

Editorial: Harper misses the bus

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Conservative leader Stephen Harper took a short four-block ride on the King Street streetcar last week, part of a public relations campaign to convince voters in the Greater Toronto Area that he really does understand and care about the problems they face on a daily basis.

It's a hard sell, though, because Harper appears out of step with the real concerns of voters in this region.

It was never more obvious than with his announcement, made just before he jumped on the streetcar, that, if elected, the Conservatives would introduce a 16 per cent tax break on fare passes for riders who use mass transit, such as streetcars, buses and GO Transit trains.

Under the plan, commuters who regularly ride TTC buses or streetcars would save \$153 a year, based on an \$80 monthly pass. GO riders would get rebates up to \$485.

Harper contends his plan will increase ridership on mass transit, thus resulting in extra revenues for transit authorities to modernize and extend their systems.

At the same time, he argues the program will help the environment by reducing pollution caused by commuting cars. According to Harper, the plan is better than Kyoto, the climate control accord which the Conservatives would scrap because they say it is too costly and won't work.

Unfortunately for commuters and environmentalists, Harper's plan misses the bus — or the streetcar — when it comes to actually improving mass transit or the environment.

At its core, Harper's transit proposal is just another variation on standard Conservative party fare, specifically that tax breaks are the answer to almost every problem.

What mass transit in Toronto and the 905 area needs is direct and continuing federal and provincial investments to buy and refurbish streetcars and buses, to extend subway service and expand GO Transit.

Increased, reliable service is what will attract new commuters to mass transit, and thus ease traffic congestion and reduce pollution.

It is highly unlikely that a single commuter in Toronto would switch from their car to a streetcar or bus because they might get a tax break amounting to barely 60 cents a day.

At the same time, Harper's plan would cost \$400 million a year. He says the money would come out of funds originally set aside for the Kyoto climate change program.

That doesn't worry Harper, who denounced Ottawa's support of the Kyoto accord and said he will introduce his own plan to cut pollution.

Clearly, Harper doesn't "get" Toronto. Polls show voters in the GTA generally like the Kyoto accord.

Trying to bribe them with a small break for riding the bus or streetcar while refusing to give money to buy more buses or streetcars and at the same time gutting our international commitment on climate change is intellectually lazy.

What Harper needs to connect with GTA voters is both a realistic transit policy and an environmental program that provides real solutions and real money for real problems.