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Canada's Pulse

How the Left enables the Right's anti-tax agenda

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One of the Right wing's greatest achievements has been the demonization of taxes. The Right's anti-tax language is devastating – “job-killing taxes,” for example.

When you want to reduce taxes, use a tax “shelter” to “protect” your wealth. When a tax controversy erupts, the news media call it a tax “revolt,” bringing to mind uprisings against oppressors.

The Right's success in framing taxes as a “burden” or tax “load” that requires “tax relief” stifles debate about which taxes are effective and which are not. The labour economist Hugh Mackenzie has appealed for “an adult conversation” about taxes. Good luck with that.

No doubt the Right's jargon has worked. Only three in 10 Canadians have a positive view of taxes (four in 10 a negative view), according to a Vector Poll™. On the other hand, nearly half the public has a positive view of profits.

Right wingers constantly prescribe tax cuts for every problem, but invariably critics on the Left blame tax cuts for every ill: government budget deficits... inequality... lousy public services.

The problem is that repeating the words “tax cuts” – even to disparage them – is free advertising for the conservative cause. Repetitiously drumming “tax cuts” into the public’s brain weakens resistance to the words, in the way almost no one’s shocked today when they hear “goddamn” on the radio.

“Freedom” is another brilliant bullet in the tax war of words. The arch-conservative Fraser Institute declares Personal Tax Freedom Day, and a calculator on the think tank’s website invites visitors “to determine the day you stopped working for government and started working for yourself.” (Tax Freedom Day usually arrives in May or June.)

Attempts to rebut Fraser’s “tax freedom” day with a “Corporate Tax Freedom Day” commit the same error of repeating the word that frames taxes as a kind of jail term that ends with your “freedom.”

Both Right and Left talk about taxes as penalties. The Right claims taxes are punishments inflicted on the innocent middle class. The Left promotes taxes as revenge on the rich. For the Left, tax cuts reward good behaviour – for companies that create jobs, for example. Companies that don’t create jobs are bad and should pay higher taxes. Over and again the links are soldered fusing taxes and hardship.

Across the spectrum politicians refer to taxes as money the government takes instead of the fees or prices people pay. Would Walmart advertise “everyday low price grabs”?

Ontario Progressive Conservative Party leader Tim Hudak vowed to fight the province’s harmonized sales tax, calling it “this tax grab.” On its website the federal New Democratic Party told Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty, “We will oppose your tax grab at every level.”

Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath called the HST a “job-killing tax.”

McGuinty turned the tables on Horwath in the 2011 election, saying the NDP would introduce a “crushing \$9 billion in job-killing taxes.”

No wonder Canadians are convinced they’re overtaxed. In a 2010 Vector Poll™, 55 per cent said their share of overall taxes is too high (44 per cent said their share is fair).

The Left has fallen into the Right’s tax trap. Left-leaning academics, politicians and labour leaders call for “tax fairness,” activating the link that taxes are unfair.

Every student in first-year PR school learns it’s not what you say or intend that matters – it’s what people hear that counts. You say “tax fairness,” but people hear “taxes are unfair.” If “fair taxes” means you want higher business taxes, just say so.

It will take at least a generation to reverse attitudes toward taxes because it’s been that long since taxes were under the public’s radar. As the Right unswervingly insisted that taxes are unfair and too high, tax abhorrence has grown.

The share of Canadians in Gallup polls who said the total taxes they pay are too high nearly doubled between 1962 and 1998, from 47 percent to 83 per cent.

Supporters of a strong public sector need to change the public’s tax views. So why tell people they shouldn’t like taxes? That’s the Right’s tactic. “Naturally, no one wants to pay more taxes. Naturally, no one likes taxes at all,” says the Ontario Chamber of Commerce president (in a commentary in the *Toronto Star*).

But you can also see the adage “Nobody likes taxes” on the Canadian Auto Workers website. The economist of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Armine Yalnizyan, told CBC News, “Nobody wants to pay taxes, but everybody wants the services to be there....”

Lip-syncing the Right’s mantra that “nobody likes paying taxes” makes audiences think about disliking taxes. In fact, the “nobody likes taxes” premise is wrong. When you ask them, millions of people say they actually like paying taxes. Why repeat the Right’s lies?

A 2010 Vector Poll™ asked a national sample which statement they agree with more:

“No one likes paying taxes. The people in government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes.”

Or....

“I like paying taxes. The government uses taxes to pay the cost of the public services we need like education, health care, police and fire protection.”

Nearly three in 10 people (28 per cent) said “I like paying taxes....” Projected across the nation’s 26 million adults, 28 per cent is more than seven million tax fans. That’s the same three in 10 in the poll cited earlier who say their view toward taxes is positive.

The correct way to talk about taxes is to tie them to the services taxes deliver and the outcomes they generate. Say taxes and services in the same breath. For instance....

- In a Vector Poll™ in 2010, 57 per cent favoured more government spending for health care “even if it means higher taxes.”
- 56 per cent in an Angus Reid Public Opinion survey this year agreed that “even if it means increasing taxes” the federal government “has an important role to play to redistribute the wealth and intervene in the economy.” Some 36 per cent disagreed, and 8 per cent were unsure.
- Despite the Right’s 30 years of anti-tax rhetoric, six in 10 people (63 per cent) in a 2010 Vector Poll™ say they would rather have good public services even if it costs more in taxes, not lower taxes “if public services are not as good” (37 per cent).

Arch-conservatives will continue shrieking about taxes the way the Puritans talked about the Salem witches. But there's no excuse for progressive people to help the Right with burning at the stake.

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