

**REGIONAL POLITICS OF CARBON TAXATION: LESSONS FROM BRITISH
COLUMBIA**

by

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Abstract

This research project examines the reactions of British Columbians to the provincial carbon tax legislation implemented in 2008. It focuses particularly on northern interior communities and commuter suburbs in the Lower Mainland. In studying these jurisdictions, the paper attempts to explain the vocal opposition to the policy from communities in British Columbia's northern interior and the quiescent reaction in the Lower Mainland. These responses are complicated by the fact that numerous sources have shown that northerners are not disproportionately impacted by the carbon tax, and in fact, commuters in the Lower Mainland tend to drive farther on average to get to work than rural British Columbians. Thus, the evidence indicates that the residents that appeared undisturbed by the carbon tax, and not the vocal citizens of northern BC, feel a greater impact from the implementation of the carbon tax policy. In light of this regional development, the paper attempts to address two questions. First, how can we explain the paradoxical reactions displayed by these jurisdictions? Second, what do the distinct reactions tell us about the politics of carbon pricing and about regional political dynamics in British Columbia? To answer these questions, the paper employs three theoretical approaches; Mancur Olson's theory of collective action, electoral incentive theory, and an ideational argument. While each theory builds upon and reinforces the others, ideas are argued to have the greatest capacity to explain the outcomes in these distinct regions. Community identities that were perceived and formed long before the carbon tax policy was ever imagined manifested themselves in this new policy debate. The longstanding sense of regional alienation in the north was significant in fostering northern perceptions of the carbon tax policy, while the absence of such historic world views, as well as some with good policy motives, encouraged the reserved approach in the Lower Mainland.

Preface

Primary research for this thesis was approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The author conducted open-ended and unstructured interviews. The Ethics Certificate number is H10-01294.

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Introduction

When it comes to implementing environmental policy and climate change action programs, Canada is only beginning to make progress. In fact, until recently, Canada could be looked at as an example of ‘what not to do’ given that the country’s “per capita carbon emissions are among the highest in the world.”¹ Canada is a regionally diverse country whose varied industrial and environmental interests often conflict, in turn making it difficult to convince the separate regions to accept progressive national strategies. Nevertheless, some provincial governments have begun to legislate and execute environmental policies that have the potential to achieve climate change goals.

One example of this legislative desire to reduce Canada’s carbon footprint is evident in the province of British Columbia (BC). In February 2008, British Columbia adopted the first revenue neutral carbon tax in North America. Unlike other market based approaches to environmental regulation like cap and trade, the carbon tax entails “a more obvious transfer to the state both from individuals and firms.”² Given that the public is often resistant to new taxes, it is hardly surprising that public reactions became increasingly negative following the introduction of the carbon tax. Interestingly though, opposition to the policy was concentrated in particular regions of the province. While the municipal governments of Vancouver and its surrounding cities in the Lower Mainland were largely silent on the topic in the press, vocal criticism of the carbon tax emerged from the municipal governments of northern and rural BC.

¹ Dale Marshall. *Provincial Power Play: Breaking Away from Federal Inaction on Climate Change*. David Suzuki Foundation. Accessed Online. 2008. p.5.
<http://www.davidsuzuki.org/latestnews/dsfnews07160801.asp>.

² Kathryn Harrison. *A Tale of Two Taxes: The Fate of Environmental Tax Reform in Canada and the Province of British Columbia*. Prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the APSA 2009. August, 2009.1.

This regional concentration of opposition becomes more puzzling when the impacts of the carbon tax are taken into account. Following the negative press attention toward the carbon tax, numerous sources including journalists, university researchers and academics, and the provincial government came out with findings on the impacts of the carbon tax. Their studies found that commuters in BC's Lower Mainland drive farther on average to get to work than rural British Columbians, and therefore can be expected to pay more on average than those in the rural north in response to the carbon tax.³ Thus, while the politics suggested the opposite, the evidence indicates that the residents who appeared less upset by the carbon tax, and not the vocal residents of northern BC, feel a greater impact from the implementation of the policy. In light of this interesting regional development, this paper examines the carbon tax reactions of British Columbia municipal politicians in the northern interior and the commuter suburbs of the Lower Mainland.

The paper begins with a description of the methodology used to uncover the puzzle of reactions that unfolded in the two regions and a brief explanation of BC's carbon tax. It proceeds with a review of three theoretical approaches to public policy that will serve as a framework to understand the responses to the provincial policy. The approaches applied to the present case include collective action (and the lack thereof), electoral incentive theory, and an ideational argument. Thereafter, a review of the debate surrounding the implementation of the BC carbon tax is undertaken, and the theoretical approaches are applied. While each theory builds upon and reinforces the others, ideas are argued to have the greatest capacity to explain the outcomes in these distinct regions.

³ Tom Barrett. "Carbon Tax Screws BC's North?" *The Tyee*. April 4, 2008. accessed online. June 2010. <http://thetyee.ca/news/2008/04/04/carbontaxnorth/>

Tom Barrett. "Hate Commuting? Move North." *The Tyee*. April 22, 2008. Accessed online. July 2010. <http://thetyee.ca/news/2008/04/22/movenorth/>

Nic Rivers. "Carbon Tax Coping." *Vancouver Sun*. April 29, 2008. A13.

Community identities that were perceived and formed long before the carbon tax policy was conceived manifested themselves in this new policy debate. A longstanding sense of regional alienation in the north was significant in fostering northern perceptions of the carbon tax policy, while the absence of such historic world views, as well as some with good policy motives, encouraged the reserved approach in the Lower Mainland. Following the application of theoretical approaches to public policy, the paper concludes with some reflections on the overall impact of the provincial carbon tax and regional politics in BC.

Case Selection and Methodology

It has recently been argued that research on carbon taxes has been “conducted primarily by economists, who mostly have theorized about optimal carbon tax design or investigated the impact of existing taxes on emissions. The literature on the politics of carbon taxation is more limited, most often taking the form of single-country case studies.”⁴ Indeed, not only have there been few studies on the politics of carbon taxation, but there have been few research efforts that focus on regional impacts and responses to the implementation of carbon taxes. A few exceptions that make note of regional responses include Rabe (2009)⁵, Zito (2002)⁶, Ciocirlan and Yandle (2003)⁷ and Svendsen et al (2001)⁸, but their efforts focus on the power of regionally concentrated industrial sectors to block or water down policy efforts. Lacking in the literature are studies that explore the regional responses from voters and politicians and it is this gap that this research effort seeks to inform.

For the purpose of focus, this paper spotlights northern municipalities that are members of the North Central Local Government Association (NCLGA)⁹, and in the more urban south, the commuter cities of the Lower Mainland Local Government

⁴ Kathryn Harrison. “The Comparative Politics of Carbon Taxation.” *The Annual Review of Law and Social Science*. August 2010. 26. 1-23.4.

⁵Barry Rabe. “The Intergovernmental Dynamic of American Climate Change Policy.” In *Canada: The State of the Federation 2009: Carbon Pricing and Environmental Federalism*. ed. Thomas Courchene, John Allan. 2010. 129-157.

⁶Anthony Zito. “Integrating the Environment into the European Union: The History of the Controversial Carbon Tax.” *Environmental Policy in the European Union. Actors, Institutions, and Processes*. Ed. A. Jordan. 2002. 241-55. London: Earthscan.

⁷ CE Ciocirlan, Yandle B. “The political economy of green taxation in OECD countries.” *European Journal of Law and Economics*. 2003. 15. 203-218.

⁸ GT Svendsen, Daugbjerg C, Hjollund L, Pedersen AB. “Consumers, industrialists and the political economy of green taxation: CO2 Taxation in OECD.” *Energy Policy*. 2001. 29. 489-97.

⁹ North Central Local Government Association. *NCLGA Members Directory*. Accessed online. April 2010. <http://www.nclga.ca/members.asp>

Association (LMLGA)¹⁰, but other communities are occasionally mentioned as well. In studying these jurisdictions, I attempt to address two questions. First, how can we explain the paradoxical reactions to the carbon tax displayed by these regions? Second, what do the distinct reactions tell us about the politics of carbon pricing and about regional political dynamics in British Columbia?

To generate answers to these questions, various techniques were employed. Over the summer months of 2010, open-ended and unstructured interviews were sought with elected officials, public servants, pollsters, academics and advocacy groups that had an involvement in the provincial carbon tax policy, or knowledge of municipal governments' reactions to the policy. Municipal, regional, and provincial level officials were approached. In total, fourteen people were interviewed either in person or over the phone. Interview questions were structured to encourage subjects to discuss their involvement and reactions to the policy before being asked for comments about findings on the impacts of the carbon tax. This approach was designed to ensure that subjects would be given the opportunity to express their feelings and knowledge about the carbon tax without the interviewer guiding them towards certain topics or statements.

Other research avenues that were explored include the review of local council minutes for evidence of debate and opinion surrounding the carbon tax, as well as convention notes, minutes and resolutions from the NCLGA, LMLGA, and the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) conventions in 2008. Media coverage of the carbon tax, predominantly but not exclusively during the months of February to

¹⁰ Lower Mainland Local Government Association. *Our Membership*. Accessed Online. July 2010. <http://lmlga.bc.ca/pages/members.php>.

November 2008, was examined for further evidence of who reacted locally to the provincial carbon tax, as were local and advocacy group websites.

Background on the Carbon Tax

Understanding the reactions of the northern interior and the Lower Mainland requires having some knowledge of the provincial carbon tax policy. BC's revenue neutral carbon tax is a consumption tax that is payable at the time of retail purchase of fossil fuels¹¹ and increases on an annual basis. Thus, a \$10/tonne of CO₂ tax was applied in 2008 with scheduled increases of \$5/tonne of CO₂ to take place each year until 2012, upon which time citizens will be paying \$30/tonne of CO₂.¹² For the average consumer of gasoline who had previously paid nothing as an explicit carbon tax, the policy will result in their paying 7.24 cents of tax per litre of gasoline in 2012.¹³

The government revenues generated from the tax are returned to taxpayers through cuts to other provincial taxes. As a result, while the tax is revenue neutral for the provincial government, it also means that on average, voters will get back in tax cuts as much as they pay in carbon taxes. However, the relative cost of the carbon tax to voters is dependent upon their personal use of fossil fuels. Tax abatements can only cover the cost of so much dependence on fossil fuels, meaning that those who use more fossil fuels will pay more carbon taxes than the offsetting tax cuts can account for. As authors like Svendson et al illustrate with their investigation of OECD¹⁴ countries, it is these more highly carbon intensive groups that can be expected to organize against carbon taxes.¹⁵ Conversely, those who are less carbon intensive will pay less, thereby creating an incentive to change one's behaviour. In fact, even those who might be less dependent on

¹¹ British Columbia Ministry of Small Business and Revenue. *British Columbia Carbon Tax*. Accessed Online. February 2008. www.rev.gov.bc.ca/documents_library/notices/British_Columbia_Carbon_Tax.pdf

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

¹⁵ Svendson et al.

fossil fuels and find that the carbon tax is revenue neutral for them can be expected to incur a monetary cost by investing to some degree in energy efficient improvements as a response to the tax. Thus, despite the potential that the carbon tax may not cost citizens anything on their tax bill, costs still exist and environmental benefits can still be realized.

Several measures have been introduced to help offset the costs of the tax. A five percent cut to the two lowest provincial personal income tax rates, a one percent reduction in the small business and general corporate income tax rates, and the provision of a low income 'climate action' tax credit were all introduced by the BC government to help residents adjust to the costs of the carbon taxes that they pay. Further, a one time 'climate action dividend' payment of \$100 was paid to every resident of BC in 2008.¹⁶

The carbon tax has been celebrated by several environmental organizations including the David Suzuki Foundation, the Pembina Institute, and ForestEthics,¹⁷ and was also supported by 70 academic economists across the province of BC when it was introduced.¹⁸ Despite its trailblazing approach to climate policy though, it has received varying levels of support and opposition from voters and municipalities across the province. The communities in the northern interior and the Lower Mainland exemplify just some of the BC municipalities now living with the carbon tax.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ CBC News. "Environmental Groups Disagree with BC NDP's stand on carbon tax." *The Canadian Press*. April 13, 2009. Accessed online. August 2010. <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/bcvotes2009/story/2009/04/13/bc-ndp-carole-james.html>

¹⁸ David Green. "Why 70 Economists Urge BC Carbon Tax." *The Tyee*. November 1, 2007. Accessed online. July 2010. <http://thetyee.ca/views/2007/11/01/carbontax/>

Theory and Expectations

This section draws on public policy literature to examine three possible explanations for the reactions to the carbon tax espoused by politicians and voters in the northern interior and in the commuter communities in the Lower Mainland.

Collective Action

In his book, *The Rise and Decline of Nations*, Mancur Olson makes a case for how informed voters will be and whether they will take the time to express their views. He argues that since an average voter will have little opportunity to change the outcome of advocacy efforts or an election, the typical citizen is usually rationally ignorant about public affairs. Of course, all members of a group or the electorate would be better off if they spent more time finding out how to best further their interests, and what exactly their interests are, but “in the aggregate, the other members will get almost all the gains, so the individual member does not have an incentive to devote nearly as much time to fact-finding...as would be in the group interest.”¹⁹

Olson also explains why some groups collectively organize and others do not. The argument predicts that individuals in large groups will not act in their group interest because the gain potentially reaped from individual action will be shared broadly with everyone in the group.²⁰ Olson argues that “those who contribute nothing to the effort will get just as much as those who made a contribution. It pays to ‘let George do it,’ but George has little or no incentive to do anything in the group interest either, so there will

¹⁹ Mancur Olson. *The Rise and Decline of Nations*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1982. 26.

²⁰ Ibid. 24.

be little, if any, group action.”²¹ Action that comes with diffuse costs (or benefits) is less likely to be taken than if the rewards (or burdens) are concentrated.

Applying Olson’s framework to carbon tax policies involves accepting that voters should be ill-informed. The reality that voters will not understand how the carbon tax works is especially true given that it is a new policy instrument and lay people tend to be unfamiliar with it. The majority of people will not know whether they are net winners or losers. Thus, with a limited understanding of the policy and little incentive for individuals to undertake personal research to uncover what best serves their interests, it can be expected that most voters would disapprove of the carbon tax policy. The word “tax,” an instrument that tends to be unpopular with voters, is visible in the title, and the corresponding benefits of the policy, namely tax cuts, are delayed and less visible. Indeed, it has been argued elsewhere that some will underestimate or even fail to acknowledge the corresponding tax breaks. Harrison clarifies that “given the psychological phenomenon of loss aversion, even if carbon tax revenues are fully recycled to voters via tax cuts, one would not expect voters’ appreciation of the tax deductions to match their resentment of the new taxes.”²² Thus, according to Olson’s theory there are strong reasons to anticipate that despite opposition to the policy, the general public will not organize opposition to the carbon tax, but neither will they be particularly well informed about the policy.

²¹ Ibid. 18.

²² Harrison. *The Comparative Politics of Carbon Taxation*. 6.

Electoral Incentive Theory

David Mayhew's seminal piece on the *Electoral Connection* argues that the primary motivation of all politicians is re-election.²³ Politicians cannot accomplish any of their political ends unless they get re-elected, and thus the electoral goal has "an attractive universality to it."²⁴ Indeed, re-election should be important in the political calculus of all politicians "if we are to expect that the relation between politicians and the public will be one of accountability."²⁵ In short, these arguments indicate that all political action is geared towards achieving the electoral goal. This reality is particularly evident around election periods because voters tend to pay greater attention to what politicians are saying and doing during these periods, than in the months or years between elections.

In their efforts to achieve re-election, politicians tend not to practice "maximizing" behaviour. Rather, politicians tend to follow conservative strategies so that they can maintain the original coalitions that got them elected in the first place. As Mayhew argues, the first goal "is to stay in office rather than to win all the popular vote...Second, [politicians] act in an environment of high uncertainty. Behaviour of an innovative sort can yield vote gains, but can also bring disaster."²⁶ Thus, electoral incentive theory dictates that politicians have significant motivation to take the position of their voters, but to do so in a way that does not interfere with the original coalition that put them in elected office.

²³ David Mayhew. *Congress and the Electoral Connection*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 1974. 18.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. 19.

²⁶ Ibid.

The BC carbon tax was implemented on July 1, 2008 and the next municipal elections were to take place on November 15, 2008.²⁷ The proximity of these dates indicates that this was a period where voters would likely have been paying greater attention to the reactions of their municipal politicians. With the more visible effects taking place in the Lower Mainland, electoral incentive theory would have predicted significant outcry from their municipal politicians. However, this did not happen. Conversely, the adverse reactions of municipal politicians in the north were highly publicized in the press.

Ideas I-Historic Perceptions and the Importance of the 'World View'

Ideas are important in politics because information in this realm of decision making tends to be incomplete and subject to interpretation. Indeed, in her theory of causal stories, Deborah Stone argues that our understanding of real situations is always mediated by ideas, and these ideas become created, changed and fought over in the political sphere.²⁸ Perceptions tend to be more powerful than facts, and what people make of a particular situation or policy often matters more than what the 'correct' information dictates. As Stone suggests, "much of what we know is what we believe to be true and what we believe depends on who tells us, and how it is presented. Because politics is driven by how people interpret information, much political activity is an effort to control interpretations."²⁹

Coming to understand a person's perception of the world and their view of particular political problems involves gathering knowledge about their general process of

²⁷ CBC. *British Columbia Civic Vote 2008*. www.cbc.ca/bc/features/civicvote2008/coquitlam/results.html.

²⁸ Deborah Stone. "Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas." *Political Science Quarterly*. 104. 1989. 282.

²⁹ Deborah Stone. *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc. 2002. 28.

socialization in the world. Stone argues that our ideas about what we want are shaped by our education and experiences. “Where one stands on issues is determined not so much by the specifics of any particular issue as by a more general world view. This world view includes assumptions about the meaning of community and...assumptions that transcend particular issues.”³⁰ Thus, in making conclusions about why politicians choose certain positions to respond to policies, it is important to look at the ideas that shape their outlook on the world, as well as the information that is presented to them.

Applying the above framework to carbon tax reactions, it seems logical to expect that citizens and politicians will not necessarily respond to the perfect information or facts, or even collect them if they have already formed opinions without them. Instead, people will be persuaded by their pre-conceived ideas about taxation policy, as well as their day to day experiences with superior levels of government, and other parts of the province. Their previous reactions to government policy are likely to dictate their reactions to the carbon tax. As Stone suggests, precedent is important. “The more one makes certain types of decisions, the easier it is to continue in the same path.”³¹ Thus, we can also expect repetition of prior behaviour and reactions to current events.

Ideas II – Good Policy Motives

A second ideational explanation is provided by the theoretical acknowledgement that principled and causal beliefs have an effect on human action. Indeed, Goldstein and Keohane explain that a person’s principles tell them what is right or wrong in the world, and expert or scientific evidence can guide individuals to create and achieve new

³⁰ Ibid. 53.

³¹ Ibid. 30.

objectives.³² These realities might be contrary to a politician's good *political* motives, but may inspire them to act on their good *policy* motives anyway. Thus, in some cases, politicians may be inspired to ignore their electoral incentives in favour of supporting a cause that they truly believe in because they feel it is the right thing to do.

³² Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane, eds. *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1993. 9-10.

The Comparative Case: Commuter Communities in the Lower Mainland and the Northern Interior

The North Central Local Government Association (formerly the North Central Municipal Association, or NCMA) is one of five area associations under the Union of British Columbia Municipalities. Its membership includes rural northern interior communities like the cities of Fort St. John, Quesnel, and Williams Lake.³³ When the carbon tax was introduced in February 2008, it was politicians from these municipalities that led the charge of communities in their opposition to the carbon tax.³⁴ Winning qualified support from mayors and elected officials in other northern towns like Smithers, Fort Nelson, and the Cariboo Regional District, the northern politicians argued that the BC carbon tax was discriminatory to British Columbians who live and work in the north, where “they cannot enjoy the luxury of being able to make urban style choices.” On May 8, 2008, at the annual general NCMA convention held in Prince George, seven resolutions asserting the disproportionate effects of the province’s carbon tax were submitted for debate.³⁵ While each took a slightly different tone, they all expressed perceptions about northern living and the unfairness the tax would impose. For example, the resolution submitted by the City of Quesnel stated:

Many northern British Columbians must work in the harsh environments of the resource sector, and fuel consumption is not a choice. It is a necessity. Northern British Columbians already pay up to ten percent more than their urban counterparts for fuel for basic transportation and home heating. Many northern British Columbians must endure long distance travel, over remote roads, in harsh weather and in hostile environments to see their doctor, or to access basic services such as school, shopping and

³³North Central Local Government Association. *NCLGA Members Directory*.

³⁴I. Austin. “BC’s Rural Mayors Banding Together to Fight Carbon Tax.” *Canwest Mediaworks Publications Inc.* March 25, 2008. Accessed online. <http://www.canada.com/theprovince/news/story.html?id=525fb4d4-29ac-4a87-8503-d40afb861ba1&k=38434>

³⁵North Central Municipal Association Convention. *NCMA Conference Minutes 2008*. 16-22. <http://www.nclga.ca/publications/52AF969931F24A318CC562123860EED3.pdf>

work. The proposed carbon tax will create a domino effect of disproportionately higher taxes through disproportionately higher transportation and heating costs for school, universities, colleges and hospitals in the colder, northern and eastern regions of the province.³⁶

Likewise, the lack of public transit and other alternative methods of transportation in the north were also decried as a reason to demand that the provincial government “create conditions for the fair application of the tax throughout BC.”³⁷

At the NCMA convention, about 140 delegates supported the seven resolutions. There was only one dissenter, Calvin Kruk, the Mayor of Dawson Creek that was recorded as being supportive of the carbon tax. “It’s about time the government does something about the atmosphere and this is a modest step,” he said before the meeting.³⁸ Instead, most expressed their discontent. “The vote’s message to Mr. Campbell is that northerners want to be a part of the effort to deal with climate change, but we want the north to be heard. He’ll hear loud and clear that the north has concerns about the carbon tax and the way it’s being implemented,”³⁹ said the Mayor of Williams Lake, Scott Nelson. Consultation concerns became even more prevalent when, in a move that northern politicians labeled as “extraordinarily bold” and “brazen,”⁴⁰ Premier Campbell attended and gave the keynote speech at the NCMA meeting, but made no reference to the northern concerns, or the resolutions that were drafted in the weeks before his arrival. The lack of consultation in combination with the impression that the tax unfairly affects

³⁶ North Central Municipal Association. *NCMA Carbon Tax Resolution*. Accessed Online. <http://ncma.enorthernbc.com/resolutions.asp>.

³⁷ North Central Municipal Association Convention. “B-12: Carbon Tax Implications to Northern Communities.” *NCMA Conference Minutes 2008*. <http://www.nclga.ca/publications/52AF969931F24A318CC562123860EED3.pdf>

³⁸ J. Bermingham. “Premier defends carbon tax as fair.” *Vancouver Province*. April 29, 2008.

³⁹ Ian Bailey. “Northern Towns Gang Up on Carbon Tax.” *Globe and Mail*. May 9, 2008. S.1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

communities in the northern interior led to outcries of protest that gained significant traction in the media, as well as with BC's New Democratic Party (NDP).

As the official opposition in the BC Legislature, it comes as little surprise that the NDP waded into the fray to contribute to the northern fight against the government's carbon tax and the impacts it would wage in the region. On April 2, 2008, Carole James, the leader of the BC NDP, published an op-ed echoing northern concerns. "I have suggested to the government that a more effective carbon tax would recognize regional differences...The growing anger and frustration in the interior and the north is real, and it is justified,"⁴¹ she argued. Then, on June 17, 2008, James and the New Democrats launched their campaign to "axe the tax."⁴² As part of their reasoning, NDP's environment critic Shane Simpson noted that "Gordon Campbell's fuel tax doesn't take into account regional differences, despite the fact that many people don't have access to public transit."⁴³ In her launch speech in Kelowna, James referenced the NCMA convention in May when she noted that "when [Premier Campbell] was in Prince George a few weeks ago speaking to mayors he didn't even mention the gas tax."⁴⁴ Following growing northern concerns about the carbon tax, the NDP chose to wage their axe the tax campaign, in turn reinforcing the message that the carbon tax was unfair to rural communities and bringing greater provincial attention to the issue.

⁴¹ Carole James. "NDP Leader Says Premier Campbell is out of touch." *Vancouver Sun*. April 2, 2008.

⁴² BC New Democrat Official Opposition. *James Launches Campaign to Axe the Gas Tax*. June 17, 2008. http://www.bcdpcaucus.ca/en/james_launches_campaign_to_axe_the_gas_tax

⁴³ BC New Democrat Official Opposition. *Scrap the Fuel Tax, Provide Real Climate Solutions, says NDP*. June 13, 2008.

http://www.bcdpcaucus.ca/en/scrap_the_fuel_tax_provide_real_climate_solutions_says_ndp

⁴⁴ BC New Democrat Official Opposition. *British Columbians Deserve a Government with the Right Priorities: James*. June 17, 2008.

http://www.bcdpcaucus.ca/en/british_columbians_deserve_a_government_with_the_right_priorities_james

In response to the arguments put forward by the north, several voices came forward indicating that the northern perception of unfairness was incorrect. In early April 2008, an article entitled “Carbon Tax Opposition Shot Down” was published in the *Prince George Citizen*. In the piece, *Citizen* staff member Mark Nielson cites figures from Statistics Canada and Finance Minister Carole Taylor that discredit many of the claims from northern communities. He notes that “in Abbotsford, the median commuting distance is 7.3km...Moreover, 8.1 percent of people commute more than 25km, compared to 5.8 percent in Prince George.”⁴⁵ As for the access to public transit, it is noted that those closer into Vancouver pay an extra six cents a litre at the gas pump to help cover the cost of the transit system. Nielson quotes Taylor who said that “I do accept that in the north and in the rural areas you don’t have the transit options but the transit options for the people in the Lower Mainland are coming at the cost of increasing the tax (on gas) for them.”⁴⁶

Similar findings were later published on a number of online magazines and newspaper websites. Tom Barrett at *The Tyee*, an independent online magazine, posted two separate articles in early and mid April referring to the 2006 Census numbers. He explains that “because commuting is such a big part of most people’s driving, people in the north likely have to drive less on average than those in the Lower Mainland.”⁴⁷ Then, on April 29, 2008, Nic Rivers, a researcher at Simon Fraser University, published the findings from his *Carbon Tax Coping* study in the *Vancouver Sun*. Rivers painted a similar picture to those that came before him. Also using numbers from the 2006 Canadian Census, he demonstrates that commuters living in the Lower Mainland drive

⁴⁵ Mark Nielson. “Carbon Tax Opposition Shot Down.” *Prince George Citizen*. April 5, 2008.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Tom Barrett. “Hate Commuting? Move North.”

farther on average to get to work than those that live in rural British Columbia. “The average Vancouverite drove 7.4km between work and home in 2006, much farther than the average commute distance of 2.5km in Fort St. John, and 3.6km in Williams Lake.”⁴⁸ Also, while a colder winter in the northern interior does indeed entail higher energy consumption, the difference between what urbanites and northerners pay on their energy bills is minimal. “At the carbon tax rates announced for 2008, a house in Prince George would pay roughly 62 cents more per month in carbon tax—a difference, certainly, but hardly a crippling burden,” argued Rivers.⁴⁹ Finally, Premier Gordon Campbell was quoted in the *Vancouver Province* on the same day that Rivers’ study came out saying that “the carbon tax is fair and equitable. The fact is that in Vancouver, the Lower Mainland, people travel three times as far for their commute as people in Dawson Creek. They travel two times as far as people in Williams Lake. They travel four times as far as people in Fort St. John.”⁵⁰ The studies showed that the north was not disproportionately impacted as they had claimed.

Despite the publication of these findings, elected officials in the north continued to make claims that the tax was unfair. In rationalizing the northern politicians’ disregard for these facts, it could be assumed that the local politicians in the north had not read the articles. However, when the NCMA drafted their resolutions condemning the tax, the BC Ministry of Finance responded to their statements again, with similar statistics. Their statement on May 7, 2008, the day before the NCMA convention was to begin, stated:

The impact of the carbon tax will depend more on personal circumstances of British Columbians than where they live in the province, although geographic location is a factor. With respect to home fuel consumption,

⁴⁸ Rivers.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ J. Bermingham

data on natural gas use by residential customers shows that while residents in some northern regions have higher average consumption than the Lower Mainland, residents in the Lower Mainland use more gas per household than residents in most other regions of the province. In addition, after taking into account the carbon tax, customer usage, and the different rates across the regions, the average total cost for those using natural gas is higher in the Lower Mainland than all other regions of the province, with the exception of Fort Nelson which is slightly higher. Similarly, while some living in remote areas may drive further distances on average than those living in cities and small towns, Statistics Canada 2006 Census Journey to Work data show that, on average, commuting distances to and from work for residents of municipalities in the Lower Mainland are among the highest in the province. In addition, compared to other regions of the province, a larger percentage of commuters in municipalities in the Lower Mainland have to travel 15km or more to get to work. Drivers in the Lower Mainland will also generally use more fuel per kilometer because of idling and traffic congestion.⁵¹

The fact that counterevidence was provided by a variety of sources at different points during the months of April and May 2008 indicates that northern politicians certainly had access to become aware of these statistics. Nevertheless, the outrage with the carbon tax and its regionally inequitable impacts persisted. For example, in late June 2008, Jim Eglinski, the Mayor of Fort St. John said that “northern heating costs are higher and many resource sector workers have no choice but to drive large trucks...I’m just like every other redneck in the North. We’re already burdened and they’re hitting us again.”⁵² Concerns for the disproportionate regional impacts continued to be published in the media into fall 2008, when the resolutions were presented again at the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) convention.

The Lower Mainland Local Government Association comprises municipalities from three regional districts and represents more than 2.5 million people, over fifty

⁵¹ North Central Municipal Association. *Provincial Response to NCMA Resolutions*. Accessed Online. May 7, 2008. <http://ncma.enorthernbc.com/publications/422A191AA69E485DB4EDF24DAB0184FE.pdf>
BC Ministry of Community Development. *Provincial Responses to the Resolutions of the 2008 UBCM Convention*. February 2009.

⁵² Petti Fong. “BC Motorists Seeing Green.” *Toronto Star*. June 29, 2008.

percent of British Columbia's population. It is a diverse region that includes BC's eight largest urban centres. Its membership includes cities like Coquitlam, Burnaby, Surrey, Maple Ridge and Delta.⁵³ The communities surrounding the growing metropolis of Vancouver exemplify commuter suburbs. For example, Coquitlam touts itself as being "just a 30 minute drive from downtown Vancouver...and about 20 minutes from the United States border."⁵⁴ The majority of employed Coquitlam residents, 60 percent, have jobs outside of Coquitlam, and almost all are within Metro Vancouver. Of the residents that commute to the city, 73.8 percent do so in their own vehicles.⁵⁵ Likewise, the 2006 Journey to Work Reference Guide found that "the number of people commuting to the municipalities of Vancouver, Burnaby and Richmond to work was higher than the number of workers living in these municipalities, and for workers living in the Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area, 67.3% drove to work and a further 7.1% got to work as a passenger in a car."⁵⁶

Interestingly, despite reports that Lower Mainland commuter cities like Coquitlam and Abbotsford would be more affected by the provincial carbon tax than other regions in the province, internet searches for their discontent turn up few results. Not until shortly before the UBCM Convention in September 2008 did any unrest from municipal politicians in the Lower Mainland become published in the media. Even then, the opposition had little to do with the impact of the tax on their disproportionately affected commuters, but on the financial barriers the carbon tax would place on municipal

⁵³ Lower Mainland Local Government Association. *Our Membership*.

⁵⁴ City of Coquitlam. *City Profile*. Accessed Online.
www.coquitlam.ca/visitors/about+coquitlam/city+profile/default.htm.

⁵⁵ City of Coquitlam. *Coquitlam's Commuting Pattern*. Accessed Online.
www.coquitlam.ca/NR/rdonlyres/C6318F37-0B41-4F22-8DDD-3509C58AF8CA/83947/commuting.pdf.

⁵⁶ Statistics Canada. *Commuting Patterns and Places of Work of Canadians, 2006 Census: Portrait of the Largest Census Metropolitan Areas in the Country's Regions*. Accessed Online.
<http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-561/p35-eng.cfm>

operations,⁵⁷ a separate issue entirely from the question of fairness between the north and the south. Thus, along with the ten carbon tax resolutions⁵⁸ that rural and northern communities submitted to the UBCM for debate, two more were issued from Maple Ridge and Delta. “The carbon tax will be imposed upon municipalities even though they will not benefit from additional revenues”⁵⁹ read the resolution from Delta, asking the province to rebate carbon tax revenues collected from municipalities. Likewise, the resolution from Maple Ridge noted that the carbon tax “is not revenue neutral for local governments.”⁶⁰ The decision by Maple Ridge and Delta to submit these resolutions is striking because although these commuter cities chose to speak up about the carbon tax, it was not to complain, as their northern counterparts did, that they were bearing disproportionate burdens. Rather, even though they actually do pay higher costs, these communities were making a point on behalf of all municipalities by calling for a marginal adjustment in how revenues from public sector fuel consumers would be treated.

In an interesting turn of events, Delta and Maple Ridge got their wish. On September 24, 2008, at the UBCM convention in Penticton, Premier Campbell announced the introduction of the Climate Action Revenue Incentive program, where the provincial government agreed to return carbon tax dollars to municipalities that agreed to sign on to the province’s Climate Action Charter. The Climate Action Charter is an

⁵⁷ Ian Bailey. “Lower Mainland Joins Carbon Tax Protest.” *The Globe and Mail*. September 8, 2008. S.1.

⁵⁸ The original seven resolutions from the May NCMA Convention were submitted along with three other rural resolutions from the Northern Rockies Regional District, the Executive of the Association of Kootenay and Boundary Local Governments, and Grand Forks.

⁵⁹ UBCM/Delta. *C:35: Carbon Tax Exemption for Municipalities Working Toward Carbon Neutrality*. 2010. Accessed online.

<http://ubcm.ca/resolutions/ResolutionDetail.aspx?id=3528&index=0&year=2008&no=C35&resTitle=&spns=&res=&prov=&fed=&other=&conv=&exec=&comm=&sortCol=year&sortDir=asc>

⁶⁰ UBCM/Maple Ridge. *C38: Funding For Greenhouse Gas Reduction Initiatives*. 2010. Accessed online. <http://ubcm.ca/resolutions/ResolutionDetail.aspx?id=3531&index=0&year=2008&no=c38&resTitle=&spns=&res=&prov=&fed=&other=&conv=&exec=&comm=&sortCol=year&sortDir=asc>

agreement between the province of BC and its municipalities that commits local governments to becoming carbon neutral by 2012. As part of their pledge, municipalities must measure and report on their community's greenhouse gas emissions and work to implement energy efficient policies. To date, 176 out of 188 BC municipalities have signed on⁶¹ and qualify to receive the Climate Action Revenue Incentive.

The returned carbon tax money from the Climate Action Revenue Incentive Program is reflective of the individual communities' personal calculations, submitted on the basis of the carbon taxes they pay in any given year.⁶² The program is helpful for municipal governments because they too pay a carbon tax on the purchase of fuels for their local operations, but unlike voters, they do not get compensating deductions because they do not pay income or corporate taxes. To provide an idea of the figures that municipalities are recouping, in May 2010, the provincial government announced that it returned "nearly \$2.9 million in carbon tax dollars to local governments who are committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2012."⁶³ Coquitlam received \$59,205 from the Climate Action Revenue Incentive grant, while Prince George received \$81,271, Quesnel received \$24,626 and Williams Lake collected \$15,453.⁶⁴

To be fair, the two Lower Mainland communities of Delta and Maple Ridge were not the only cities that called for the return of carbon tax dollars to municipalities. The rebate program can be considered a political win for municipalities across the province. Earlier in the spring of 2008, the Mayor of Williams Lake, Scott Nelson received

⁶¹ Province of British Columbia. *Live Smart BC: BC Climate Action Charter*. Accessed online. <http://www.livesmartbc.ca/community/charter.html>

⁶² British Columbia Ministry of Community and Rural Development. *News Release: \$2.9 Million in Carbon Taxes Returned to Green Communities*. May 4, 2010.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

significant press attention when he first floated the idea of withholding payment of the carbon tax on municipal fuel purchases. Instead, Nelson and his council said that they would direct the money into a savings fund until the province could prove that the tax would be revenue neutral for municipalities.⁶⁵ However, the challenge from northern politicians was met with provincial resistance, as Campbell ignored concerns about the tax when he addressed the NCMA convention in May, and BC's Community Services Minister encouraged northerners to retrofit buildings and find other ways to reduce emissions, rather than refuse to pay the carbon tax.⁶⁶ While not strictly about the question of fairness between the north and south, this point about the Climate Action Revenue Incentive grant is important because the well timed concession from the provincial government in the fall of 2008 illustrates the continuing unpopularity of the carbon tax.

Despite this brief show of publicity at the UBCM convention from Delta and Maple Ridge, reactions from politicians and voters in Lower Mainland cities were significantly absent from the press during the carbon tax debate. These findings suggest that the communities were less upset by the implementation of the tax.

⁶⁵ Steve Janke. *Tuna, Beer, Popcorn, Next Comes the Carbon Tax*.
<http://stevejanke.com/archives/263068.php>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Discussion – The Application of Public Policy Theory

With the reactions of the rural interior and the Lower Mainland having been presented in greater depth, we turn to three theoretical approaches to explain these puzzling reactions.

Collective Action

Olson’s theory of collective action is somewhat useful for explaining why, despite unhappiness with the carbon tax, individual voters would not collectively organize against the policy.

To begin, polling data collected from BC residents between February and November 2008 showed that voters’ were predominantly unenthusiastic about the tax. On February 29, 2008, when the tax was introduced, Environics Research showed that a modest majority, 54 percent, supported the carbon tax.⁶⁷ Indicating mixed results about British Columbians’ initial sentiments regarding the policy however, a Compas Inc. survey of 1,300 people taken only a week later, found that 61 percent said that they thought the tax was “bad.”⁶⁸

Nevertheless, the confusion among pollsters about the level of support disappears in late June and early July 2008. This period is marked by the implementation of the tax and the rise in the price of gasoline to the summer high of over \$1.50 a litre, a 40 cent increase from January of that same year.⁶⁹ During this time, polls consistently showed that the majority of people opposed the new tax. In a June 2008 Ipsos Reid poll of 800

⁶⁷ Environics Research Group. *British Columbians give a nod of approval to their new provincial carbon tax*. February 29, 2008. <http://research-environics-net.sitepreview.ca/english/Environics%20-%20BC%20Carbon%20Tax%20Press%20Release%20-%20February%2029-2008.pdf>

⁶⁸ Brian Hutchinson. “BC Still Undecided as Provincial Carbon Tax Looms.” *National Post*. June 19, 2008.

⁶⁹ Kathryn Harrison. *A Tale of Two Taxes: The Fate of Environmental Tax Reform in Canada and the Province of British Columbia*. 16.

BC adults, 59 percent remained opposed, with almost half of the respondents indicating that they were “strongly opposed.”⁷⁰ Environics Research too showed that levels of support had fallen 14 percentage points from their numbers in February.⁷¹ Finally, a poll conducted by Angus Reid strategies between July 11th and 13th found that 64 percent strongly or moderately opposed the tax.⁷²

The final telltale sign of voters’ reaction to the carbon tax, and the impact it could potentially wage on the actions of municipal politicians, is the poll taken in November 2008. Ipsos Reid showed that of the 801 people that were polled, 55 percent of British Columbians continued to resent the carbon tax policy.⁷³ The carbon tax, while perhaps supported at its introduction, became a clearly unpopular environmental strategy for voters in BC during the time of municipal elections. As predicted by Olson’s theory, and revealed by the polling data, voters were disapproving of the carbon tax.

Olson’s theory also suggests that citizens’ level of knowledge about new policies will contribute to their level of approval. It is useful then to acknowledge the knowledge barriers surrounding the carbon tax. For many, it is apparent that the communication strategy surrounding the carbon tax contributed to their poor understanding of the tax. First, the notion that the carbon tax is revenue neutral *for the provincial government* was confusing to some. Pollster Angus McAllister explained it best.

My research suggests that talking about something revenue neutral for the government is actually bad communication because a lot of people only

⁷⁰ J. Fowlie. “Most Oppose Carbon Tax.” *Vancouver Sun*. June 18, 2008.

Ipsos Reid. *BC Liberals Maintain Lead*. June 18, 2008. <http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=3968>

⁷¹ Keith Neuman. “Carbon Taxes: Panacea or Political Oblivion.” *Environics Research*. September 2008. <http://research-environics-net.sitepreview.ca/imagelibrary/091008/Green%20Business%20Magazine%20-%20Public%20Opinion%20Column-Keith%20Neuman%20-%20September%202008.pdf>

⁷² D. Hogben. “Most Don’t Like Carbon Tax, Poll Finds.” *Vancouver Sun*. July 30, 2008.

⁷³ Ipsos Reid. *Two Years and Still Counting...Still No change in Provincial BC Standings*. November 18, 2008. <http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=4177>

care about whether it is revenue neutral for them. If you say it's revenue neutral, and you're a guy driving a lot more, you're going to say 'it's not revenue neutral for me, why are you telling me that, you're a liar!' The other problem is that...people might think this is about changing behaviour and when I've done focus groups people say 'well the one way to change public behaviour is to hit them in the pocket book.' Whereas the message around this was 'it's not going to hurt.' So it's a bit of a contradictory message if you're going to say that 'we're doing this for the environment but it's not going to hurt.' It looks like you're trying to have it both ways, which makes you look duplicitous.⁷⁴

It is clear from McAllister's comments that the issue of revenue neutrality is a potentially problematic one in terms of the BC government's ability to communicate the benefits of the policy.

The reality of McAllister's research extends beyond 2008 when the tax was first introduced. Even in the interviews completed in the summer of 2010, some municipal politicians remained skeptical about the revenue neutrality aspect of the carbon tax. While some felt the carbon tax was revenue neutral, others did not. One made the comment that "no the carbon tax is not revenue neutral, it is costing me more in terms of the fact that I'm having to pay that carbon tax and I'm also having to use my big gas guzzling truck."⁷⁵ Others were uncertain how revenue neutrality would enable behaviour change. "I believe that if the revenue was collected and it was put back into programs to create incentives...it would be far more effective"⁷⁶ said city councilor Brent Asmundson. The comments demonstrate that while the revenue neutrality of the carbon tax may have been considered a high selling point for the provincial government, convincing voters of this reality was a challenge.

⁷⁴ Angus McAllister. *Interview*. July 23, 2010.

⁷⁵ Ron Paull. *Interview*. July 5, 2010

⁷⁶ Brent Asmundson. *Interview*. July 6, 2010.

A second communication challenge with the carbon tax is the labeling of the policy as a tax. Many acknowledged that categorizing the carbon pricing strategy as a ‘tax’ contributed to people’s negative perceptions. “Much of the [negative] response to the carbon tax...was about the framing of the tax as a ‘tax’”⁷⁷ said McAllister. Likewise, Bob Simpson, the provincial NDP Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for Cariboo North, who was generally supportive of pricing carbon, said that the policy would be better if we “stop talking about it as a tax because talking about it as a tax gets peoples backs up.”⁷⁸ It is significant that various interview subjects made comments about the confusing and conflicting communication strategy around the carbon tax. This reality is important because if voters have a low and skeptical understanding of the carbon tax, they will be more likely to fall back on their preconceived notions of the provincial government and its policies.

Next, Olson’s propositions also assume that people will be unlikely to organize or join groups, or make any concerted effort like writing a letter or making a phone call, to demonstrate these sentiments. Consistent with the theory, internet searches of online magazines and newspapers indicate that interest group organization, or a collective rise in angry voters intent on waging war on the carbon tax was absent in the Lower Mainland. Further, when asked about voter discontent in the Lower Mainland, municipal councilors noted the ambivalence of voters. Lou Sekora, a city councilor in Coquitlam, said that “there was not the outcry from voters with the carbon tax...I don’t think that the carbon tax was an issue with a lot of people. It was very, very quiet.”⁷⁹ Municipal councilor Brent Asmundson further qualified that “there’s maybe more ambivalence [in Coquitlam

⁷⁷ McAllister.

⁷⁸ Bob Simpson. *Interview*. June 25, 2010.

⁷⁹ Lou Sekora. *Interview*. July 12, 2010.

than the north] and maybe people didn't see the impact of it."⁸⁰ Finally, William Susak, the General Manager of engineering and public works in Coquitlam said that "there was really no public commentary on the issue. I don't recall any delegations, I don't recall any letters, I think the feedback was zero."⁸¹ The comments from city officials in the Lower Mainland indicate that their voters were not so upset about the carbon tax that they would call their councilors and complain about it. The outrage was not present and as a result, there was no organization against the carbon tax in the Lower Mainland.

This result conforms to Olson's theory because the BC carbon tax entails a broadly shared cost. All BC voters share the burden of the tax, and as a result any action to collectively organize against the tax would also involve diffuse benefits gained from any legislative change. With few individuals having a greater incentive than others to organize against the carbon tax, minimal organization took place. The logic of collective action predicts that in spite of opposition to the carbon tax, groups would not organize against the broadly shared burdens of the carbon pricing strategy, and the reality is that in the Lower Mainland, they did not.

There is a further institutional element that helps explain the lack of political response in the Lower Mainland. The carbon tax is a consumption tax and consumer taxes are an area of political jurisdiction that falls outside of the municipal purview. The fact that the carbon tax is a provincial policy likely contributed to voters' lack of outrage at the municipal level because they did not view the issue as a local government issue. This argument is confirmed by municipal councilors who noted that they stayed out of the debate because it was not legislated at the local level. Coquitlam's Lou Sekora noted

⁸⁰ Asmundson.

⁸¹ William Susak. *Interview*. July 12, 2010.

that “there was some talk about the carbon tax, but I don’t think that we as councilors ever got together with the mayor and talked about it...because it’s legislated by the provincial government.”⁸² Similarly, Councilor Brent Asmundson argued that “from a municipal perspective, we don’t have any real decision power or anything involved with the carbon tax. That was provincial legislation.”⁸³ The reality that the carbon tax falls outside of municipal jurisdiction helps explain the quiescent reaction in the Lower Mainland. Voters likely did not see the provincial policy through a municipal lens and saw little reason to complain to their municipal councilors thereby reinforcing the reserved response to the carbon tax.

In the rural north too, citizens were reticent to formally organize. Voters were angry with the carbon tax and more willing to express their dissatisfaction to politicians than those in the Lower Mainland, but it is clear that their unhappiness was more directed at the provincial arena. NDP MLA Bob Simpson commented on the people that came to see him. “I would have guys come into my office, logging truck drivers that were now going to be given an additional tax...one of the guys said ‘show me a solar logging truck and maybe I’ll be able to justify paying these additional dollars.’”⁸⁴ Conversely, many municipal politicians in the north acknowledged that voters were angry, but they also noted that there was minimal collective action. Nate Bello, the former mayor of Quesnel argued that the carbon tax rebellion “was mostly a political thing. I think there were people complaining, but I don’t think there was a spearhead.”⁸⁵ Bello was not alone in his sentiments. Brian Skakun, a municipal councilor in Prince George said that “there was

⁸² Sekora.

⁸³ Asmundson.

⁸⁴ Simpson.

⁸⁵ Nate Bello. *Interview*. June 25, 2010.

no organized effort...the carbon tax just didn't draw the attention or public opposition.”⁸⁶ Individual comments may have been more prevalent in the north, but they were more directed at the provincial arena, and had little impact on the actions of local politicians. Thus, Olson's theory predicts that voters will be unlikely to make calls to politicians, and this appears to generally be the case in the northern interior. Where voters did make an effort to lobby their politicians, they did so at the provincial level which is fitting since the carbon tax is a provincial policy. It is clear that voters' lack of attention to the councilors at city hall is a reflection of the perception of regional fairness across the province rather than an issue to be tackled locally.

It is noteworthy that both the public and politicians were upset in the north, and yet there was a lack of reaction from both of these groups in the Lower Mainland. As a result, the theory of collective action is only partially useful. Olson's ideas about collective action correctly predict that voters in neither jurisdiction would organize in a collective or formal way, and that they would be rationally ignorant about the new tax. The argument is helped along by the fact that the carbon tax is not a municipal policy because voters were not looking to their local politicians with concerns about the tax. This reality can help explain the lack of action and the quiescence from voters and politicians in the Lower Mainland. Despite evidence that indicates greater concentrated cost for the voters, politicians in commuter communities in the Lower Mainland were largely silent on the carbon tax debate because the provincial policy falls outside of their municipal jurisdiction, and their voters did not push them on the subject. However, jurisdiction or not, the higher cost in the Lower Mainland certainly provides a strong incentive for their politicians to oppose a policy that would adversely affect their voters.

⁸⁶ Brian Skakun. *Interview*. July 7, 2010.

Also, given the minimal organization in the north, and the little impact it was argued to have had on the behaviour of politicians, an explanation for the vocal reactions from the politicians in the northern interior remains amiss.

Electoral Incentives

As a theoretical approach to studying the reactions in the northern interior and the Lower Mainland, electoral incentives offer deeper insight, but still fall short of explaining the carbon tax responses in these two regions. There may have been little collective organization by voters in both the north and the south, but the growing unpopularity of the policy gives politicians an incentive to take advantage of the latent public opinion in these regions. Further, theoretical assertions would suggest that because the carbon tax had higher costs to commuters in the south, one could expect a stronger reaction from their voters and politicians. Instead, the reality witnessed stronger disapproval by voters and politicians in the north.

Further analysis of the polling data indicates that the greatest opposition to the carbon tax was consistently found in the BC interior, “especially the north, where the tax [was] plainly loathed.”⁸⁷ In June 2008, 63 percent of the 190 people polled by Ipsos Reid in the interior of BC said they opposed the carbon tax, and 49 percent of those said that they were strongly opposed.⁸⁸ This statistic is further confirmed by pollster Angus McAllister who argued that “blue collar, rural Canadians, they were the least likely to embrace it from my numbers, and conservative voters.”⁸⁹ Given that the tax was most unpopular in the northern interior, the polling data indicates that northern politicians did have a greater electoral incentive to vocally oppose the carbon tax than other regions in

⁸⁷ Hutchinson.

⁸⁸ Ipsos Reid. *BC Liberals Maintain Lead*.

⁸⁹ McAllister.

the province. Thus, the theory predicts that opposition in the north would be present, and indeed it was stronger than anywhere else in the province.

While the response from politicians in the north was indeed greater than the south, some politicians noted that they needed no encouragement from their voters to speak out against the carbon tax. For example, when recounting how the idea for the Quesnel NCMA carbon tax resolution came up, city councilor Ron Paull said:

I was the one that brought the resolution to the table...[though] it doesn't have to be a council member's idea. What might happen, and you know *it didn't happen to me* but it could have, is that one of my constituents that I meet says 'Hey Ron, what do you think of this carbon tax, and I'll say well I don't think it's very good...

The councilor's statement is critical because although his words suggest that northern politicians were speaking on behalf of their constituents, they were taking the issue upon themselves and were not overtly pushed by voters to rebel against the carbon tax.

While the polling data supports the stronger opposition to the carbon tax in the northern interior, the electoral incentive model still cannot account for the virtual absence of opposition from voters or politicians in the Lower Mainland. Another look at the regional breakdown of the carbon tax polling by Ipsos Reid indicates that while the interior harbored greater opposition than any other region in the province, the Lower Mainland area followed close behind, with the rest of the province trailing these regions. In that same June 2008 Ipsos Reid poll, 60 percent of the 500 people polled in the Lower Mainland said that they opposed the carbon tax, with 44 percent of those "strongly" opposing the policy.⁹⁰ The polling in November showed similar results. Opposition was still strongest in the interior in November, with 58 percent saying they opposed the tax, and the Lower Mainland trailed only slightly behind with 54 percent of people registering

⁹⁰ Ipsos Reid. *BC Liberals Maintain Lead*.

opposition to the carbon tax.⁹¹ Given the unpopularity of the carbon tax in both places, electoral incentive theory would have predicted opposition from politicians in both the rural interior as well as the urban south. Thus, while electoral incentive theory is useful in the first case, it falls short in the Lower Mainland.

Further complicating the use of electoral incentive theory to explain the political reactions in these two cases, all of the northern municipal politicians that were interviewed indicated that the carbon tax had little to no impact on the municipal elections in November 2008. Councilors were interviewed in Prince George, Quesnel and Williams Lake, and they all indicated that the carbon tax played a minimal role in their campaigns for re-election. Surinder Rathor, a councilor in Williams Lake, said that “I don’t remember this being a campaign issue. Nothing on the carbon tax, and I can assure you there wasn’t a single question asked on the carbon tax in late October, early November, when we did the all candidate forum, there wasn’t any questions.”⁹² This reality suggests that the electoral incentive to oppose the carbon tax is diminished. However, the positions of municipal politicians still likely mattered because though the carbon tax may not have been discussed during the elections, a local politician who did not share the strong views of her constituents may have risked being seen as “out of touch.” Such perceptions could potentially have had implications for other issues. Plus, it should be noted that the carbon tax debate had been ongoing for several months prior to the elections, so many of their positions on the policy may have already been established and understood by voters. Thus, while the absence of the carbon tax in the north’s municipal elections bears mentioning, the importance of the policy is no less present.

⁹¹ Ipsos Reid. *Two Years and Still Counting...Still No change in Provincial BC Standings*.

⁹² Surinder Rathor. *Interview*. June 24, 2010.

Another issue to be examined is the election results in Williams Lake. The election results in the municipality indicate that a new mayor, Kerry Cook, was elected in the 2008 election.⁹³ This finding might initially seem odd given that Scott Nelson, the previous mayor of the community was one of the central figures in vocalizing opposition to the carbon tax. However, Scott Nelson chose not to run for re-election as mayor of Williams Lake, and instead stepped down from municipal politics. Only months later, in February 2009, he would seek, but not capture, the provincial nomination to become the BC Liberal candidate for the Cariboo-Chilcotin riding.⁹⁴ Thus, while the polling data supports Nelson's strong opposition in Williams Lake, in reality, by choosing not to run for re-election, the mayor had little reason to cater to electoral pressures, unless it was to look out for his successor. Without this municipal electoral incentive to guide his motives, Mayor Nelson was given more leeway to follow his own policy motives. In fact, given that he was seeking a seat in the provincial Liberal Party, he had a political incentive to be a bit more reserved on the subject, if not tow the Liberal line in support of the tax. Given that Nelson was a central figure in Williams Lake during this debate, the reactions in this community remain a puzzle.

Further on the role of provincial politics is the function of the NDP and their "axe the tax" campaign in the carbon tax rebellion and reactions across the province. Evidence from interviews and a review of the timeline of events indicates that the NDP did not play a role in creating the rebellion in the north, but instead reacted to it. Carole

⁹³ CBC. *BC Local Election Results 2008: Williams Lake*. Accessed Online. <http://www.cbc.ca/bc/features/civicvote2008civicinfbc.html>

⁹⁴ Justine Hunter and Ian Bailey. "HST backlash could prove to be BC Liberals' Waterloo." *Globe and Mail*. May 31, 2010. and, Steve Forseth. *Blog: Upcoming Candidate Selection Meetings-BC Liberals and BC NDP*. February 3, 2009. <http://bclcarsouth.blogspot.com/2009/02/upcoming-candidate-selection-meetings.html>

James' op-ed piece outlining the NDP's concern for disproportionate regional impacts came out in April, after northern municipal politicians had made their case to the press, which began almost instantaneously after the tax was introduced in late February. Also, the NDP's "axe the tax" campaign came out almost a month and a half after the seven carbon tax resolutions were submitted to the NCMA for debate. Finally, although MLA Bob Simpson acknowledged in his interview that "there were a lot of us in caucus that were shocked at the [campaign to] 'axe the tax'" he recognized that the party was simply "riding the populist sentiment" of the time.⁹⁵ These comments reaffirm the theory that the NDP joined rather than led the northern carbon tax rebellion. The implications of this realization are twofold. First, the NDP's role in the carbon tax debate may have enhanced the public's negative reactions to the carbon tax; a theory which is supported by the increase in voter disapproval with the tax over the spring and summer of 2008. In turn, the saturation of the NDP message across the province may have reinforced the quiescence in the Lower Mainland because it supported the notion that the carbon tax was unfair to rural communities. Nevertheless, although the NDP's campaign may have enhanced provincial resistance to the carbon tax, their actions cannot account for the initial divergence in response between the north and south, which was prompted by vocal opposition from municipal politicians in the north and not the NDP messaging. Thus, the actions of the NDP are yet another factor that is only partially helpful in uncovering the puzzle of reactions to the carbon tax in BC.

As a final consideration when examining the electoral incentives involved in these two regions, it is possible that the visibility of environmental pollution could sway the positions of politicians. In fact, an examination of air pollution in the province does

⁹⁵Simpson.

indicate some support for the quiescent reaction in the Lower Mainland. The region has been considered a “pollution hot spot” over the last twenty years.⁹⁶ Particularly disconcerting for the area is ground-level ozone, or smog. The provincial *State of the Air 2009* report indicated that ground-level ozone levels remain higher in the Fraser Valley and eastern parts of Metro Vancouver than anywhere else in the province. Lower Mainland communities are also home to the highest concentrations of nitrogen dioxide.⁹⁷ These figures indicate that some of the worst air quality in the province as a result of motor vehicles is in the region where the carbon tax would have the biggest impact in trying to reduce reliance on vehicles. Thus, people in this region may be willing to accept the carbon tax as necessary, even if they do not like it. However, it should also be mentioned that northern BC is certainly not immune to environmental pollution, as they have high levels of particulate matter that comes from the combustion of fuel sources, like wood and diesel.⁹⁸ Thus, while it appears that the environmental realities facing the Lower Mainland could have added some additional cover for their politicians to justify the necessity for a carbon tax, and perhaps their lack of opposition, there is also such an incentive in the north. Therefore, the effects of environmental pollution are also only somewhat useful.

Regardless of the effects of air pollution in the two regions, these impacts cannot account for the fact that the polling data indicates that voters were clearly unhappy with the carbon tax. The numbers simply cannot tell the whole story in this particular case. Regardless of environmental impact, the data indicates that there is an electoral incentive

⁹⁶ Unknown Author. “Air Pollution Kills Thousands in BC.” *Vancouver Province*. August 14, 2008.

⁹⁷ Province of BC. *State of the Air Report, 2009*. Accessed Online. 3.
<http://www.bc.lung.ca/airquality/documents/SOA2009webmedres.pdf>

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 3.

for politicians in both regions to oppose the carbon tax. The reality is that the tax was only vocally opposed in the rural interior, and not in the Lower Mainland. Thus, the puzzle to explain the reactions in these communities remains.

Ideas I – Historic Perceptions and World Views

The lack of collective action from voters and interest groups, as well as the electoral incentive evidence, has been useful in giving partial explanations for the reactions in these regions. However, in an interesting turn of events, both of the above public policy theories serve to reinforce the importance of the third and final ideational explanation for the carbon tax reactions in the northern interior and the urban south. This section explores the role of ideas and concludes that they are the key to understanding the different carbon tax reactions.

Using Deborah Stone's ideational theory proves a useful tool for explaining the carbon tax reactions in these two regions. There is significant evidence to suggest that previously formed ideas and incomplete information had an impact on the carbon tax reactions in the northern interior and in the Lower Mainland. It is striking that people in both jurisdictions were not particularly well informed about how the carbon tax cost them when compared to others in British Columbia.

An examination of the literature on the political development of British Columbia throughout the 19th and 20th centuries reveals that an early dependence on resource development in the province has contributed to an acrimonious relationship between the northern and southern areas of the province. Brownsey et al describe that resource-based economic activities accentuated the regional structure of the province such that the north was alienated from the south. This regional tension was then "exacerbated by the rather

stark social structure of mine, smelter, and forest towns in the rural areas of the province in which many workers had significant elements of their lives controlled by corporations headquartered in the Lower Mainland or outside the province.”⁹⁹ Further, not only were decisions about the everyday lives of northerners made by companies that had little connection to their communities, but this process became the natural practice with governments as well. Markey et al claim that “too often governments have imposed processes or plans on the [northern] region.”¹⁰⁰ These historical processes have led to “a good deal of skepticism about economic planning processes”¹⁰¹ in the north and have also “reinforced a view that the region and its communities are essentially on their own.”¹⁰² The ‘world view’ that was shaped during these formative years in BC was one of alienation in the north at the expense of people and communities in the Lower Mainland.

This framework applies to the current carbon tax case. To begin, despite the facts produced by sources like Barrett, Rivers and the BC Ministry of Finance that indicated that commuter areas in the Lower Mainland rather than the rural north would be disproportionately disadvantaged, as Stone advises, “interpretations are more powerful than facts.”¹⁰³ The north’s argument about the unfairness of the tax came out before these studies, which indicates that they were working with incomplete knowledge and that their preconceived perceptions of their communities played a big role in their definition of the carbon tax as a problem. Even after the figures were published, the north continued to make comments to the press that the carbon tax was unfair to the region, which proves

⁹⁹ Keith Brownsey, Michael Howlett & Joshua Newman. “Chapter 2: From Forestry to Film: The Changing Political Economy of British Columbia.” In *British Columbia Politics and Government*. Toronto: Emond Montgomery Publications Ltd. 2010. 17-18.

¹⁰⁰ Sean Markey, Don Manson and Greg Halseth. “The Disconnected North: Persistent Regionalism in Northern British Columbia.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*. 30.1.2007.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Stone, 28.

that perception matters. Finally, at the end of each of the interviews with municipal politicians in 2010, respondents were asked for their thoughts on the facts produced by Rivers and the Ministry of Finance. As one might have suspected, most had little knowledge of the figures. Only Garth Frizzell, a councilor in Prince George that was first elected in November 2008, was aware of the studies that proved that “the commuter in the Lower Mainland is driving a lot more than we are up here.” Given that he was not an elected official during the height of the carbon tax rebellion in the north though, his contribution to the ideas shaping that particular political debate would likely have been minimal. Thus, as Stone’s work predicts, ideas became important in the carbon tax debate because the majority of people had incomplete information. Their view of the carbon tax was instead guided by their world views and historic perceptions rather than studied evidence.

Despite evidence suggesting otherwise, the notion that perceptions were a guiding force for northerners was acknowledged by Nate Bello. The former Quesnel Mayor said that “even if there is this more factual approach to it, the people of the north *felt* that they were being unduly burdened, and there was no consultation ahead of time. So that provincial response came out [around] the NCMA convention but what happened before that?”¹⁰⁴ It is apparent that many were unaware of the reports that discussed the impacts of the carbon tax and as such, allowed their preconceived perceptions to guide their reactions.

In the northern interior, historic perceptions that the north is disadvantaged and alienated are abundantly clear from the interview process as well as in published comments made by municipal and other local politicians. The argument coming out of

¹⁰⁴ Bello.

these communities was consistently phrased as a story where the north is still disadvantaged at the expense of the south. In MLA Simpson's interview in summer 2010, he compared the infrastructure dollars spent in the two regions. "Our schools and hospitals are getting closed. We're losing all this stuff and we watch a brand new cancer centre get built down in Abbotsford, Highway 1 expanded, \$4 billion for the Port Mann Bridge, and we've got people that still live on gravel roads and have party line telephones."¹⁰⁵ Another quote from Quesnel's former Mayor Nate Bello was particularly apt in explaining the divergent realities in the different jurisdictions. "I think the north has always felt alienated...People have the perception that the government is for Vancouver and there's always been the common phrase 'Beyond Hope.' We're 'Beyond Hope (British Columbia)' because we don't live down there where the money is flowing."¹⁰⁶ The notion that "everybody in British Columbia focuses on that Lower Mainland"¹⁰⁷ and that the north is overlooked remains alive and well among politicians in the interior.

This sense of grievance is not only evident in general comparisons between the north and the south, but the belief also permeates northern views of the carbon tax. In a March 2008 interview with the media, Simpson made the comment that "this is not a lifestyle choice. Northern residents need bigger vehicles due to road conditions and their line of work."¹⁰⁸ Another quote from the local paper in Williams Lake goes further in its suggestion of a comparative disadvantage facing the north as a result of the carbon tax. The voter notes that "it's all well and good to encourage urbanites in Vancouver to leave

¹⁰⁵ Simpson.

¹⁰⁶ Bello.

¹⁰⁷ John Massier. *Interview*. June 25, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Unknown Author. "City supports Carbon Tax Lobby." *Quesnel Cariboo Observer*. March 16, 2008.

the car at home, and bike or ride the Skytrain to work. Here in Williams Lake, that just won't work."¹⁰⁹ Finally the Mayor of Williams Lake, Scott Nelson, also expressed concern for the disadvantaged north when considering comparative costs for running a business. "There's going to be considerable increase in cost...for working in a temperature of minus 35 degrees in the north versus a temperature of plus 10 in Vancouver... We just want to make sure that when the carbon tax legislation is put in, it's fair and it's equitable."¹¹⁰ This concern for a policy that is 'fair and equitable' speaks to the perception across the north that the south continues to reap advantages from the political system at the expense of rural northern communities.

A further indication that an ideational or world view was shaping the reactions in the northern interior is the concern for the lack of consultation between the provincial government and local elected officials during the process of policy implementation. This apprehension has traditionally been an issue in northern BC, and the reality is evident in concerns about the carbon tax. John Massier, a municipal director in the Cariboo Regional District said that "a lot of people that live in the more remote areas of the province feel like they're not listened to."¹¹¹ Quesnel city councilor Ron Paull made a more direct link between the carbon tax and the level of consultation by qualifying that "this government had absolutely no prior consultation with the people. You just basically woke up one morning and...the government announced that they're going to introduce a carbon tax."¹¹² Finally Nate Bello provided a good summary of northern politicians' dissatisfaction with the quality of dialogue between the two levels of government when

¹⁰⁹ Unknown Author. "Federal Candidates Need to Remember the Whole Riding." *Williams Lake Tribune*. September 18, 2008.

¹¹⁰ Ian Bailey. "The Delegates of Prince George Have Their Say." *Globe and Mail* May 10, 2008.

¹¹¹ Massier.

¹¹² Paull.

he said, “The manner, the lack of consultation really set a bad taste in people’s mouths...There was no consultation; it was a big announcement all of a sudden. Where’s the discussion? Where were the forums? Where was anything?”¹¹³ He asked. Though the provincial government likely held pre-budget consultations at some point with some people, and budget discussions are always kept relatively secret, the important point is that northerners felt they were ignored in these conversations. This view that the north is rarely consulted is a reflection of historic perceptions and thus, spurs resentment in the north in a way that it does not in the south.

Finally, while making conclusive judgments about the reactions in the Lower Mainland is more difficult because their quiescent reaction gives the media little to report on, there is good reason to believe that their world view played a role in their reaction as well. Given the historic and continued dependence on the resource sector in the north, it is reasonable that their communities would initially be troubled by any policy that raises the cost of a natural resource, like fossil fuels. Their view of the world and the preservation of their livelihood are dependent upon their use and manipulation of natural resources. Conversely, this type of alienation has not historically been present in the Lower Mainland. In fact, the literature has shown that the economic development of the province has tended to favour and empower this region over the north.¹¹⁴ The lack of historical association with the exploitation of natural resources in the Lower Mainland suggests that their ‘world view’ would be less disturbed by policy changes involving the use of natural resources.

¹¹³ Bello.

¹¹⁴ Brownsey et al. 27.

Further, it is apparent that the perception that the north is more dependent upon fossil fuels is not unique to the north. Even those in the Lower Mainland made the link between the north and their reliance on fossil fuels. When asked about the lack of reaction in the Lower Mainland, Caelie Frampton who monitors the Greater Vancouver Regional District municipal councils, as well as Translink as a contractor for a coalition of BC labour unions, referenced the “amount of driving that you have to do in the north”¹¹⁵ and Coquitlam’s General Manager of Engineering and Public Works, William Susak commented on the lack of transit choices in the north. “They’ve got to use gas...almost exclusively. We have choices,”¹¹⁶ he said. These comments indicate that there is a link between the Lower Mainland’s perception of their own use of natural resources and the carbon tax. It appears that it did not initially occur to Lower Mainlanders to complain about the disproportionate disadvantage that they would face, because regardless of the actual cost, they too perceived significant costs in the north. Additionally, they had greater options to cope with the tax in the urban south.

As a further link between the level of local politicians’ indignation with the carbon tax and the amount of choices in the different regions, the development of transit infrastructure in the Lower Mainland was close to becoming reality at the same time the carbon tax debate was heating up in the summer of 2008. The Evergreen Line, a new rapid transit line that would link Coquitlam to Vancouver and other surrounding cities like Burnaby and Port Moody, had been in the process of development for over twenty years.¹¹⁷ However, construction was finally to begin in 2010. It is possible that

¹¹⁵ Caelie Frampton. *Interview*. July 22, 2010.

¹¹⁶ Susak.

¹¹⁷ Province of British Columbia. *Evergreen Line: Frequently Asked Questions*. Accessed Online. <http://www.evergreenline.gov.bc.ca/faq.htm>

municipal councilors in the Lower Mainland recognized that vocally opposing the carbon tax would be counterproductive. The provincial carbon tax was introduced as an initiative to encourage citizens to drive less and rely more on public transit options. In July 2008, only the roles and responsibilities for the Evergreen project had been laid out, and funding agreements were “anticipated to be executed before the end of 2009.”¹¹⁸ In striving to implement this public transit infrastructure with provincial funding commitments still on the line, it seems likely that municipal councilors living in the affected areas recognized that opposing the carbon tax, a policy that the provincial Premier had shown strong attachment to,¹¹⁹ would be unwise.

Interviews indicate that this theory likely played a minor role, but it was somewhat confirmed by two different events. First, when questioned about the impact of the relationship between transit and the carbon tax, William Susak said:

I think you're on to something...There's a two and a half billion dollar highway improvement program, most of which is being spent within Coquitlam, and there's the Evergreen Line on top of that which is another \$1.4 billion which has a huge, positive impact for Coquitlam. So the perception about whether or not people felt they were getting value for taxes, those two projects on their own may well have...They were coincident.¹²⁰

Susak's comments point to the substantive relationship between the two policies and the notion that voters and politicians in the Lower Mainland may have been less vocally outraged by the carbon tax because there was a perception that the carbon tax would not disproportionately affect them. They felt they had better transit infrastructure to help them cope. Conversely, in the north, the lack of transit options and the inability to

¹¹⁸South Coast British Columbia Transportation Authority. *2008 Statutory Annual Report*. Accessed Online. www.translink.ca/media/documents

¹¹⁹ Harrison. *A Tale of Two Taxes*.

¹²⁰ Susak.

change their behaviour was one of the greatest complaints. “We don’t have a multimillion dollar transit system. We drive from community to community—we’ve got old style transit: the automobile,”¹²¹ said Scott Nelson. As public transit projects dependent upon provincial funding were not a factor facing municipal politicians in the northern interior, this separate policy development contributes to a better understanding of the regions’ diverging reactions to the carbon tax policy.

The second event that indicates that Lower Mainland politicians might have considered opposing the carbon tax counterproductive to their interests happened only months after the municipal elections in November 2008. On April 23, 2009, Translink’s 21 member mayors’ council unanimously endorsed a motion that requested up to \$300 million per year from the provincial carbon tax to support the expansion of the transportation system.¹²² This move was a strategic one. The lack of funding for the transit system is well known. The concern was brought up in all of the interviews done in the urban south. Consequently, if the Lower Mainland Mayors had opposed the carbon tax the previous year, it would have been much harder for them to request the funds from the tax to go towards paying for their transit system, if the carbon tax had even been able to survive the opposition from the northern *as well as* the southern more urban parts of the province. Thus, even if it was only a minor factor in the calculations of municipal politicians in the Lower Mainland, the link between the carbon tax and transit policies is further reason for their quiescent reaction.

¹²¹ I. Austin. “BC’s rural mayors banding together to fight carbon tax.”

¹²² Kelly Sinoski. “Dispute over money threatens Metro Vancouver’s Transit System.” *Vancouver Sun*. April 23, 2009.

Ideas II – Good Policy Motives

There is convincing evidence to suggest that some politicians in the Lower Mainland and the northern interior were acting on their individual good policy motives. The argument that politicians in the separate regions were following good policy motives is persuasive, though it appears that their ideas of what constituted ‘good policy’ was simply a difference of opinion. For example, as previously noted, while there was an electoral incentive to oppose the carbon tax in Williams Lake, Mayor Nelson’s decision not to run for re-election at the municipal level but campaign for the provincial Liberal nomination indicates that his response may have been a result of his personal policy motives. Nelson criticized the carbon tax relentlessly, despite being a card carrying Liberal and choosing to leave municipal politics to seek the nomination for his provincial riding as part of Gordon Campbell’s Liberal team. His vocal criticism of the Liberal’s carbon tax would not likely win him a greater appreciation within the political party. The former Mayor had plenty of reasons to remain quiet and yet he chose not to. The evidence indicates that Nelson was following his own personal policy motives, which in this case still indicated that the revenue neutral carbon tax was a bad policy for the north.

In the Lower Mainland as well, there was opportunity for politicians to follow their good policy motives, and it appears that they did so. The absence of collective organization by voters and interest groups in the communities empowered some local councilors to ignore their electoral incentives and act upon their personal preferences. In the case of the carbon tax, while there are few published records of Lower Mainland politicians commenting on the revenue neutral policy, those that could be found indicate that some were supportive of the policy.

For example, before Fin Donnelly became the current NDP Member of Parliament for New Westminster-Coquitlam and Port Moody in a 2009 by-election, he was a member of the Coquitlam city council. A poll conducted in August 2008 also found that Donnelly was considered the top choice to fill the position of Mayor of Coquitlam in the November 2008 municipal election.¹²³ The councilor was clearly a high profile and popular political figure in the community. Despite the federal NDP's well publicized preference for cap-and-trade policy, and the significant opposition to the carbon tax in his own community and across BC at the time, Donnelly has been a consistent, longtime public supporter of carbon taxes.¹²⁴ In fact, in the 2009 provincial by-election, the former councilor ran his campaign by "playing up his environmental credentials."¹²⁵ The fact that Donnelly supported carbon tax policies when two different political motivations indicated that he should oppose, suggests that the former councilor was following his good policy motives.

A second case of Lower Mainland politicians following good policy motives is apparent in the words of Mayor of Maple Ridge, Gordon Robson. In early September 2008, Maple Ridge and Delta submitted two resolutions for debate at the UBCM convention that would take place at the end of the month. The resolutions did not reference the differential impacts between the regions but instead expressed concern for the impacts on municipal operations. In discussing the resolution from Maple Ridge, and his apprehension with the carbon tax policy, Robson commented that "he is not opposed to a carbon tax but actually thinks it should be higher to encourage a reduction in fuel

¹²³ Robbins SCE Research Inc. *Public Opinion in Coquitlam: Who Will Win Mayor?* August 9, 2008. http://www.robbinsscereasearch.com/polls/poll_511.html.

¹²⁴ Mario Bartel. *By-Elections Profile: Fin Donnelly – Member of Parliament, New Westminster-Coquitlam and Port Moody*. Accessed online. www.findonnelly.ca/node/131.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

consumption to make a real difference in reducing greenhouse gases.”¹²⁶ The fact that Robson was submitting a resolution that voiced some apprehension about the provincial policy, but still took the time to publicly support carbon taxes illustrates that he too was following his good policy motives.

Finally, a third example that indicates that some politicians in the Lower Mainland were following good policy motives is a quote that former Mayor of Coquitlam, Maxine Wilson gave to the press when she attended the Union of BC Municipalities Convention in September 2008, just two months prior to the municipal elections. On September 24, 2008 at the UBCM Convention, Premier Campbell announced the Climate Action Revenue Incentive program where the provincial government would “reimburse local governments for millions of dollars in carbon tax costs.”¹²⁷ Given the unpopularity of the tax in municipalities across the province, some mayors used the opportunity to express their discontent with the policy. Wilson however took a neutral, if not positive position towards the carbon tax. “We need to work together to reduce carbon emissions,” said Coquitlam’s mayor, referring to the provincial government and municipalities across BC. “If we don’t, we’ll be in a disastrous mode of self-destruction.”¹²⁸ This statement is important because it demonstrates a conscious decision on Wilson’s part to forego opposition to the carbon tax. Again, in spite of political and economic disadvantage facing politicians in the Lower Mainland, the few comments from municipal politicians published in the press indicate that some were supportive of the policy.

¹²⁶ Bailey. “Lower Mainland Joins Carbon Tax Protest.”

¹²⁷ Unknown Author. “Campbell Bedges on the Carbon Tax.” *Vancouver Sun*. September 25, 2008.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Given voters' rational ignorance and apathy towards the carbon tax, it appears that some politicians in the Lower Mainland and the northern interior were given more leeway to follow their own policy motives, and follow these motives they did. In most cases, political perceptions of the carbon tax policy in both northern and southern politicians is reflective of misperceptions about the location of the greatest impacts, but in other cases, like Fin Donnelly for example, a greater understanding of the policy pushed him to follow his good policy motives.

Conclusion

In February 2008, the provincial government of British Columbia introduced the first revenue neutral carbon tax in North America. The policy was initially celebrated because it tackled climate change goals aggressively and in a bold new way. Environmentalists applauded the province for its innovation, particularly in an era where the need for sustainability has become more apparent than ever. Yet, while the introduction of the carbon tax led to celebrations by some, the policy was opposed by voters and politicians across the province and in northern and rural communities in particular. In the months following the introduction of the tax, concern that these communities would be harder hit by the carbon tax because they faced harsher winter conditions, farther driving distances to their jobs, dentists, and other basic amenities, and had fewer public transit options that could help them reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, became well publicized in the media. Then, in a move that created the political puzzle that this paper has set out to explain, researchers found that, in fact, the apparently undisturbed urban commuters would face greater impacts as a result of the carbon tax. The question then, is why so little opposition was heard from commuter cities in the Lower Mainland, and why such indignation toward the carbon tax existed among politicians in the rural, northern interior?

At the beginning of the paper, I set out to answer two questions. First, how can we explain the divergent reactions to the provincial carbon tax displayed in the northern interior and the commuter communities of Lower Mainland, and second, what do the reactions tell us about the politics of carbon pricing and about regional political dynamics in British Columbia?

In response to the first question, the application of public policy theory demonstrates a building of factors culminating in the importance of ideas that led to the diverging reactions in the Lower Mainland and the northern interior.

The collective organization of voters and interest groups against the tax in these two regions was largely absent. While voters in the northern interior were more inclined to express their discontent with the carbon tax, there was no organized effort and their concerns had little impact on the actions of northern municipal politicians. Most municipal politicians in the northern interior acknowledged that the carbon tax rebellion was led by the politicians who spoke out on their own accord. Further, because the carbon tax is a provincial policy, voter concerns in both jurisdictions were not predominantly directed at city hall. These factors reduce the pressure for politicians to conform to voters' ideas. As a result, while the lack of collective action and the jurisdictional realities could explain inaction, the fact that similar conditions were apparent in both regions gives this theory only some capacity to solve the carbon tax puzzle. The lack of collective action and the lack of institutional responsibility can account for quiescent reactions in the Lower Mainland despite the effects of the carbon tax disproportionately impacting their votes. However, given similar lack of collective organization in the north, the theory is unable to fully account for the reason that northern politicians took it upon themselves to speak out on behalf of their constituents.

An examination of electoral incentives also proves to be only marginally helpful. Polling data taken during the carbon tax debate illustrated that significant voter opposition to the carbon tax was indeed apparent in both jurisdictions. While higher in the northern interior, disapproval was also present in the Lower Mainland. Thus, yet

again, the application of public policy theory illustrates similar circumstances in the north and urban south, leaving the carbon tax puzzle unresolved.

In the end, the power of ideas proves triumphant. Community identities that were perceived and formed long before the carbon tax was ever imagined manifested themselves once again, in this new policy debate. References of the north's belief that they are alienated and rarely consulted on policy were abundant in municipal politicians' reasoning for opposing the tax. Concurrently, the timeline of events from when the carbon tax was introduced to the publishing of scientific evidence countering the north's claims gives reason to believe that because of historic 'world views,' it simply did not occur to Lower Mainland politicians to initially oppose the policy on the grounds of disproportionate impacts. This truth is further confirmed by interviews where Lower Mainlanders expressed similar perceptions about the realities of living in the interior as those dictated by northern politicians and voters. It is clear that perceptions of a disaffected north extend beyond the rural interior.

A further examination of newspaper clippings indicates a synthesis of previous findings that allowed some politicians to act on their good policy motives. The lack of collective organization and jurisdictional control over the carbon tax policy enabled some politicians to abandon their electoral incentives and instead pursue their good policy motives. Accounting for the split between the two reactions is the fact that their individual perceptions of 'good policy' were substantially different. A combination of unfamiliarity with a new policy instrument and historic alienation guided ideas in the north to take the view that the carbon tax was a bad policy. In the Lower Mainland, this same unfamiliarity with the carbon tax and misperception of costs, as well as a few cases

of politicians motivated by a need to take a positive part in climate change reform, shaped the response in the urban south. In light of these findings, the puzzling carbon tax reactions in these communities become clear.

With respect to the second question considering what this research can tell us about regional dynamics and the politics of carbon pricing, it is evident that tensions still exist between the north and south, and between rural and urban areas in British Columbia. Despite advancements in communication and technology that could have served to shrink the proverbial gap between the two regions, comments from local politicians in the north indicate that regional conflicts are still an issue in the province. Deserved or not, there is a distrust of the provincial government in the north, and a sentiment that the Legislature, and citizens living in the urban south, do not understand the people or the realities of the north. This problem is only further antagonized by the north's decreasing share of electoral representation in the provincial Legislature.¹²⁹

Nevertheless, sometimes northerners are not more marginalized by their government; they just feel like they are. This reality is certainly evident in the provincial debate on the carbon tax. Though ideas about what it means to live in northern and rural BC played a significant role in shaping concerns that residents would be disproportionately affected by the policy, the evidence painted a different picture.

The lessons that can be learned from the BC experience are two things. First, an effective strategy to communicate the benefits of carbon pricing policies is paramount to getting people on side. Designing carbon tax policies to be revenue neutral can have benefits for economic productivity and can diminish the regressive impacts that can be

¹²⁹ Skakun and Simpson.

experienced if the tax is not revenue neutral.¹³⁰ However, governments need to be careful about how they communicate this policy idea. The experience in BC suggests that much of the negative response to the carbon tax was a result of people's skepticism and misunderstanding of this aspect of the policy. In future, perhaps governments would have a more successful time selling the carbon tax to voters if they shift the messaging to focus on the individual taxpayer. Rather than focus on the carbon tax as being revenue neutral for the provincial government, which people can be skeptical of, policymakers can lead the messaging with the tax cuts for voters. Instead of selling the environmental benefits of a carbon tax which are shared broadly across the public and harder to see in the short term, policymakers can highlight the economic benefits for the taxpayer, which are easier for voters to visualize and internalize because they represent gains to individuals.

Further, calling the carbon pricing strategy a 'tax' was found to invoke negative feelings in British Columbians. As small of a gesture as it might be, future policymakers should consider the advantages of coming up with a more positive name other than "carbon tax." A study of climate change policy in the United States found that environmental taxation has been successful in generating revenues for energy efficiency programs or renewable energy development in 18 states but the policies were universally not referred to as taxes. Instead, the legislation is characterized by terms like "social benefit charges" or "public benefit fees."¹³¹ In an attempt to stem anticipated opposition to environmental taxes, like in the case of BC's carbon tax, considering new titles that do not include the term 'tax,' may prove helpful.

¹³⁰ Harrison. *A Tale of Two Taxes*. 4.

¹³¹ Rabe. 145.

The second point that can be taken away from the case of carbon tax reactions in British Columbia is that their political and individual concerns about regional disparities would not likely be unique. Regional tensions exist across Canada and around the world, and this case can prove educational to other jurisdictions who might be considering implementing carbon taxes. In this sense, the politicians and voters in BC can serve as allies in other jurisdictions. British Columbia's experience can help others anticipate these regional reactions and manage their policy strategies accordingly. For example, to avoid northern disapproval, policymakers can make the case early in the introduction phase of the policy that the impacts of carbon taxes do not necessarily fall disproportionately on the backs of rural voters. While there is the potential risk that urban voters may understand that the impacts are greater for them, policymakers can explain the developments in public transit infrastructure that can help ease carbon tax costs. The accessibility to public transit in the Lower Mainland of BC was considered a reason that urban voters were not more vocally opposed to the carbon tax. Likewise, much of the upset in the north was about the lack of options and the inability to change their individual behaviour. It is recommended then that policymakers put aside funds that will help people shift their habits, and aggressively sell this strategy to areas where changing behaviour may be most difficult. As MLA Bob Simpson recommended "it might be simple stuff, like a shade tree program...or a woodstove exchange program." Whatever the policy choice may be, introducing tools to further assist people in changing their behaviour may encourage more people to support carbon tax policies and allow other jurisdictions to avoid the backlash experienced in BC.

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Appendix 1: UBC Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval



The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver,
B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Kathryn Harrison	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Arts/Political Science	UBC BREB NUMBER: H10-01294
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:		
Institution		Site
UBC		Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)
Other locations where the research will be conducted: In the field - Interviews may be conducted in person in Williams Lake and Coquitlam, British Columbia. Other interviews will be conducted by telephone from Vancouver.		
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Chelsea Peet		
SPONSORING AGENCIES: University of British Columbia - "Global Commons and National Interests funded provided by the Weyerhaeuser Foundation to UBC's US Studies Program"		
PROJECT TITLE: Carbon Tax Reactions: A Study of British Columbia		

CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: June 11, 2011

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:	DATE APPROVED: June 11, 2010	
Document Name	Version	Date
Protocol:		
Research Proposal - Carbon Tax Reactions in British Columbia	1	May 17, 2010
Consent Forms:		
Consent Form2 - Carbon Tax Reactions 2010 - All respondents other than politicians	2	June 11, 2010
Consent Form Politicians - Carbon Tax Reactions 2010	2	June 11, 2010
Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:		
Carbon Tax Reactions - Sample Interview Questions	1	May 18, 2010
Letter of Initial Contact:		
Initial Contact Letter - Carbon Tax Reactions, 2010	1	May 17, 2010
The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.		
<p>Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:</p> <hr/> <p>Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair Dr. Ken Craig, Chair Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair</p>		