



# ARGUMENT

## OUR VIEWS

### *Big donors and city politics*

**T**he debate over money and politics, particularly whether corporate and union donations should be banned from municipal campaigns, is on the boiler again as another civic election looms. To us, the answer is obvious: politics doesn't suffer from a lack of money. We will shed no tears if big money is drummed out of municipal campaigns.

Those who favour corporate and union donations in politics are not anti-democratic. There are pros and cons either way, and well-meaning people can disagree on such an issue. Backers of corporate donations argue, fundamentally, that a campaign contribution is a form of political speech, which is an essential part of their right to free expression. They have a point. Free speech is a bedrock of democracy, and is not something to be trifled with. At the same time, money is a form of expression and influence not available to all. And if we banned corporate and union donations, citizens could still exercise their right to donate to politicians — but they could do so as individuals.

Our elections should not be sold to the highest bidder, and unions, and particularly corporations, with their deep pockets, should not be given free rein to stamp their influence on politics.

When one industry, for instance, regularly contributes about a quarter of the money many councillors raise, we should all pause and reflect on the consequences. Money can have a corrupting influence on politics and, even in the U.S., where campaigns are all about money, a century-old ban on direct corporate dona-

tions to federal candidates remains intact. And in Canada, a federal ban on union and corporate contributions to parties and candidates is now in place. Some provincial governments also have them.

So if they work at the federal level, why is there resistance to such a ban at the municipal level? Some, such as Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson, say it's not fair to deny corporations and unions their right to free speech, rejecting the argument that money buys influence. A councillor, Watson says, can't be bought for \$750 — the maximum contribution. Perhaps. But the issue is not so much about the influence on an individual councillor as the collective impact.

When the development industry funds about a quarter of municipal campaigns — as they've done in Ottawa — their collective contributions make a big impact. The money creates a favourable environment for the industry and its interests to thrive, and it largely goes to incumbents to the disadvantage of new candidates. Supporters say developers and other businesses, and indeed unions, are doing no more than exercising their political

rights when they donate. That may well be so, but let's not kid ourselves that it's all about altruism.

In Ottawa, for instance, the largest donors to municipal campaigns are usually developers and allied businesses involved in construction, planning and engineering as well as waste management and taxi cabs. They do it — quite legally — because it is in their business interests. Municipal politicians regulate many of them, and a council decision to extend the urban boundary, approve or reject a particular subdivision, or change how taxis operate, could mean thousands, perhaps millions of dollars in profit — or a great opportunity lost.

There is a reason why we don't usually see names such as Shell, McDonald's, The Bay or Pepsi on the list of contributors to municipal campaigns. One imagines those corporations are no less civic-minded than developers or taxi cab owners. But they normally don't contribute because it doesn't serve their interests. They have nothing to gain by it. It is disingenuous for politicians to say that campaign contributions have no influence on their decisions.

The municipal sector certainly needs campaign finance reform. A ban on corporate

and union donations would be welcome. But alternatives exist. And since transparency is of paramount importance, candidates could be required to publish a list of contributors before an election in an accessible format, so everybody knows who is financing whom.

The Ontario Liberals, who once frowned on corporate and union donations in provincial campaigns, and promised action, have not acted since coming to power. It goes without saying that they are unlikely to do so municipally. Unlike Toronto, Ottawa can't ban such donations without provincial approval. But even if it could, it won't happen because Watson is opposed to a ban, and the current council is likely to follow his lead. Let's hope the next council will have enough independent voices to take up the issue. And if they don't, because it may go against their own political interests, we hope the next provincial government, whatever it is, will have the courage to ban corporate and union donations from provincial and municipal campaigns.

OTTAWA CITIZEN