

# HST defeat brings back harder edge of B.C.'s protest politics

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For most of the past decade, British Columbia politics were almost unrecognizable. After almost 30 years of near constant political turmoil and larger-than-life politicians who seemed to revel in the province's zany, often unstable political culture, it all went quiet.

Under the staid, dour leadership of Gordon Campbell, British Columbia adopted the kind of bland political customs that Bill Davis made work so well in Ontario throughout the 1970s. It appears British Columbians have had enough of that.

The stunning grassroots rebellion that led to Friday's death of the harmonized sales tax could only have happened in British Columbia. This kind of protest politics is in the province's blood, an undeniable part of its genetic political makeup. Only in B.C. could such a revolt be led by a former premier, Bill Vander Zalm, who was hounded out of office in disgrace, despised by wide swaths of voters from one end of the province to the other.

"It is a truism that Mr. Vander Zalm was the author of his own demise," says David Mitchell, historian and president of the Public Policy Forum in Ottawa. "But he was a charismatic populist capable of engaging great crowds of people. And that is not inconsistent with the personality politics that have always complemented protest politics and the protest culture in British Columbia."

What we do know today is that what happened in B.C. on Friday is without precedent in this country, maybe in the British Commonwealth. A major piece of government policy, tax policy no less, was defeated by a vote of the people through referendum. This sort of thing happens routinely in California, a state where a government-policy-by-referendum approach has made it almost unmanageable. This is the first glimpse of it that we have seen in Canada.

So is this the slippery slope for B.C. politicians that some are suggesting it is? Or rather a unique outcome that occurred because of a fairly exceptional set of circumstances? My guess would be that it's the latter, mostly because of the rare conditions that allowed the tax uprising to succeed.

Firstly, the HST was introduced by an extremely unpopular politician in Gordon Campbell, who was perceived to have lied to British Columbians about his intentions regarding the tax. (Promising not to bring in such a tax and then, right after winning the 2009 election, doing just the opposite.) The public anger was palpable. And critics who saw the HST as shifting the tax

burden from big business to consumers quickly went to work telling British Columbians why the tax was a disaster for them.

But instead of going on a sales blitz of his own, Mr. Campbell ignored the nascent revolt, calculating that it would be long blown over by the time the next election rolled around. He also arrogantly dismissed the potential of the rebellion's erstwhile leader, Mr. Vander Zalm. They turned out to be miscalculations that ultimately cost Mr. Campbell his job.

Many believed that his resignation in November, 2010, would stop the uprising in its tracks. It did not. Explaining to the public why the tax was bad was always easier than trying to elucidate why the HST was good for the province. Even though the government did a better job of this in the dying weeks of the referendum campaign, it was too late.

Finally, we mustn't forget that the anti-HST forces would have lost this vote had Mr. Campbell, in an act of thoughtless desperation, not changed the referendum rules to make it far easier for the tax opponents to win. But when the premier said that a simple 50-per-cent-plus-one vote would carry the day, the anti-HST forces could scarcely believe their luck.

Gordon Campbell almost single-handedly killed the HST.

While the decision has immediate financial implications for the B.C. government, which now has to return \$1.6-billion in HST funding to Ottawa, it has consequences for the Harper Conservatives, too. The Tories envision a harmonized country when it comes to tax policy. Losing an economic and political influencer like B.C. among the provinces (now four) that have the HST is a setback to the government's plans.

Whether this victory for direct democracy emboldens voters across the country remains to be seen. We have certainly seen Canadians vent their anger and frustration at the ballot box before – the rise of the NDP and the annihilation of the Liberals in the last federal election is a good example of it. The Reform Party was a creation of protest politics. But the political culture in B.C. has always had a different personality and harder edge.

“British Columbia is also a community that, by and large, is bound by populist impulses that reject expert opinion,” Mr. Mitchell says. “That is a key element of the frontier politics that still, by and large, prevail in British Columbia.”