

ESTABLISHED 1912

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OPINION

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Removing big money out of politics is worth the cost

Re: Taxpayer funding of political parties norm in democracy, Douglas Todd column, Sept. 23.

Finally, a voice of reason in the raucous debate about public financing of political parties. Douglas Todd provides us with a researched and reasoned opinion. Of the 35 democracies holding membership in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), he notes that only Canada doesn't practise a system of public and private funding. B.C.'s official Opposition tries to discredit the new government by loudly alleging it was hiding its true intent during the election. If true, in Todd's opinion that would rank as "a relatively minor infraction" compared with the "ultra-lax" approach of the previous government. The only question is: Is the objective of the proposed legislation to get big money out of politics? If the answer is yes, then let's get on with it. *Bill Brassington Sr., Burnaby*

Mental health services should be top priority for government

Re: Health minister calls opioid crisis 'No. 1 priority,' Sept. 21.

I read the interview with B.C.'s new health minister, Adrian Dix, with great dismay. I'm disappointed that the opioid crisis is his No. 1 priority, rather than mental health — which affects far more people, and services are still insufficient and hard to access. It's true that the opioid-related deaths are all tragedies. But \$322 million this year toward opioid addiction crisis measures? B.C. is on pace for more than 1,400 overdose deaths in 2017. That's \$230,000 to try to prevent each death. Why isn't the provision of safe, controlled supplies of drugs like MDMA (ecstasy) to users part of the conversation? I suspect that would be a far less expensive option than maintaining the unsafe, illegal supply of drugs, and trying to indirectly prevent deaths. *Brett W. Lloyd, Vancouver*

Ride-hailing services face less onerous conditions than taxis

I'm a full-time taxi driver with Sunshine Cabs in North Vancouver. I write because I'm concerned about ride-hailing companies in B.C. The taxi industry is regulated by the provincial government to ensure that all passengers are carried safely by competent drivers. To become a licensed taxi driver, government rules require: ■ A basic Class 5 licence; ■ A Class 4 licence, where the exam is set at a higher level than a Class 5; ■ A one-week, full-time training course at the Justice Institute in New Westminster, followed by a two-hour exam; ■ A criminal record check that is reviewed annually and costs \$45; and ■ An annual medical exam. Which of the above is required of a driver with a ride-hailing company? A basic Class 5 licence. The idea of being in a vehicle where the driver has a basic driver's licence, has limited driving experience, hasn't been medically checked, hasn't been trained how to deal with clients, hasn't had a criminal record check, drives a private car that may be in poor mechanical condition, with inadequate insurance, and where I'm unsure of the final bill, is alarming. These are factors that I ask you to consider as the implementation of ride-hailing services is considered over the next few months. *Christopher Kay, North Vancouver*

Respectful people stand at attention when anthem played

When national anthems are played, everyone should be standing at attention. These NFL bums who are now kneeling and locking arms show disrespect. The problem starts with TV cameramen — why are they not standing at attention? Instead, they pan the players and the anthem singer. If they fixed their cameras on the flag and stood at attention like everyone else, there would be no platform for disgraceful behaviour. The U.S. Marines have a code: God, country, unit. When cameramen, players and others disrespect the flag, they do likewise to the military and don't deserve to live in the country. *Bob McCance, Vancouver*

We can sell or use electricity from B.C. Hydro's Site C project

Re: Hydro will be 'burned' by Site C alternatives, Vaughn Palmer column, Sept. 16.

I realize a lot of people are against building Site C, but after reading Vaughn Palmer's breakdown of the costs to cancel the project, I believe it's better to finish it rather than having spent \$3.5 billion for nothing. I'm sure we will be able to sell any excess power produced now, and we'll need more electricity in the future, since most cars will be electric and our population will continue to grow. I hope our new government looks at these facts and doesn't cancel Site C. *Glenn Rickard, Coquitlam*



PUBLIC UNFAIRLY KEPT IN DARK ON SITE C REPORT

There's no good reason to keep delays and overruns on dam project a secret



VAUGHN PALMER
Victoria

The B.C. Utilities Commission moved quickly Wednesday to block public access to the uncensored version of an independent review it commissioned into Site C. At 8 a.m., the communications director for the commission, Erica Hamilton, called Robert McCullough, the Portland, Ore.-based energy expert who'd posted an unredacted copy of the report by Deloitte LLP on his website.

She asked him to take down the offending version of the report and he obliged.

With that, the public was again denied access to the full details of Deloitte's findings about Site C, including delays and overruns on the main construction contract for excavating the site, diverting the river and building the dam itself.

The main civil works contract was \$136 million over budget and two months behind schedule from the outset. Already it has eaten three-quarters of its share of the contingency budget, with only one-quarter of the work done. All noted here Wednesday in a column based on the unredacted version of the Deloitte report.

As it happened, I heard from the BCUC myself back when the Deloitte report was first posted Sept. 8 on the commission website.

I'd summarized a dozen or so highlights from the report on Twitter, when I got an urgent call from Hamilton, the same BCUC official who contacted McCullough this week.

She advised that the commission had taken down the report because it had mistakenly been posted without fully blacking out material that should have been kept confidential.

She also asked that I destroy my copy of the unredacted version.

I had not actually downloaded a copy, for which I am still kicking myself. By the time the report was reposted that evening, the most telling passages about the civil works contract were obscured.

Then this week I discovered McCullough had somehow obtained a copy of the version that was briefly available earlier this month.

The only way one would know about the confidentiality restrictions on the report would be if one were reading the unrestricted version that one was not supposed to see in the first place.

I don't fault him for taking it down at the request of the commission. He's been appearing before the Site C review as a consultant to the anti-Site C Peace Valley Landowners Association. He'd not be serving the interests of his clients by defying a request from the BCUC. They may apply for some of the public funding that is available to participants in commission proceedings.

But upon hearing that BCUC was again trying to suppress parts of the Deloitte report, I called Hamilton to ask why the commission was withholding critical information from the public.

She replied that it was a decision by the four commis-

sioners on the Site C review panel. Yes, but why?

"We don't feel it is appropriate for it to be publicly available."

Later, I received a followup statement from the commission:

"Access to the confidential version of the report is a matter between a requesting party and B.C. Hydro. Thus, the BCUC considers posting of the confidential report to be inappropriate, and as such requested Mr. McCullough promptly remove the report from his website."

So as I get that, if you want to know the details of a report that is critical of Hydro, you have to apply to Hydro for permission to read it.

I leave you to guess how likely permission would be granted and under what conditions.

I also learned that the

confidentiality issue was addressed on a statement on Page 1 of the Deloitte report itself.

Quote: "The information in this document contains commercially sensitive information and is confidential and proprietary to Deloitte. No information from this document can be released in whole or in part without the expressed written consent of an authorized officer of Deloitte LLP."

So no spreading it around without the permission of the consulting firm that prepared it.

But at this point the narrative enters the realm of catch-22 or, perhaps, a scenario worked up by Franz

Kafka.

The only reason I know about the statement quoted above is because I read it in the uncensored version, the one posted on McCullough's website until the commission stepped in Wednesday morning. In the approved-by-the commission version, the passage was blacked out.

Yes.

The only way one would know about the confidentiality restrictions on the report would be if one were reading the unrestricted version that one was not supposed to see in the first place.

You can't make this stuff up, but fortunately there is no need to do so.

The day before releasing the Deloitte report, the commission underscored that the text posted on the website would include "redactions to all information provided confidentially from B.C. Hydro."

Then the reminder that if one wanted to see the unredacted version, one would have to seek permission from Hydro. Appropriate, in the eyes of the commission, "because the confidential information pertains to B.C. Hydro."

The information pertains to Hydro yes, but it pertains to the public interest even more.

The censored parts of the Deloitte report detail how Hydro underestimated the cost of the main civil works contract from the outset and only kept the work on schedule by draining the contingency fund.

The findings, as Deloitte itself notes, call into doubt "Hydro's ability to estimate large contracts" and "reduces our confidence in the accuracy of the other main contract packages that have yet to be awarded."

No question why Hydro wanted the gory details suppressed. No way should the independent regulator cooperate in keeping the public in the dark.

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