

Vaughn Palmer: Horgan preaches pragmatism after favourable Site C poll

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Published on: January 12, 2018 | Last Updated: January 12, 2018 5:51 PM PST



VICTORIA — While Premier John Horgan says Site C was the toughest judgment call his NDP government has faced, a new opinion poll suggests the decision to

proceed with the controversial hydroelectric dam was the right one in political terms.

“Site C: By a margin of two to one, B.C. residents say province made the right call to finish dam project,” as the headline on a release from the Angus Reid Institute put it Friday.

The non-profit foundation put the question to an online panel of 803 B.C. adults just after the NDP government announced the decision: “Would you say continuing construction of the Site C dam was the right decision, wrong decision or not sure/can't say?”

The verdict: 52 per cent of those responding endorsed the decision, only 26 per cent said they were opposed, the rest stood on the fence.

Those who identified themselves as B.C. Liberal supporters overwhelmingly (78 per cent) thought Horgan and his colleagues had made the right call.

Self-identifying New Democrats were less enthusiastic but still supportive, by a margin of 44 per cent to 33 per cent.

Even those calling themselves Greens were 42 per cent favourable, 40 per cent opposed, a tie within the presumed margin of error (plus or minus 3.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20) for the online survey.

The other close call was among women, with 37 per cent saying the NDP made the right decision, closely followed by 33 per cent who said the government got it wrong.

Overall the survey suggests that Horgan and his colleagues, for all the hurdles they had to clear in getting to “yes,” read the public mood correctly.

“A very difficult choice for many of my colleagues, very difficult choice for me personally,” as he put it in a year-end interview with Keith Baldrey of Global TV.

“But we had to look at what was in the best interest of B.C. And we looked on balance at the impact of proceeding or the impact of stopping the dam, and we just couldn't see (spending) \$4 billion for nothing. And I think that the public would understand that as well.”

The Reid institute findings provide a dramatic contrast to the feedback on Twitter and other social media platforms.

There Horgan and crew have been roasted, with activists predicting the decision to proceed with Site C will cost the New Democrats the next election.

Not giving up the fight, Site C opponents have organized a summit, to be held in the provincial capital at the end of this month. Guest speakers will include several First Nations leaders, plus Harry Swain, who chaired the federal-provincial joint review panel on Site C, and Robert McCullough, one of the half-dozen experts who briefed the NDP cabinet in a confidential session late last year.

“The summit will provide a forum for discussion and consideration of actions,” according to the invitation that went out earlier this month. Topics to include: “How do we get out of this?” Further details and registration at [sitecsummit.ca](http://www.sitecsummit.ca) (<http://www.sitecsummit.ca>), the conference website.

“All are welcome who oppose the Site C project. We will proceed whether or not any members of government attend.”

On the likelihood of putting the brakes on Site C at this late date, the New Democrats have already provided a response of sorts. Just before Christmas, B.C. Hydro announced that with the green light from cabinet on Site C, it was preparing to award the second-largest contract for construction of the project.

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Hydro has this month entered into the final stage of negotiations with the preferred proponent, a four-partner international consortium, to build the powerhouse, penstocks, spillways and power intakes for the dam.

That part of the project is budgeted at \$1.255 billion, though the cost is expected to come in somewhat higher.

The Dec. 21 news release insisted the proposal from the partnership is “within the revised cost estimate established by B.C. Hydro of \$10.7 billion.”

Make that the “latest” revised cost estimate established by B.C. Hydro. For as those who’ve followed the progress of Site C over the years will recognize, it will not necessarily be the last.

But having decided that the construction was already past the point of no return, the New Democrats have lost no time getting on with finishing it.

All part of the turn-the-page messaging from a government determined, as some of its own members have noted, to move beyond the NDP roots as a party of perennial protest and opposition toward something more pragmatic.

“That’s a good assessment,” as Horgan put it in the year-end interview.

“That’s not to say we lose sight of the values, by any means.

“We need to have a government that’s based on the values that we all share; compassion, an ability to share power, not to hold power. I think those are the types of things that my colleagues are coming to terms with and I’m very proud of all of them.”

But, bottom line: “If we’re going to be a government that governs for all B.C.ers, we have to set aside our activism and start being better administrators.”

Time will tell whether he and his fellow would-be administrators can keep Site C on track and out of further political trouble. But as messaging goes, Horgan’s call for pragmatism over activism is aimed at his own supporters as much as anyone.

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