

LOCAL NEWS

B.C. cabinet minister quits over HST

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Blair
Lekstrom
was a key
figure in
Premier
Gordon
Campbell's
cabinet
prior to his
unexpected
resignation
as energy
minister on
Friday
morning.
(CBC)

B.C.'s minister of energy, mines and petroleum resources, Blair Lekstrom, has unexpectedly resigned from cabinet and quit as a member of the Liberal caucus, because of public opposition to the coming HST.

"It is clear to me that the residents of Peace River South are opposed to the harmonized sales tax and are unhappy with the way in which our government moved forward with this policy," he said in a statement released Friday morning.

"This is not about being right or wrong; in fact, I firmly believe that government is making a decision they believe will help the province, but as we have been unable to bring the public along, I acknowledge there is a need to re-evaluate this decision," he said.

"In light of the widespread opposition to the HST, I believe it would be prudent to bring the move toward the HST to a halt and immediately engage British Columbians in a dialogue about our taxation policy.

"This is a major tax policy shift, and it is time to engage British Columbians with a series of discussions about our province's future."

Premier Gordon Campbell said he respects Lekstrom's decision, but was disappointed and surprised by it.

Lekstrom raised the issue at cabinet on Wednesday and then with caucus on Friday morning before submitting his letter of resignation, Campbell said.

But the premier confirmed the government still has no intention of backing out of the HST plan, since it has already started spending the money it received from Ottawa as part of the deal.

Ex-minister will stay on as MLA

Lekstrom, who was a key leader in Premier Gordon Campbell's cabinet, also said he was quitting the Liberal caucus but will stay on as the MLA for Peace River South in northeastern B.C.

He has yet to say whether he plans to sit as an Independent or perhaps even join the rising B.C. Conservative Party as the fringe party's first MLA in decades.

The former mayor of Dawson Creek, B.C., was first elected in 2001 to represent the Peace River South riding, which borders Alberta.

The conservative rural riding has long been home to a movement to get rid of any provincial sales tax and more recently has become a hotbed of opposition to the HST.

Just last month, Lekstrom made it clear in an interview with CBC News he was feeling the heat from voters in his riding.

"Is there concern in my riding? Most definitely there is," he said.

"The issue that I hear more than anything is not so much about the tax, as saying, 'Gosh, we thought this wasn't on the agenda before.' And it wasn't," he said during the May 20 interview.

Blow to Liberal leader

The news comes as a blow to Campbell, who admitted to party supporters at a fundraising dinner on Thursday night in Vancouver that the party failed to sell the coming HST to taxpayers in B.C.

More than 600,000 voters in B.C. have signed a petition intended to strike down the unpopular tax, which is scheduled to roll out on July 1.

Campbell has already appointed Kootenay East MLA Bill Bennett as the new minister of energy, mines and petroleum resources.

Westside-Kelowna MLA Ben Stewart was also appointed minister of community and rural development and Vancouver-False Creek MLA Mary McNeil was appointed minister of citizens' services.

With files from The Canadian Press