



Metro residents are being asked to vote for a 0.5 per cent sales tax rise to help fund transit enhancements.

# Stunning turnaround of the anti-taxers

**Plebiscite: But Yes proponents discover that people may vote as taxpayers — not as citizens**

Politicians and business leaders have talked way more about cutting taxes for poor beleaguered taxpayers for the past 30 years than they have about the valuable services tax money provides.

Through good times and bad, the political debates have focused on debt reduction, deficit-fighting, deregulation, privatization, selling off public assets to balance the books and shaming those who rely on public programs to pay the rent or feed their children.

So, it's no surprise now, as Metro Vancouver residents are asked to vote for a 0.5 per cent increase on sales tax to pay for bridges, buses, Seabus and light-rail transit, that: a) they don't want to because they're convinced they're hard-done-by taxpayers; and, b) they find it hard to trust all these folks who have so swiftly changed gears from taxes are bad to vote Yes for more.

Why would it be any different? Along with the Fraser Institute, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation has been at this a long time with clever campaigns and awards ceremonies where an adult dressed up as a pig helps hand out pig-topped trophies to wasteful public officials.

With the No side support, they're reaping what they've sown.

But they're not alone. Plenty of other fiscally conservative, anti-tax, small-government-is-better promoters are also seeing the fruits of their labours. Although it's not in the way they might have imagined, since they're staunch supporters of the Yes side.

Among them are the Vancouver Board of Trade, which launched the first federal debt clock 25



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years ago, and the B.C. Chamber of Commerce, which admits that B.C.'s taxes are among the lowest yet still decries the erosion in tax competitiveness.

After years of appealing to our limited self-interest, anti-taxers — both groups and individuals — now want us to voluntarily pay more.

Suddenly, they're telling us how essential public utilities like roads and transit are for everyone's wealth, health and happiness. For the good of us all and for future generations, they're begging us to vote Yes.

It's a stunning turnaround. After all these years of telling us to look at budgets through the lens of "What's in it for me?", they're now asking us to look at this plan and consider what's in it for all of us.

What they're asking is for us to not act like taxpayers this time. They're asking us to act like citizens.

The surprise is that nobody — least of all Premier Christy Clark — seems to have given it more than a passing thought before blundering ahead with this plebiscite.

Maybe we've lost the capacity to be good citizens. Maybe the notion of the common good has been convinced out of us.

We've certainly lost some of the capacity in Metro Vancouver. In 2012, a third of residents

surveyed said they're estranged from community, lonely, disengaged.

Yet they also said they're largely uninterested in getting to know their neighbours.

Add to that the fact that so many people are in debt up to their eyeballs and it doesn't seem as if there's a very firm base on which to build a consensus for spending more for the public good.

Of course, it's possible that this plebiscite is a watershed and that people will be convinced to vote as citizens, not taxpayers.

The Yes side is a surprisingly disparate coalition that spans the political spectrum and includes business groups, cyclists, environmentalists, trade unions, students, doctors, anti-poverty advocates and architects.

It's a rare public display of the fact that Canadians traditionally have not been averse to raising taxes to spend on public works or for the public good.

When the federal government polled Canadians last year about what made them proud to be a citizen, they overwhelmingly chose publicly funded Medicare.

When asked in November, 80 per cent of Canadians told Ipsos Reid pollsters that ending child poverty should be a national priority.

And ask even many No voters if more money should be spent on transit and they'll say yes. But they don't trust politicians with the money.

As taxes went down over the past 30 years, distrust of politicians rose.

Voter turnout dropped too, although paradoxically, it's never been those who have benefited most from tax cuts who stayed home — it's those who have been hurt the most by service cuts, including young people and the poor, who are less likely to vote.

The challenge for the Yes side's broad coalition is not only appealing to people's better nature; it needs to convince them to act on it.

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