



Why municipal election spending limits matter

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BY VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 30, 2014



Unless you're a policy wonk, electoral reform is hardly the stuff to set your pulse racing, even if it does involve limiting how much politicians can spend.

But if you've got a few moments this week, it would be a good idea to get in touch with your inner wonk.

Why? Because the B.C. government needs to hear the strong message that it's long past time to rein in what candidates, political organizations and third parties spend on municipal elections. And Friday is the deadline for public comment.

Nearly four years ago, a government-appointed panel studied reforms to municipal elections and recommended numerous changes, including limits on spending, who can contribute and how much. That same year, a Mustel survey found that 85 per cent of B.C. residents favoured those kinds of restrictions.

But the provincial government hasn't had the stomach for it. The panel made 31 recommendations for changes, and all but one will be in place for the November election. Missing is a rule limiting spending by candidates, elector organizations and third-party advertisers.

And restrictions on donor contributions are not even on the agenda. They should be. It's not clear why there's such reluctance to deal with election financing. It's done at both the federal and provincial levels, and for municipalities in two provinces.

More importantly, and in the simplest terms: Without restrictions, it makes it a lot easier to buy a win or a winner, especially since fewer than one in three registered voters even bothers to cast a ballot. One has to look no further than B.C.'s 2011 municipal elections to see that rampant election spending is happening here and not only in the big cities.

Campaign spending in Vancouver (population 578,040) hit \$5.3 million. The winning party, Vision Vancouver, spending \$2.2 million. Developer Rob Macdonald alone contributed \$960,000 to the

Non-Partisan Association (accounting for a fifth of that party's spending).

Across Metro Vancouver, the Canadian Union of Public Employees doled out nearly \$700,000.

In Richmond (population 174,460), incumbent Mayor Malcolm Brodie raised and spent \$224,750 compared to his rival Richard Lee's \$6,134.

In Sechelt (population 9,496), John Henderson spent nearly \$16,200 (\$10,731 from his own pocket) to defeat the incumbent who spent \$10,250. And, while Henderson wasn't endorsed by a group called For a Better Sechelt, it raised and spent \$46,200 promoting an agenda that meshed with that of Henderson and a group of council candidates.

Ontario and Quebec restrict municipal election spending. In Ontario, mayoral candidates can spend a maximum of \$7,500 plus 85 cents for every registered voter; council candidates can spend \$5,000 plus 85 cents a voter. In Quebec, the mayoral base is \$3,780 with a per-electoral allotment that ranges from 30 to 51 cents depending on the municipality's population.

A B.C. Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development discussion paper offers two more complicated approaches to spending limits. One would have both a per-voter and per-resident allotment plus a base amount. The other would have different formulas for differently sized municipalities.

As for third-party spending, the paper notes that candidates are spending less as electoral organizations spend more. That, of course, is the very reason to restrict it.

Yet, oddly, the paper raises a red flag about the constitutionality of limiting third-party spending. That's despite the fact that the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in 2002 that federal third-party spending limits are justifiable and reasonable limits on free speech to ensure electoral fairness.

Back in 2010 after then-minister Bill Bennett described municipalities as the "wild West" when it comes to election expenses and hundreds of submissions to the municipal electoral reform panel supported spending limits, **the restrictions should have been enacted.**

Now, **at the very least, they should have been included in the municipal election reform bill that the government hopes to enact and have in force for the November elections.** But they're not. Maybe provincial and municipal politicians believe that if another three years go by, people will be inured to the dangers of frontier-style democracy.

Prove them wrong. By Friday midnight, send a message that the status quo wasn't good enough in 2010 and really falls short of the mark for 2014 and beyond.

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The discussion paper is available at bit.ly/1iboT4f

To have your voice heard, email localgovelectionreform@gov.bc.ca or send a letter to Local Government Elections, Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development, PO Box 9847, Stn Prov Gov, Victoria V8W 9T2

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