Taken for a ride: The community impact of the Canada Line P3

The Canadian Union of Public Employees has looked at the community costs and consequences of the privatizing a transit project through a public-private partnership (P3) in Vancouver, British Columbia. This article sheds some light on the extensive list of problems associated with the region's decision to use the P3 model for the Canada Line rapid transit project.

The Canada Line, a rapid transit line connecting Richmond, the Vancouver International Airport and Vancouver, opened in the fall of 2009. It is the third line in Metro Vancouver's 68.7-kilometre SkyTrain network. The construction of the Canada Line was a \$2.1 billion project resulting in the largest P3 in Canada at the time and one of the first in Metro Vancouver.ⁱ

Although the Canada Line was a welcome expansion of the region's public transit system, the P3 project's main legacy has been to provide a clear example of what can go wrong when governments give control of decision-making to the private sector and sacrifice their accountability to the public.

Part of Vancouver's history

The idea for Vancouver's SkyTrain system emerged as part of the region's preparations for Expo 86. Since then, the SkyTrain has shaped the region's culture, landscape, and has been a driving force in the development of certain regions. In 1989 BC Transit identified, "more than \$5 billion dollars' worth of private investment that had occurred within a 10- to 15-minute walking distance of the SkyTrain light rail and SeaBus passenger ferry systems."ⁱⁱ

The original SkyTrain line, now known as the Expo Line, was completed in 1985 and had 15 stations starting at Vancouver's waterfront, continuing through Burnaby and ending in New Westminster. The building of this line was publicly funded and cost \$854 million. Expansions in 1989, 1990 and 1994 brought the total number of stations to 20.

A second SkyTrain line, the Millennium Line, was also publicly funded at a cost of \$1.2 billion. It began operation in 2002, and by 2006 included 13 new stations. The Millennium Line was completed ahead of schedule and under budget. Even before the completion of this line, planning had begun for its extension to the west (Broadway corridor) and the east (Coquitlam).

The successful bid of the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver delayed that extension, as attention shifted to creating a rapid transit link connecting Richmond, the airport and Vancouver (referred to as the RAV Line in the early days of the project). Planning for this new line, including the stubborn and irrational commitment to the P3 model, began in earnest with the creation of the project management entity called RAVCO.

P3 or bust

Decision-making on transportation and transit issues has always been contentious in Vancouver. Over the period of 2000 to 2004; TransLink, Metro Vancouver's regional transportation authority and RAVCO this was very apparent in the discussions between two of the main players in rapid transit decision-making.

Since its creation in 1999, TransLink has been responsible for creating and maintaining an efficient transportation network in the Greater Vancouver Region. From 1999 to 2007, TransLink was governed by a 15-member Board of Directors. Municipal voices were the majority, with 12 board seats held by municipally-elected officials. The remaining three directors were provincially-elected officials. RAVCO was formed in 2000 through an agreement between the key public sector funders of the Canada Line¹ project: TransLink, the federal and provincial governments, along with the Vancouver International Airport Authority.ⁱⁱⁱ

RAVCO, with the strong support of the province, recommended that the new rapid transit line be built using a P3. Members of the TransLink board had other ideas. Directors voted twice to turn down the P3 model,^{iv} preferring the project to be handled in a similar manner to the first two successful transit lines: through a conventional public procurement process with a maximum public funding commitment of \$1.35 billion.^v

The province insisted that the Canada Line be built as a 35-year P3, only providing their share of the funding if the project was a P3.^{vi} Dan Doyle, the deputy minister of transportation at the time, emphasized this point in writing by identifying the P3 model as one of the essential conditions for provincial funding:

"The provincial commitment to funding for rapid transit will be maintained at its present level of \$550 million on the following conditions:

3. Any project constructed using provincial funding will be a public-private partnership"vii

Then-transportation minister, Kevin Falcon, pressured the TransLink board by threatening to cancel funding for the Evergreen Line, another transit expansion project, and by blocking a proposed parking stall tax. These tactics proved effective. In 2004, the TransLink board accepted the P3 model for the Canada Line.^{viii} The board approved the project with a total budget of \$1.56 billion including a maximum \$1.35 billion from public funds^{ix}.

In 2004, the province, partly in retaliation for delays in getting their way on the P3

¹ The "Canada Line" was the name for the Richmond, airport, Vancouver transit line that the federal government requested in exchange for their share of the funding. RAVCO was also renamed, becoming Canada Line Rapid Transit Inc. Co (CLCO).

decision, and partly to ensure that they could force through future decisions without being restricted by another level of duly-elected politicians, set in motion a sweeping restructuring of the TransLink board. By 2007, the mayors of the region retained the right to select TransLink board members, but with significant restrictions on their power. The province limited their role to selecting non-elected officials from a pre-approved list of nominees provided by a screening panel dominated by representatives from the private sector, who were more supportive of a privatization agenda. In other words, the provincial government manipulated the political process and sacrificed local accountability, all for the sake of promoting P3s.

Over budget

One of the biggest selling features promoters of P3s pitch is the reduction of government risks related to projects going over budget. The Canada Line proved them wrong in spectacular fashion. The consortium led by SNC-Lavalin and Serco,² operating under the name InTransitBC, was awarded the 2004 contract for a 35-year P3 to design, build, finance, maintain and operate the Canada Line – despite their bid being \$1.9 billion, or \$340 million over the maximum approved budget of \$1.56 billion.^x

Late in 2004, the project budget was pared down to \$1.76 billion (which was still over budget) by changing station locations, scrapping two stations altogether, shifting costs from the project books to the books of public sector organizations^{xi} and, in a highly controversial move, changing the means of construction from "bored-tunnel" to "cut-and-cover tunnel" for large portions of the line. The federal and provincial governments covered the cost increases, adding

Serco left the consortium in 2005 and was replaced by the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec (which manages the funds of the Quebec Pension Plan) and the British Columbia Investment Management Corporation (which manages some of the province's largest public sector pension funds)

\$400 million to fund the P3, as the final project cost reached nearly \$2.1 billion in 2009. Meanwhile a provincial news release continued to claim that the project was "on budget"^{xii}.

Technology not compatible

P3 promoters like to claim that the model provides a key advantage in project design: innovation. In theory, if the private sector has more control over a project, the competitive forces of the marketplace will lead to innovations the public sector could not deliver. However, the real-life example of the Canada Line does little to support this theory.

At the end of the competitive process for the Canada Line, TransLink had to choose between proposals from two different private sector consortia: one led by Bombardier and one led by SNC-Lavalin. The consortium led by SNC-Lavalin was awarded the contract. Their proposal included train technology provided by Rotem, a division of Hyundai of South Korea. This technology is older and less innovative than the technology used on the original SkyTrain line in 1983 (provided by Bombardier). One BC blogger writes, "[s]till, it doesn't exactly inspire awe that the new RAV line has more in common with the old BC Electric streetcar line that ran to Richmond on West Boulevard and to Marine Drive along Oak, Ontario and Fraser until 1958 (not 1910 as our current Premiere (sic) believes, despite having been Mayor of Vancouver in the 1980s when he protested freeway expansion projects in the city)."

In addition, the winning consortium's trains are longer and wider than trains used on the other SkyTrain lines, and do not use the same electrical propulsion system. The benefit to the consortium was that the trains were cheaper to purchase. However, at the end of the 35-year contract, TransLink will be taking over a set of trains and tracks that are not interchangeable with other SkyTrain lines. TransLink will not be able to achieve future financial savings through standardized maintenance of trains, tracks, and stations. Further, the transit authority will have to pay a premium to replace rolling stock in small orders instead of leveraging savings with larger, system-wide orders.^{xiii}

Secrecy trumps accountability

In addition to cost overruns and outdated and incompatible technology, the Canada Line demonstrated a fundamental problem with P3s: the lack of available information regarding how public funds are being spent on projects. The core principle of P3s is that governments, with the goal of transferring risk, relinquish control over a project to a private sector entity that is expected to work in the *public interest* on behalf of the government. However, as part of any P3 deal, governments must sacrifice transparency – a key tool that allows the public to judge whether actions *are* in the public interest – in exchange for providing confidentiality to the private sector companies taking on the responsibilities of the government.

The inherent nature of P3s creates an unresolvable tension between the need for confidentiality and the need for public accountability. The Canada Line is no different than other P3s in this respect. According to Professor Matti Siemiatycki^{xiv}:

"The level of secrecy required to maintain the integrity of the private-publicpartnership delivery model calls into question whether the RAV-project governance structure threatened the fiduciary responsibility of the civil service or provided the necessary accountability to the elected officials who were responsible for deciding whether to approve the project."

Under the pretext of ensuring fair competition in the Canada Line P3 process, significant issues that would have caused the public to ask difficult questions were kept tightly under wraps. For example, early in the process PricewaterhouseCoopers produced a feasibility study for RAVCO warning that public and private funding sources for the project would not be enough to cover the expected costs, and that the public sector would likely have to contribute more. The full study was kept confidential so as not to impact on "commercial negotiations," but an executive summary was publicly released that failed to mention the potential public sector funding shortfall.^{xv}

Lack of public or government oversight, when combined with the private sector's insatiable profit-maximization agenda, has lead companies to cross the line into criminal activity. For example, in November 2012, Pierre Duhaime, who had resigned eight months previously as CEO of SNC-Lavalin³, was arrested on fraud and conspiracy charges by Quebec's anti-corruption task force, along with Riadh Ben Aïssa, the former head of the company's construction division. The charges related to the awarding of the contract for the P3 McGill University Health Centre facility. In April 2013, the World Bank barred SNC-Lavalin and over one hundred of its affiliates from bidding on any project for a period of ten years following "a conspiracy to pay bribes and misrepresentations when bidding for Bank-financed contracts."^{xvi}

Public engagement or backroom dealing?

In addition to ballooning costs, secrecy that undermined the public interest, lack of compatible technology, and SNC-Lavalin's questionable track record, the construction of the Canada Line also had significant negative impacts on the communities adjacent to the line, particularly due to a flawed consultation process and the project team's unwillingness to adequately address community concerns.

³ CUPE and the Polaris Institute have produced an in-depth corporate profile of SNC-Lavalin, available at cupe.ca/snc-lavalin

At first, communities along the line were thrilled at the prospect of improved transit. Based on information released to the public up to 2003, it was understood that construction was being designed to minimize disruption along the route, using 90 per cent "bored-tunnel" and 10 per cent "cut-and-cover" methods for construction^{xvii}. The bored-tunnel method was more expensive, but left city streets relatively intact and undisturbed. Cut-and-cover involved excavating 40-foot trenches, leading to major disruptions to the community.

This issue – bored-tunnel versus cut-and-cover – was to become a key focus of the project consultation processes. During early consultations, prior to the environmental assessment application for the project, there was no mention of the potential for extensive use of cut-and-cover construction. When the project's environmental assessment application became public in December 2004, residents were surprised to learn the province had allowed the private consortium to drastically change the construction plans. Without any public consultation, the amount of cut-and-cover construction work had risen from 10 to 75 per cent of the work. In fact, this information had been part of the consortium's plan for nearly a year and had never been clearly communicated to the public.^{xviii}

Former Vancouver city councilor Anne Roberts suggested the consortium had done a "bait and switch," stating: "I think looking at the political lay of the land, they decided that the only way to get this approved was to promise no disruption, no traffic congestion, and no parking problems and the only thing you could promise then was the bore tunnel. That has always been the position... I call it a bait and switch because we all got lulled into thinking it was a bore tunnel. That was the preference."^{xix} Once the new construction method was known, public perception of the project quickly changed. Many highlighted that the chosen method differed significantly from what had been previously shared with the public, concerns were raised that the environmental assessment consultation did not address the impacts of cut-and-cover construction. At this point, the province intervened and instructed the provincial Environmental Assessment Office to extend its consultation process. Public participation in the consultations increased and concerns grew.

Once the consortium prepared a preliminary design, there was another round of consultations where members of the public reiterated their concerns, and businesses raised concerns about public access to their establishments. However, at this point, the public and businesses were losing faith that the consultation process was making any attempt to address their concerns.

While residents and visitors in the Cambie Street corridor found this disruption troublesome, it was most acutely felt by small businesses along the route. Between 2005 and 2009, much of Cambie Street was closed to pedestrians and vehicles. Neither the province nor the private consortium offered compensation to local businesses to offset losses due to construction and many were forced to relocate or close entirely.

Loss of business and litigation

In response to the change in construction plans, businesses and residents joined forces as the "Do RAV Right Coalition." In 2005, they filed a lawsuit in the BC Supreme Court in an attempt to force additional environmental assessment that would appropriately assess the impact of the proposed cut-and-cover construction method.^{xx} The lawsuit was unsuccessful. Despite flaws in the methodology of the original environmental assessment, and a completely different construction method, the Canada Line was cleared to proceed.

In 2009, small business owner Susan Heyes filed suit for business losses incurred because of Canada Line construction. Heyes won, and the BC Supreme Court awarded her damages of \$600,000 to be paid by Canada Line Rapid Transit Inc. (CLCO). Unfortunately, the ruling was quickly appealed and the BC Court of Appeal overturned her victory. Subsequently, Heyes sought to bring her case before the Supreme Court of Canada, but that court refused to hear her appeal.^{xxi}

Early in 2010, the BC Supreme Court granted three business owners class-action status, to sue for damages on behalf of Cambie Street merchants. This decision was unsuccessfully appealed by CLCO, to the BC Court of Appeal in 2011. Over 200 Cambie Village Business Association landlords and business owners joined the class action and late in 2015, the BC Supreme Court decided that the cut-and-cover construction did unreasonably impact on businesses along the Canada Line route and ruled that business owners would be entitled to claim damages for the losses^{xxii}.

Human rights and labour violations

So far, this has been a story of financial mismanagement, backroom dealings and deception, but it gets much worse. The private sector consortium, no doubt in an effort to squeeze additional profits out of the project, was also found guilty of egregious workplace health and safety violations, and flat out exploitation of temporary foreign workers.

In 2008, 22-year-old Andrew Slobodian died while operating a crane on a Canada Line construction site. Slobodian had been trained as an apprentice ironworker and had been given 90 minutes of training on the crane that ended up falling on him and crushing him to death. A

WorkSafeBC investigation concluded that a long list of health and safety violations led to Slobodian's death, including insufficient training and experience of the operator, insufficient supervision of the work, and improper setup of the crane. The companies involved in the consortium were asked to pay a near-record amount including an administrative penalty of \$230,000 and a fine of \$82,000.^{xxiii} Roberta Ellis, the vice-president of WorkSafeBC's Investigation Division at the time was quoted in the press saying:

"No penalties are adequate when a life is lost, but we hope that they can serve to motivate these employers and others to comply with the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation, particularly as it applies to training and supervision."^{xxiv}

Unfortunately, the consortium appealed the decision and the Review Division of WorkSafeBC subsequently cancelled the fine and reduced the penalty to \$106,000, concluding that the employer had violated the regulations, but had not acted negligently.^{xxv}

SNC-Lavalin was also implicated in the exploitation of 36 temporary foreign workers. These workers were brought to Canada from Latin America, along with a number of workers from Europe, because of their specialized knowledge of tunnel construction.^{xxvi} It soon came to light that the workers from Latin America were being paid less than \$4 per hour and working more than 60 hours per week. The Construction and Specialized Workers Union Local 1611 approached the workers, and it was no surprise that they jumped at the chance to join the union – the first time in Canadian history that a group of temporary foreign workers in the construction industry successfully organized to join a union.

In response, and as a means to try to avoid collective bargaining, the employers raised their wages to approximately \$11 an hour, which was still only about 90 per cent of what temporary foreign workers from Europe were being paid doing the same work.^{xxvii} The union was unsuccessful in having the BC Labour Relations Board pressure the employer to negotiate and instead had to turn to the BC Human Rights Tribunal.

In 2007, the union local lodged a discrimination complaint with the tribunal against SNC-Lavalin and their recruiters, SELI Canada, on behalf of the 36 Costa Rican, Ecuadoran and Colombian workers. The tribunal ruled in favour of the temporary foreign workers, stating that they were treated differently from other workers on the project. The tribunal's 2008 ruling awarded the workers \$2.4 million, which included the difference in pay as well as \$10,000 to each worker for injury to their dignity, feelings and self-respect. SNC-Lavalin and SELI Canada appealed the ruling to the BC Supreme Court, but eventually agreed to a \$1.25 million settlement negotiated by the union, which the workers voted to accept in 2013.^{xxviii}

Lasting impacts

Based on the experience of the Canada Line, residents of the Greater Vancouver Region have clearly seen the difficulties that can arise when governments privatize transit infrastructure and services using the P3 model.

Elected officials have also taken note of the damage that P3s can do. During the construction of the Canada Line, Carole Taylor, at the time the province's finance minister, personally questioned the value of P3s and stated: "[i]t is a worry for the province, as a funder, that you are in this awkward position of being a funder but not being in control. It makes me wonder, is this a good model? I am asking myself that at this point... I think we were surprised in a couple of ways as to how Canada Line has approached this project."xxix More recently, the mayor of Burnaby was quoted in the press stressing the importance of not repeating the costly mistakes that came from building the Canada Line as a P3.***

Upcoming expansion of Vancouver's rapid transit system includes the Millennium Line Broadway Extension, South of Fraser Rapid Transit Project, and the currently-underway Evergreen Line. TransLink is using a scaled-down P3 approach for the Evergreen Line, reflecting not only sensitivity to pressure from the public and elected officials, but also the views from the provincial Auditor General and Partnerships BC – the province's cheerleader for P3s.

The Evergreen Line is being built using a P3, for the design, construction and financing of the project, however it will use technology that is compatible with the original two SkyTrain lines. The Auditor General saw the lower level of private-sector involvement as a clear improvement over the Canada Line approach. In a 2013 report, he found there was a "solid basis for government's decision to reject a longer-term P3 arrangement, including operations and maintenance, because of the integration and efficiency benefits of having one operator across the entire SkyTrain system."^{xxxi} This follows from previous Auditor General reports highlighting the higher rate of interest being paid by the government for the private debt of P3 projects (7.5 per cent versus 4 per cent for government debt),^{xxxii} and raised ongoing concerns about the failure of government organizations to provide adequate information about costs and risks associated with P3 projects.^{xxxiii}

Partnerships BC, the province's biggest promoter of P3s, also preferred the scaled-down version of P3 for the Evergreen Line. Partnerships BC found that a P3 model where the private sector maintains a non-integrated line like the Canada Line would be expected to "have higher annual maintenance costs when compared to the economies of scale that would be generated by TransLink by maintaining the Evergreen Line as part of the SkyTrain system."^{xxxiv}

Although better than the Canada Line, the Evergreen Line is a P3 with many flaws. Like

the Canada Line, the Evergreen Line P3 was sold to the public as an approach that would deliver a project on time and on budget. In April 2016, the provincial minister responsible, Peter Fassbender, announced that the project would be completed early in 2017 on time and on budget, costing the province \$586 million. Yet, as *Vancouver Sun* columnist Vaughn Palmer notes, in the original project announcement from 2009, the province promised completion by August 2014, with a provincial contribution of \$410 million – making the project two-and-a-half years behind schedule and 43 per cent over budget.^{xxxv}

As with the Canada Line P3, there have been health and safety issues with the construction of the Evergreen Line. Worker Julio Serrano refused to operate a crane because he realized that it was unsafe, but his employer, SNC-Lavalin, instructed him to operate the crane regardless of the danger to Serrano and his coworkers. This led Serrano to contact WorkSafeBC, who arrived on the site the next day and ordered the crane put out of service due to risk to the workers. Shortly after the crane was repaired, Serrano was laid off due to what the employer claimed was a shortage of work. Serrano has filed a complaint with WorkSafeBC that is still not resolved.^{xxxvi}

Even though the Evergreen Line is not a P3 on the scale of the Canada Line, these two P3 projects share some common lessons for us, and one question that it raises may be of particular importance. When things go wrong with a P3 project – whether it is cost overruns, massive disruption to communities, or dangers to workers – how can we hold elected representatives accountable, if all of the planning and decision-making has to be done in secret?

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^{vii} Letter dated June 19, 2002 from Dan Doyle to Pat Jacobsen. (on file in office)

viii History lessons for Carole Taylor. Policy Note. March 22, 2009.

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xii Government of British Columbia Canada. (2009). B.C. Celebrate Near Completion of Canada Line [Press release].

xiii <u>BC's Auditor highlights big differences between the Evergreen and Canada Lines. Policy Note. April 4, 2013.</u>

^{xiv} Siemiatycki, M. (2006). Implications of Private-Public Partnerships on the Development of Urban Public Transit Infrastructure: The Case of Vancouver, Canada. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 26:137. ^{xv} Siemiatycki, M. (2007). What's the Secret? The Application of Confidentiality in the Planning of Infrastructure Using Private-Public Partnerships. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 73(4): 388-403.

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^{xx} Do RAV Right Coalition goes to court. Website of A. Cameron Ward & Company, Barristers and Solicitors. June 20, 2005.

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xxiii Companies may appeal record workplace fines. The Province. July 29, 2009.

xxiv Canada Line death probe sparks record fines. CTV News Vancouver. July 28, 2009.

xxv WorkSafeBC cancels fine in Canada Line fatality. Daily Commercial News. March 8, 2011.

xxvi Imported Workers Fight Back. The Tyee. January 8, 2013.

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xix Taylor not alone in her dislike of TransLink's too-independent status. Vancouver Sun. July 24, 2007.

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xxxi <u>An Audit of the Evergreen Line Rapid Transit Project</u>. Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia, Report 15: 2013.

xxxiⁱ <u>The 2014 Summary Financial Statements and the Auditor General's Findings</u>, Office of the Auditor General of <u>British Columbia</u>, October 2014.

^{xxxiii} See the following reports by the Auditor General of British Columbia:

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An Audit of the Ambulatory Care Centre Public Private Partnership: Vancouver Health Authority, Report 2: May 2011.

Audits of Two P3 Projects in the Sea-to-Sky Corridor, Report 4: July 2012.

xxxiv Project Report: Evergreen Line Rapid Transit Project. Partnerships British Columbia, March 2013.

xxxv B.C. Liberals redefine 'on time, on budget'. Vancouver Sun. April 25, 2016.

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