

# Carpenters' union biggest political donor in Ontario

Joanna Smith – November 4, 2011

OTTAWA—The biggest player when it comes to giving money to political parties in Ontario is the union representing carpenters, a distinction that surprised even them.

“Wow!” Steve Del Duca, director of public affairs at the Carpenters' District Council of Ontario, said when he learned the union donated more money to political parties than any other group or individual this year. “Well, it's good to be first at something.”

A *Toronto Star* analysis of contributions to the three major political parties in Ontario this year so far — including recently released data from the fall election campaign — found the union topped the list with nine separate donations totalling \$41,510.



The Carpenters' District Council of Ontario donated more money to political parties than any other group or individual this year, according to a *Star* analysis of contributions to the three major political parties in Ontario. DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR file photo

Elections Ontario's [real-time disclosure of contributions](#) data shows the union was generous to all three parties, donating a total of \$25,260 to the Liberals, \$14,000 to the Progressive Conservatives and \$2,250 to the New Democrats.

Del Duca said that donating money to political parties — both in government and opposition — is one way of making sure union members have a strong voice when it comes to making legislative and policy decisions.

“Part and parcel of political activity in this day and age is reaching parties in any way that you can,” Del Duca said.

Corporations and unions are banned from donating to federal political parties — and this week the Conservative government introduced legislation to prohibit them from giving loans to leadership candidates. too — but they remain generous on the Ontario political scene.

The latest report by the Chief Electoral Officer of Ontario showed that in 2009 the Liberals received 42 per cent of their donations from corporations and the Progressive Conservatives received 32 per cent of their donations from that source. The proportion of corporate donations to the Ontario NDP was negligible that year, but the party did receive 11 per cent of its contributions from trade unions.

Many individual contributions also come from people associated with corporate donors.

For example, Waterloo-based Research in Motion Inc. gave \$9,500 to the Liberals and \$9,300 to the Tories this year and then donated an additional \$2,000 to the Liberals during the fall election campaign. Meanwhile, its co-CEOs Jim Balsillie and Mike Lazaridis gave a total of \$37,700 to the Liberals as individuals this year, while their immediate family members donated an additional \$65,100 to the Liberals.

Robert MacDermid, an associate professor of politics at York University who produced a report on political financing in Ontario last month, argues it is time to follow the federal and municipal example and ban donations from corporations and unions while also lowering donation limits.

“Corporations cannot vote or run for office, they are not citizens and do not hold the rights of citizens,” MacDermid wrote in the report. “They should not be allowed to participate in electoral politics by contributing to candidate campaigns.”

Such a move could impact the parties in different ways, especially in the absence of a per-vote subsidy like the one the federal Conservative government is now phasing out.

Contribution limits are not straightforward.

An Ontario resident, corporation or trade union can donate up to \$9,300 to a central registered political party per year, plus an extra \$9,300 during each campaign period. Additional room to donate to riding associations and individual candidates means people often end up donating even more.