


DEPUTY MAYOR EYES CURB ON MEDIA

News Corporations; Issue raised as council limits campaign grants

Presented by



Natalie Alcoba, National Post

 Joe Pantalone, Toronto's deputy mayor, raised the possibility of imposing restrictions on media corporations whose journalists cover City Hall, as councillors yesterday voted to limit undue influence in campaign elections by banning corporate and union donations.

"We have a unique situation where we have corporations which are media corporations, which own both print and broadcast media, which have corporate interests. However, they are also expected to be reporting and otherwise informing the general population as to what is happening, so the two are sometimes in contradiction," Mr. Pantalone said in a telephone interview yesterday after raising the issue during a public council debate.

"Maybe that issue should be analyzed and possibly restrictions put in."

When asked whether the restrictions could limit reporting by the media, Mr. Pantalone said the first step is to find out if there is a problem, and then debate what, if anything, could be done about it.

He offered no suggestions, but said his comments were about reviewing the corporate side of the media, "while allowing them to do their public interest role, which is to inform and relay information."

"I'm not advocating restrictions at this moment in time," said Mr. Pantalone, who says he is 95% sure he will be running for mayor next year. "I'm pointing out that if indeed you want to control corporations' role in the electoral process, here are some corporations that are not being controlled."

Council spent seven hours yesterday debating changes to campaign financing rules, chief among them a recommendation to ban corporate and union donations. The 29-12 vote was a victory for councillors Michael Walker and Cliff Jenkins, who have worked on the issue for more than six years and who credited Mayor David Miller with swaying votes with closing remarks that elections "are about people."

Mr. Walker said the decision promises a "breath of fresh air" for the 2010 campaign because the prospect of raising money would be less daunting for rookie candidates.

"I think we're going to be looking at a much more neighbourhood-and citizen-oriented council in the next term," said Mr. Walker (St. Paul's). "The signal is out on this council that we expect people to be raising money from citizens, and then you have one obligation and that's to the citizen and the neighbourhood you're elected to defend."

Mr. Jenkins (Don Valley West) said it is easy for candidates to get money from corporate interests: "They almost force it on you." But several councillors maintain the ban will do more harm than good.

Councillors Denzil Minnan-Wong (Don Valley East) and Howard Moscoe (Eglinton-Lawrence) attacked the reform, saying that it would only drive corporate donations underground. "I want them out there and visible for everyone in the public sphere to see," Mr. Moscoe said.

Councillor Maria Augimeri (York Centre) said getting rid of corporate and union donations would be a "death knell" to any newcomers' foray into politics because it would cut off a major source of funding.

Robert MacDermit, professor of political science at York University, said the reforms are about removing the potential for influence built into a system that allowed corporate owners to give twice, once in their own names and once through their corporations.

"I have seen candidates in Mississauga ... who have maybe four contributions from individuals, and the rest are from developers. What were they doing for three years that only four individuals were giving them money?" he asked. "If a representative does their job, give voice to unvoiced need, they will have no problem [getting] money, and that's true of most of these people [on Toronto council]."

Mr. Jenkins said the reforms mean that, over time, council will be more representative of the people in each ward.

Mr. Pantalone (Trinity-Spadina), meanwhile, said he is leaning toward running for mayor because he knows he has the skills and the experience to do the job. An Italian immigrant, Mr. Pantalone said if he wins, he would be the first mayor whose mother tongue is neither English nor Gaelic.

"Diversity is our strength, but somehow that hasn't found its way to the mayor's office yet," he said.

Mr. Pantalone said he will reveal his platform once he declares his candidacy.