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Soft touch needed to save the HST in B.C.

By IAN BAILEY
From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

Focus group moderator says hard sell on tax doomed to fail as polls show people want more information before deciding how to vote in referendum

The B.C. government's only hope for a Yes vote in next year's HST referendum is to back off the hard sell and leave the public to reflect on the complexities of axing the tax, says the moderator of focus groups on the controversial measure.

Greg Lyle, of Innovative Research, says the approach may be anathema to any government, but is the only option ahead.

"The minute people feel they're being sold anything, they're extremely resistant," Mr. Lyle said in an interview Monday. "Any sense of push is going to get the people to push back."

His findings came out of a series of focus groups his firm conducted for the provincial Harmonized Sales Tax Information Office, which, he said, echoed poll results jointly released Monday by the office that suggest a dissatisfaction with available information on the HST.

Fifty-seven per cent of a total 887 respondents surveyed between Nov. 16 and 23 by polling company Harris/Decima said they wanted more information before deciding how to vote in the referendum, and 45 per cent said the former status quo on two taxes would be negative. The poll is considered accurate within 3.3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

"British Columbians might not vote to get rid of the HST, but it won't be because the government won. They're not going to go and say, all of a sudden, the government really knew what it was doing, all is forgiven," Mr. Lyle said.

"What could happen though is, as British Columbians start to grapple with the reality of life after [Gordon] Campbell and the consequences of going back to the [provincial sales tax] and [goods and services tax], they may decide keeping with some changes would probably be the lesser of evils."

By changes, he is referring to a cut in rates - a possibility raised by former health minister Kevin Falcon, who is seeking the leadership of the B.C. Liberals - or products and services covered by the tax.

He said his focus groups - a total of 40 people in four different groups - suggest the issue is not fixed, and initial HST opponents are reconsidering their opposition. He also suggested there may be some interest in a compromise.

He encouraged a tone where the government eases up and reminds voters "it's not the end of the world" to go back to a PST and GST, but that there might be issues to manage with that decision.

"The best chance the government has is if they stay out of the way and the average person talks about it themselves," said Mr. Lyle, who managed the B.C. Liberals' 1996 election campaign.

The B.C. government's point person on the tax indicated Monday that the Liberals may be taking such an approach in the months before the referendum.

The vote is now set for September, but Liberal leadership candidates have proposed moving it up to the summer to get rid of the uncertainty around the fate of the 12-per-cent tax.

John Les, the parliamentary secretary for HST information, said he is planning an enhanced website on the HST and the mailing of government literature on the tax next year, but said it will be a low-cost, restrained effort "without spending gobs of money."

At least one leadership candidate - former attorney-general Mike de Jong - has said the referendum is lost, but Mr. Les said polling numbers suggesting people are receptive to information offer an opening for a win.

"I think, very clearly, if people are given the information on which to make a decision, they will come to a conclusion in favour of the HST," he said.

George Abbott, the former education minister now in the leadership race, also was hopeful.

"I do not agree that this is a vote that is necessarily lost," he said in an interview. "I think that if people can get the facts on hands, people will make an informed decision."

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