

A Coquihalla moment to savour

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VICTORIA - Question period, last week of the spring session, and the Opposition was poking sharply at a government sore spot -- the Coquihalla.

New Democrat Jenny Kwan began by citing evidence of the growing anger over the plan to lease the Coquihalla to a private operator and extend the tolls for half a century.

More than one government member wonders if the doubly enraging plan could pave the road to ruin for B.C Liberals in the southern Interior.

The proposed 55-year extension of the tolls is already being translated as "you'll pay, your kids will pay, your grandchildren will pay," in some quarters.

"There might be hope, though, Mr. Speaker," continued Ms. Kwan, referencing a revealing letter to the editor from "the member for Kamloops."

The letter, she noted, advised that the government plan for the Coquihalla "is a proposal only," suggesting the Liberals might not proceed.

At which point Ms. Kwan was parading heretofore undemonstrated reserves of irony. For the Mr. Speaker presiding over Monday question period and the member who wrote the letter were one: Claude Richmond, B.C. Liberal MLA for Kamloops and Speaker of the legislature.

The Speaker maintains silence on most issues out of respect for the necessary impartiality of his role as presiding officer of the legislature.

But on this one he's been respecting his other role as elected MLA, communicating his constituents' anger even as he tries to assuage it.

"There is no doubt that it is an emotional issue," he wrote in the letter quoted by Ms. Kwan. "But let's try to get past the emotion . . . Let us also remember that it is a proposal only and it may not be the answer. Any solution must benefit the taxpayers of B.C. Otherwise there's no deal."

Having used the letter to put some of the Liberals' own reservations on to the record, Ms. Kwan put the question to Transportation Minister Judith Reid.

If Liberal MLAs say the plan doesn't meet the test, would she kill it?

Here was a moment to savour. Mr. Richmond was wearing his Speaker's hat at this point -- not literally -- he takes it off when he calls the proceedings to order. But the dictates of impartiality notwithstanding, it might have crossed his mind that this was one of the best questions he'd heard all session.

So timely. So understanding. So well-grounded in its research. Over to you, minister.

Ms. Reid tried the brushoff. Most Coquihalla toll-payers are not from the local area. And the proceeds will be spent, in part at least, in the local area.

In the end, her answer conceded the point raised by the Richmond letter: "We have a bottom line. If we do not exceed our bottom line, we will not be going ahead with this deal."

She didn't mention a number. The Liberals don't want to give away their bargaining position. But they are said to be hoping for \$500 million to \$600 million.

Tolls-for-life in exchange for half a billion dollars up front might be a good deal to Ms. Reid, safely ensconced as she is behind a policy that exempted the new highway in her Vancouver Island riding from any tolls.

The trade-off will be a much harder sell for Mr. Richmond and his no-less-anxious fellow Liberals from the Kamloops-Okanagan region

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The governing council of the B.C. New Democratic Party has rejected a proposal to select the next leader by a vote of all party members.

A motion calling for "one person, one vote" was presented to the council's quarterly meeting in Vancouver on the weekend.

It was voted down after some council members said there would not be enough time to implement the requisite constitutional amendments before the next leadership convention, set for Nov. 22 in Vancouver.

That's bad news for New Democrats who were hoping to put off the convention. They see a better chance of attracting a fresher face -- Vancouver Mayor Larry Campbell is often mentioned -- if the choice were to be made closer to the next election.

But with council reaffirming the November date, there'll be no more opportunities for delay.

June 15 is when the party officially begins accepting leadership candidates. Interim leader Joy MacPhail gives every indication she'll announce her candidacy soon after.

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