

Victoria aims to put limits on civic campaign financing

Record expenditures by main Vancouver parties bring calls for election finance reform

BY JEFF LEE, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 13, 2015



Vancouver mayoral candidate, journalist Kirk LaPointe, of the Non-Partisan Association party, listens during a news conference in Vancouver, on Thursday November 13, 2014. Voters in Vancouver and other municipalities across British Columbia will go to the polls Saturday for a civic election.

Photograph by: DARRYL DYCK, THE CANADIAN PRESS

In their quest for power in the recent civic election, Vancouver's two largest political parties unleashed the most expensive campaigns in the city's history, backed by no-holds-barred campaign funding.

But the scale of that astronomical spending, which politicians in most other Canadian cities can only dream about, may soon be a thing of the past. The provincial government aims to bring in local election expense limits for the 2018 elections that will dramatically cap the amount candidates can spend on campaigns.

The proposal, a stated outcome of a special all-party legislative committee looking into local election expense limit measures, comes as Mayor Gregor Robertson's Vision Vancouver party spent the equivalent of \$18.34 for every one of the 180,668 votes cast in the council, park board and school board races. It also ran up the largest election deficit in B.C. civic history, spending nearly half a million more than the \$2.9 million it raised. The Non-Partisan Association, which shelled out just over \$2.02 million, spent \$11.19 for each one of the votes cast in the election.

The numbers reflect actual votes cast, not the number of people on the voter's list, which is 415,978.

By comparison, in Toronto and Montreal, where there are limits on expenses and contributions and corporate and union donations are banned, candidates can spend only 85 cents and \$1.50 respectively per registered voter. In addition, most large Canadian cities, including Toronto and Montreal, have wards, where councillors are elected to represent a geographic area. That means candidates don't have to raise as much and can finely target their expenditures. Vancouver has an at-large system, where all members of council represent the entire city, resulting in the need for larger campaigns to cover the area.

For years Vision Vancouver has prodded the B.C. government to reform campaign finance and ban

corporate and union donations, without success. The NPA and other major parties have also supported calls for election finance reform, but differ on how far legislation should go. In the interim, Vision has made a virtual industry out of collecting donations from those same sources, arguing it is simply following the law so as not to be at a competitive disadvantage. The NPA has followed suit. The result: over 78 per cent of the \$2.9 million Vision raised for its 2014 election war chest came from unions and corporations. The NPA was not far behind, at 73.8 per cent.

Stratospheric personal donations have also become benchmarks for those parties, with individuals cutting cheques for as much as \$100,000 or more.

Those figures stunned Jackie Tegart, the chairwoman of the province's Special Committee on Local Elections Expense Limits. Her all-party committee heard public submissions before the election on reining in such largesse.

"Wow. That tells me that it is very timely we are doing the work we are doing," said Tegart, the Liberal MLA for Fraser-Nicola. "We are hearing loud and clear from people that what is happening at the municipal level needs to be reined in, that they believe there need to be limits. People want to know that running for municipal council is accessible and that you don't have to be a millionaire."

The mandate of the committee, which will table its report June 12, is limited to considering expense limit reforms. It will not examine contribution limits. But Tegart said controlling how much candidates can spend by default will limit how much they need to raise. "If you have a limit on expenses, it also affects how much you need," she said.

The province's proposal is to set a specific dollar limit in elections with 10,000 or fewer eligible voters. For those with more than 10,000 voters, the limit would be a proportional amount, Tegart said. Neither amounts have been set yet.

The amount of money flowing into civic elections, particularly in Vancouver, worries Max Cameron, the director of the University of B.C.'s Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions. Unlike Montreal, the issue here is one of "institutional corruption," he said.

"Here the fear isn't so much the outright bribery or the influence of mafia as much as the way in which affluence buys influence. Wealthy donors, unions and corporations get access by making big contributions," he said. "Almost certainly the reality in the case of big donors is that if you are giving \$100,000, you expect something in return."

Cameron said donation limits — such as in Winnipeg, where a person can give a maximum of \$1,500 for a mayoral candidate and \$750 for councillors — are "a reflection that you are using your money to express your preference and to be helpful, but it is not quite at the level that creates the presumption that if you pick up the phone, the mayor is going to answer."

Donors of large sums aren't doing it out of altruistic civic mindedness, he said.

"I see it as an attempt to be on a list of people who are taken very seriously by the city and who want to have access," he said. "That is what the voter is asking: what could you possibly be buying with a gift of \$20,000, \$50,000 or \$100,000?"

Cameron is not suggesting the parties or the candidates have broken any laws.

"What we are talking about is ethics, not legalities," he said. "Politicians are hired to make good decisions that are going to benefit our communities on the whole. The question to ask is does this kind of money sloshing around in the system make it easier or harder for them to make decisions that are in the public interest. My proposition is it makes it harder."

Corporations and unions are also sending a message with such large contributions not to mess with assured campaign nest eggs, he said.

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