark overlook a role for the provincial government in the makeover, even indulging in a bit of mischief on that score.

“Well, the province could run TransLink, I suppose,” she speculated, knowing full well that the leaders of two dozen or so fiefdoms that make up

Metro Vancouver would reject any further loss of control over service levels and priorities for expansion.

Rather, they’d prefer local autonomy and a blank cheque from the province in terms of funding. Whereas as the premier sees it, the government is already heavily engaged in financing regional transportation.

In answer to the specific suggestion that the province should increase the annual operating subsidy for the regional transit system, she recalled how the Lower Mainland already enjoys a funding advantage over other regions on capital costs for hospitals.

“Municipal taxpayers all over the province pay a tax for hospitals,” she noted, hearkening to a change that occurred under the previous New Democratic Party government. “People in the Lower Mainland don’t pay that tax. ... It has always been the understanding that local governments would find a way to fund part of transit in the Lower Mainland because in the rest of the province local taxpayers pay for transit and hospitals.”

The provincial government shares capital costs for transit as well. It is already picking up 40 per cent of the tab for the new Evergreen line, scheduled for completion next year. Clark reiterated a commitment to pay one-third of the cost for replacing the TransLink-owned Pattullo Bridge and the next phase of transit expansion, which will most likely be light rail service in Surrey.

“As the province, we are still here with our third of funding. That money remains on the table,” she said. She also said, “I mean, really, at this point it’s up to the mayors to think about how they want to find their portion of the money.”

Since TransLink is a provincial government creation, the onus is on Clark and the Liberals to legislate any changes in the long run. But neither should there be any overlooking that the regional transportation authority has already been subject to previous provincially led makeovers, none satisfactory.

Blow up TransLink?

They’ve already tried that and it didn’t work.

Victoria should proceed with caution this time.

[vpalmer@vancouver.sun.com](mailto:vpalmer@vancouver.sun.com)