

Stephen Harper “behind” No campaign in transit referendum, SFU prof says

Written by Joan Russow

Monday, 12 January 2015 21:11 - Last Updated Saturday, 17 January 2015 13:45

by Carlito Pablo



Prime Minister Stephen Harper shakes hands with Jim Prentice, premier of Alberta

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“It shows the long reach of the Prime Minister’s Office,” Gutstein told the *Straight* in a phone interview today (January 9).

According to Gutstein, there is a “very direct link” between Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s office and the no-vote campaign to be run by Marshall in Metro Vancouver’s transit referendum this spring.

“It’s a Ford Nation type of move,” said the SFU adjunct professor and author of the 2014 book [Harperism: How Stephen Harper and His Think Tank Colleagues Have Transformed Canada](#). “Like they’re appealing to the suburban Conservative voters. ‘We don’t want, you know, new taxes imposed on us.’”

“And the connection to Harper is not really masked,” Gutstein continued. “Like Marshall’s

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connections to the Prime Minister’s Office are pretty obvious, so that’s going to be known to people that Harper is behind this. He’s behind it because he doesn’t want his suburban voters to be saddled with another tax. So that would explain the long arm of the Prime Minister’s Office.”

Marshall was manager of strategic planning in the Prime Minister’s Office from 2006 to 2007. He was also the Conservative Party of Canada’s pollster in its successful 2008 election campaign. From 2008 to 2010, Marshall was a member of the party’s national council, representing British Columbia. (Marshall was also involved in setting up the pro-tar sands website EthicalOil.org , for which his wife Kathryn served as a spokesperson.)

The country is going into an election this year, and according to Gutstein, a campaign against taxes, specifically the additional sales tax proposed to fund transit improvement in Metro Vancouver, fits into Harper’s messaging.

“It’s an election year. It’s just to reconnect with his base. He’s probably going to be doing it in a dozen different ways, but this is certainly one of them. He’s looking out for their interest,” Gutstein said.

And one way of looking out for the Conservative base’s interest is to keep taxes down, he added.

“We’ve balanced the budget. We’ve cut taxes. We’ve given more back to the taxpayers. And that’s certainly going to be one of the major themes of the campaign,” Gutstein said.

Arrayed against a coalition of business, labour, environmental, and other groups supporting transit improvements, the “no” campaign might lose, according to him.

But Gutstein thinks a defeat wouldn’t really matter to the Conservatives, because the campaign would have demonstrated something that they would want to portray themselves when the election comes around, which is that “somebody’s got to stand up for the little guy”.