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City council bans corporate, union political donations

By Jennifer Lewington
Globe and Mail Update

Vote means municipality becomes first in province to take such an action ahead of 2010 election

After a contentious day-long debate at city council, Toronto voted to become the first municipality in the province to ban corporate and union donations for the 2010 election.

The 29-12 vote was a strong endorsement, though advocates had earlier feared a close decision or even defeat.

"The city of Toronto is showing its leadership here and it will be a sign to many, many other municipalities throughout Ontario who are yearning to have the same rights," says York University political scientist Robert MacDermid, an analyst of municipal election finances in the Toronto region who watched the debate.

The new rules mean that donations (\$750 for a councillor and \$2,500 for a mayoral candidate) are restricted to individuals, not business or union entities. Advocates of change argue businesses and unions wield too much influence as donors to campaigns.

Councillor Michael Walker (Ward 22 St Paul's), who has lobbied for a ban since 2001, was elated by the strong vote.

"It's a breath of fresh air," he said, urging the province to follow suit. He predicted a "more neighbourhood and citizen-oriented council than we have right now" with candidates forced to campaign for every vote.

Cliff Jenkins (Ward 25, Don Valley West), who also pressed for the ban, said "it's what people want."

Given that it is relatively easy for some candidates to get money from corporate and union donations, Mr. Jenkins predicted they now "will have to do a lot of work in places where they have not done that work and that is with ordinary citizens."

But critics of the ban, including councillor Howard Moscoe (Ward 15, Eglinton-Lawrence), said developers can still contribute as individuals, but now it will be more difficult to track their corporate links. "It's a backward step," he said of the measure.


Mr. Walker said the outcome of the vote was uncertain throughout the day, but credited Mayor David Miller, with whom he often spars, for stepping in at the close of the debate to shore up wavering councillors.

"It isn't about the integrity of elected officials," declared the mayor, of the rationale for the ban. "I have never seen a member of this council act without integrity because of a campaign donation."

He added, "When you allow corporate donations, what you are allowing is someone who is better off and who control a significant resource to have far more impact on who gets elected."

Mr. Walker said the mayor's remarks "pulled together the vote and it solidified. The Jell-O hardened."

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