



Oct. 9, 2005. 01:00 AM

## City reforms blocked by provincial inertia

Democracy appeared to be moving forward last fall as Toronto city councillors cast self-interest aside and passed election reforms making it harder for them to return to office. Hope soared that the new rules, making local elections fairer and more forthright, would be in place in time for the 2006 municipal race.

Regrettably, little remains of that goal now. Election changes, favouring democracy, have smacked against a wall of provincial inaction.

Precisely one year ago, in this space, the *Star* praised city councillors for approving a reform package that put the public's interest ahead of their own.

The new rules call for a ban on corporate and union donations. Some incumbents get more than 70 per cent of their contributions from such sources. Gala parties would count as a campaign expense instead of being exempt, as they are now.

Also, any campaign money raised, but not spent, would have to be turned over to the city instead of amassed for future elections. That provision alone could have provided Toronto with more than \$1 million after the last municipal vote.

By undercutting some of the unfair advantages that currently favour incumbents, the new rules would make it easier for political newcomers to win office at Toronto City Hall.

With the next municipal election season set to start in January, the provincial government was urged to move quickly in putting these much-needed fixes in place. Ontario's Municipal Elections Act must be revised if the reforms are to take effect.

But today, a year later, Premier Dalton McGuinty's government has failed to act. Rather than making electoral reform a priority, Queen's Park has responded with inertia. Less than three months remain before the start of the next municipal race and necessary revisions are unlikely to happen.

Some outspoken advocates of reform, such as Councillor Michael Walker, remain hopeful that the Ontario government will have an 11th hour stirring of conscience and that, with all-party support, reforms might yet be passed in time for the coming municipal contest.

That's what would happen in a Hollywood movie — *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington: The Queen's Park Sequel* — but in the real world of political self-interest, expediency and broken promises, it is far more likely that Toronto councillors will keep their unfair advantage.

On one level, provincial inaction is understandable. Many councillors only grudgingly cast their vote in favour of election reform. Evidently shamed into doing the right thing, some reversed themselves after they had argued strenuously against the measure.

Once it was passed, the city didn't press hard for Queen's Park approval. Other priorities were allowed to loom larger on the municipal agenda. Had there been a loud and steady drumbeat for change rising from city hall, the province would have been more likely to act. But that cannot excuse the Ontario government's passivity. Speedy passage of reform, making local elections fairer, was the right thing to do.

Beyond any indifference at Toronto City Hall, McGuinty's government should have pursued change. It should have done so even if opposed by some city politicians. Instead, it has allowed reform to languish.

Thanks to that inaction, Toronto city councillors happily find themselves in the role of well-favoured incumbents in yet another contest.

Their gain represents a loss to the public, and to democracy itself. It also reflects a sad failure by a provincial government elected on a platform calling for a more democratic Ontario and for measures cutting the influence of money on politics.

> [Get great home delivery subscription deals here!](#)

---

[FAQs](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [My Subscription](#)

---

[Home](#) | [GTA](#) | [Business](#) | [Waymoresports](#) | [A&E](#) | [Life](#)

---

**Legal Notice:** Copyright Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Distribution, transmission or republication of any material from [www.thestar.com](http://www.thestar.com) is strictly prohibited without the prior written permission of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. For information please contact us using our [webmaster form](#). [www.thestar.com](http://www.thestar.com) online since 1996.

