

CONTRIBUTION RULES

Election reform delay tarnishes mayor



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Almost five years ago, newly elected Toronto Mayor David Miller urged his colleagues to clean up municipal election finance by banning contributions from corporations and unions and outlawing the lavish war chests incumbents are able to transfer from one campaign to another.

Yesterday, after a series of complicated delays that would require a graduate thesis to explain, he urged the executive committee once again to delay passing the promised bylaws - this time for another nine months at least. While claiming to support the simple measures "in principle," he joined long-standing opponents who once again succeeded in punting them out of play.

Although yesterday's "referral" of the measures does not outright prevent their adoption before the 2010 election, it surely puts an end to this mayor's reputation as a serious reformer of anything. Five years ago, he was certain the system encouraged corrupt practices and needed the same simple fix that returned to the agenda yesterday. Now he needs more time to think about it.

The telling point is that council did not have the power to ban corporate and union donations when the mayor first urged it to do so. Then, its only option was to ask the province to change the law - which council did.

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The optics were excellent, focusing blame on Queen's Park for any delays in granting Mr. Miller's new broom the necessary authority to sweep.

But now that the province has given the city the authority to make the reforms unilaterally, through the City of Toronto Act, the mayor is balking. What does that say?

Mr. Miller is one of several municipal politicians who declined to accept union and corporate donations in the 2006 election campaign, something he pointed out several times yesterday to prove his allegiance to the "principle" of campaign-finance reform. But when he spoke on the issue, he sided with those who opposed the ban, saying they had given him new insights not revealed by umpteen-dozen debates on the same issue.

Indeed, the mayor devoted much of his speech to scolding a citizen who spoke in favour of the reforms and had the temerity



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to repeat, in a much subtler way, the anti-corruption rhetoric that first brought candidate Miller to power more than five years ago. Although that speech scarcely stood out amid the orgy of self-serving drivel the mayor helped to orchestrated yesterday, with one politician after another loudly proclaiming their saintliness, it was the ugliest performance of his career to date.

Mr. Miller even supported a lunatic motion to discipline an independent citizen's group, Vote Toronto, that had somehow upset his poor, put-upon executive. The motion, made by Councillor Gloria Lindsay-Luby, demanded "that the charts and/or data presented by the Vote Toronto organization regarding campaign finances be given to the City Clerk and to the City Solicitor for vetting."

But not really, according to the mayor. The City Clerk and City Solicitor are not about to become City Censors. "I didn't take this to mean vetting," he later explained, demonstrating in a God-given nutshell the true quality of his leadership on this crucial issue.

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By this point, it hardly matters what happens to the measures this formerly clear-headed, Earth-bound reformer once championed. Even if he is ultimately embarrassed into supporting them, the mayor has made his real position clear. He has become a helpless captive of the institution he once sought to reform. Patty Hearst herself was never more deluded.