



City's campaign financing rules must change

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The Cynical Satirists Club, a group focused on lampooning life and its vagaries, recently debated the important issue of political campaign financing. The audience assembled with their voting machines. The judges lined up to weigh the evidence. The room buzzed with excitement.

The pro side started. Lobbyists are justifiably fed up with the process of investing millions of dollars to get politicians elected, they claimed, then having them promptly forget who elected them. And worse, they argued, these same politicians conveniently forgot to ratify the legislation the lobbyists wanted. Much applause.

It was the con team's time for a scathing rebuttal. Lobbyists should bypass politicians and give their millions directly to voters. The world, they concluded, would be much better served if all politicians were eliminated and corporations governed.

The audience alternatively laughed, clapped and jeered.

Thankfully, the judges were made of stern, ethical stuff. After some consultation they announced back-room lobbyists should be severely curtailed from giving their millions to politicians; politicians had to abide by strict rules; and voters were to be taxed, not tempted with bribes.

The room was silenced by their brilliant insight. Democracy was safe until the next satirical debate.

Sadly, many countries and jurisdictions do not regulate the money politicians use to get elected. Many have had their careers abruptly ended by scandals that erupted when they voted as their funders (lobbyists) advised them to. This, in turn, dissuaded bright, competent candidates from running who did not want to jeopardize their reputations. They wanted to serve their people with the highest of ethical standards.

Fortunately, Canadians do things differently and correctly. This country's elected officials and its constituents believe in accessible, transparent and unbiased guidelines to ensure that politicians are fairly elected by citizens, and make decisions in their best interests, minimally affected by those who funded their campaigns.

Federal and provincial politicians follow stringent rules dealing with funding elections. These pieces of legislation all regulate how much money an individual, corporation, union or employee organization can contribute to a candidate's campaign.

Alberta's provincial candidates can accept donations from individuals or groups to a maximum of \$15,000 in between elections and \$30,000 during a campaign. Anonymous contributions cannot exceed \$50. The province also requires candidates to place any surplus campaign funds in trust for the candidate to use during the next election. Or, if nominees decide not to run again, the money can be transferred into the coffers of their registered party, constituency association or into the war chests of other party candidates.



Municipalities in British Columbia go one step further. Their legislation mandates that each candidate appoint a financial agent to keep proper records of all contributions. If there is a surplus balance of \$500 or more, after the campaign bills are paid, those funds must be held in trust by the municipality and will be returned to the candidate if he or she decides to run again. If the decision is no, the monies are treated as a donation to the municipality.

Calgary's politicians also want and need the protection of similar legislation.

The Calgary Chamber of Commerce, always a fan of accessible, transparent and unbiased processes recommends the provincial government amend the Local Authorities Elections Act and bring the municipalities in-line with their federal and provincial colleagues:

Impose a maximum limit on campaign contributions that any individual or group can donate, and publish the final list of donors on the municipal website.

Establish a provincially maintained Candidate Conflict of Interest Registry with lists of family members, interests in corporations or organizations, land holdings and contracts with the municipality.

Require all surplus campaign funds be donated to a registered not-for-profit charity or the municipality.

Mandate that only individuals and organizations operating or residing in the municipality are eligible to contribute to campaigns.

Calgarians deserve to have the best and brightest citizens represent them at City Hall. They need to be able to raise money to run election campaigns. And, when elected, voters ought to know who funded them, how much they gave and what they will do with their war chest once they decide to leave political life.

This city does not need a debate by the Cynical Satirists Club to know we will support the premier if he introduces legislation that establishes campaign contribution limits and restricts surplus funds.