

POLITICS AS USUAL: Campaign Financing

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

It was reported recently that the Province will move to ban corporate and union election campaign donations at the municipal level, effective 2018.

Previously, they had indicated that the proposed change would be optional. Each municipality would be allowed to decide for itself whether to apply the ban or not.

As my regular readers know, I am not a fan of permissive, as opposed to obligatory, regulatory provisions. Either everyone is required to do something or no one is.

You cannot create an equal playing field when not everyone is using the same rules.

Creating a situation where some municipal candidates can take corporate or union cash while others cannot is a recipe for chaos and disaster.

Clearly, the Province thought better of it too and, apparently, based on feedback they had received, they have decided that what's good for the goose ? the province ? is good for the gander ? us.

They've already moved forward with banning corporate and union donations for provincial campaigns and they are now extending it to municipal races, too (note: this has not yet been made law).

While I agree that campaign financing reform is most definitely in order ? at the very least to make it less confusing ? I do not think we are comparing apples to apples when speaking to impacts and implications of election financing at the two levels.

Applying the same rules at the municipal and provincial level, as if the two contexts are the same, is not entirely fair. And I will explain why:

The most obvious reason is because municipal elections are not party based (well, in Ontario at least). Candidates are individuals. They do not run on a party platform. They do not have the party machine behind them assisting with all manner of campaign related activities. Thus, the costs both direct and indirect are fully borne by the municipal candidate, whereas they are not by the provincial candidate.

That is a fairly significant difference.

I am not saying that those costs should be offset by corporate or union donations, but I am saying that removing the potential financial support those donations represent is a harder hit at the municipal level than at the provincial level.

Following on that point, the inability to raise funds by means other than individual donations will be truly problematic in the larger races ? such as for Mayor or Regional Chair.

The cost of running for Mayor in the city of Toronto is in the millions of dollars. Again, I'm not advocating massive corporate or union donations here, but one has to recognize that it is harder to raise that kind of cash individually than it is under the current system.

The effect of the legislation will more than likely be largely positive. Certainly there is some evidence to suggest that corporate and union donations have had an outsized impact on the outcome of many municipal races.

Thus, the elimination of the potential undue influence that such donations have had on municipal decision making will be welcome. That being said, let's not lose sight of the potential negative impacts of the proposed changes.

We may see more self-financed candidates ? and in those cases, the folks that have the most money to fund their own campaign ? Trump, anyone? - will have a distinct advantage over those that do not - including being able to run at all.

That's hardly in the best interest of democracy.