

THE COST OF YOUR VOTE, by Dan Hershfield

Bill 1: David Emerson's defection to the Conservatives has left many feeling that their vote has been devalued. But what's a vote actually worth? Coming up, Dan Hershfield attempts to find out.

Bill 2: There are some things you can't put a price on. But is a vote one of them? The David Emerson affair has Dan Hershfield wondering.

Intro: Recently, Ethics Commissioner Bernard Shapiro released his report on the David Emerson floor-crossing. While he concluded that no laws had been broken, he noted that the incident had left many feeling that their votes had been devalued. But are they right? We sent Dan Hershfield to find out.

It's easy to say that David Emerson cheapened the electoral process. Ridiculously easy, in fact. But it's much harder to prove, for the simple reason that it's very difficult to figure out just what a vote is worth. And how can you say something's been devalued if you don't know what its value was in the first place? To find out, I was going to have to do some thinking and possibly some math.

First, I tried to come up with some unit of measurement that would include things like freedoms and civic duties, one which would indicate the real value of a vote. But alas, I kept coming back to the same unit that most people rely on to determine value.

SFX: Cash register

Yep. Money. Nice and quantifiable. And in David Emerson's case, fairly easy to apply.

MUSIC: Been Caught Stealing, Jane's Addiction

Setting aside all the other perks attached, by getting himself into Cabinet, Emerson bumped up his salary by about \$70,000. So we'll call that "the value of him crossing the floor."

Now, in his riding of Vancouver-Kingsway, the Liberals got 20,062 votes, the NDP 15,470, and the Conservatives were a distant third with 8,679 votes. So for the Conservatives to have actually won the seat during the election, about 7,000 people who voted Liberal would have to have switched their votes over to the Tories. So we'll call that "the cost in terms of betrayed voters."

\$70,000 salary increase, 7,000 stolen votes. That means that if he wanted to buy enough votes to have won the seat as a Conservative, his break-even point would be about \$10 per vote a year. So let's say that's what David Emerson values a vote at, and we can conclude that he devalued his constituents' votes if it turns out the street value is higher.

And how did I determine the street value? I went to the streets.

Clip 1: TRACK 3

0:09-0:20: Hmm. The value of a vote. I think it's, it's, it's huge. The value of a vote is huge. It's, it's, the future of our country in a gesture.

Clip 2: TRACK 4

0:06-0:37: The value of a vote is, to me, identifying with a party or a directive, like a, some sort of social issue that I would like to see happening in the world, a direction I'd like the world to take, and my own country, and how I see myself as a person and how I'm able to represent that to other people, basically, how I can gage myself with people I don't know across the country.

Hmmmm. Come to think of it, I don't need to know the actual street value of a vote. I just need to know one thing.

MUSIC: Can't Buy Me Love, The Beatles

Clip 3: TRACK 5

1:46-1:56: If someone was to offer you, say, ten dollars for your vote, what would your reaction be to that? No. Yeah, I would say no. Ten dollars? Not, not going to do it.

Clip 4: TRACK 6

0:31-0:53: It's not enough. Ten dollars isn't enough? No. Not at all. Not remotely. And what makes you set the price higher than ten dollars? Umm, if it's going to determine something that will cost me more than ten dollars, like taxes, then I think it's worth more than ten dollars.

Clip 5: TRACK 8

0:55-1:01: No, no, no, no. Ten dollars? No. Ten dollars. I've got ten dollars already.

Clip 6: TRACK 2

0:50-0:58: Ten dollars. That seems way too low, way too low. I think a vote is worth at least a hundred dollars, I would say...

Clip 7: TRACK 1

1:14-1:29: I think it's too important. It would just feel incredibly unethical to sell a vote. It seems bizarre. What..what...who are you?!? What kind of stupid question is that? Sell my vote? Who's going to want to buy my vote? Who? Who would buy my vote?

So there you have it.

MUSIC: More Than a Feeling, Boston

The people have spoken, and the street value of a vote is clearly more than ten dollars. So for those who felt that their vote had been devalued but couldn't prove it, now you can say it's more than just an opinion. It's almost like a fact. Sort of.

Clip 8: TRACK 1

1:19-1:21: What...what...who are you?

I'm Dan Hershfield, for CBC Radio.