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Free public transit on the dirty brown horizon?

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There have been 41 smog alerts declared so far this year in Ontario — the first one way back in February. Now meteorologists say the heat wave (and associated pollution crisis) could last until Thanksgiving. Air quality is a big problem in other parts of Canada, too, imposing huge economic and health costs. Doctors estimate that smog causes 5,800 premature deaths each year in Ontario alone. That's stunning: Imagine the hysteria if terrorists were to kill a tiny fraction of as many Canadians.

Confronted with a dirty brown horizon and noticeable tightness in their chests, millions of Canadians no doubt shake their heads and wonder what the world is coming to. But then we go back to our daily routines. What will it take to fundamentally change our behaviour (not to mention that of Midwest Americans, the original source of much of our smog)? Lots of ideas are being thrown around. Unfortunately, most won't make nearly enough difference.

Take Toronto, where well-meaning officials urge commuters (via huge electronic signs over the city's freeways) to "Reduce Vehicle Use" on smoggy days. Problem is, by the time they see the sign, the drivers are already in their cars. Just turning off the signs would probably save more pollution (through reduced electricity use) than this feel-good message does.

At any rate, if you find it hard to breathe on smoggy days, taking the bus won't help: It'll take longer to get to work, and you'll spend longer outside, without air conditioning, until you get there. Even with Canada's best communicator, Rick Mercer, urging us to meet the one-tonne challenge, appealing to environmental voluntarism will never solve our problem. We must shift more fundamentally the cost-benefit calculation that leads most Canadians to conclude it's still better to drive to work than take the bus.

Stephen Harper's Conservatives recently headed in this direction, proposing a 16-per-cent federal tax credit on monthly transit passes. This proves the Tories really do believe in "recycling": This idea's been promoted for years by public-transit advocates and even by the NDP (in its last federal election platform). The original proposal involved tax-exempt status for employer-paid transit passes; in the Tory incarnation, in contrast, transit riders buy the passes themselves. And the Tory subsidy would be worthless to the large proportion of transit riders who have low incomes and hence don't pay federal income tax.

Nevertheless, the general notion of tax assistance for transit users is a good one. Tax-exempt transit passes would help, but not enough. If we really want to reward Canadians

who take the time and trouble to ride the bus, let's go further. Let's make public transit free.

We already ask transit riders to “pay”: infrequent service, crowds, longer commutes. Their actions benefit us all. They shouldn't have to pay again at the token booth. Instead, we should fund this public service outright. That would provide a more immediate and powerful incentive to take the bus, compared to a far-off and iffy tax credit. The icing on the cake: a direct boost to the disposable incomes of existing transit users, most of whom (young people, immigrants, seniors) really need one.

This policy would be surprisingly easy to fund. Public transit systems currently take in about \$2.5-billion in passenger revenues each year — equivalent to about two-thirds of the excise taxes Ottawa now collects on gasoline sales. Transit operators could take resources currently dedicated to collecting and policing fares, and invest in improving service.

Better yet, let's double the existing 10-cent federal gasoline tax. Take all the new money and give it directly to public-transit systems, on condition that their service is free. That would finance the expansion in transit capacity required to meet the (desired) increase in passenger demand. The tax increase could be phased in over time, once world oil prices start their inevitable retreat from current stratospheric heights. That way, gasoline consumers would hardly notice the extra dime (European governments did exactly this when oil prices fell in the 1980s).

Sounds radical? You bet it does. But it's going to take more than tinkering around the edges to really fix that dirty brown horizon.

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