

The Transit Card

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Conservative Leader Stephen Harper, eager to portray himself as environmentally sensitive, has promised that a Tory government would come up with more realistic and achievable ways to reduce pollution than the flawed Kyoto Protocol. Touring vote-rich Ontario this summer, his first practical suggestion is a tax credit for transit passes, a policy he unveiled in Toronto last week before stepping onto a streetcar.

Voters are unlikely to be too impressed. They know their transit systems require a lot more than cheap passes to win customers. The Toronto Transit Commission, for example, has found that while lower fares do increase its ridership, what it really needs is money to provide better service -- more buses and streetcars in peak hours; more buses, streetcars and subways in off-peak hours; more buses in the suburbs; and more dedicated rights-of-way for streetcars downtown and displays telling riders how long the wait will be. Some of these improvements will be covered by the federal Liberal plan, included in the recent budget, to pass along some of the gas tax to municipalities.

To be fair, Mr. Harper has told Canada's cash-starved municipalities that he would also send money their way, but he's going to need a much more sweeping and imaginative public transit plan to actually get himself those Ontario votes. What use is a cheap bus pass when it's 15 below and there's no bus in sight?