

## Conservatives continue attack against NDP union ties, to question in Commons committee

By [TIM NAUMETZ](#) | Oct. 03, 2011

PARLIAMENT HILL—The Conservative attack against the NDP and its union affiliates widened on Monday with a backbench Conservative MP tabling a bill to force public disclosure of union finances, while Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Parliamentary Secretary, Dean Del Mastro, criticized Elections Canada on how it is handling a Conservative complaint over NDP and union links.

The bill from Conservative MP Russ Hiebert (South Surrey-White Rock-Cloverdale, B.C.) would compel "every labour union in Canada" to file financial statements to the Canada Revenue Agency, which would have to post the spending and expense details on its website.



Conservative MP Dean Del Mastro.  
The Hill Times Photo by Jake Wright

Mr. Hiebert, who came under criticism himself last year when Commons expenses accounts showed him to be the second-highest spending MP in the House, introduced the bill after the government tabled its third bill recently in a series of three that either legislated employees back to work, at Canada Post last June, or threatened to do so if they went on strike, both at Air Canada.

The legislative initiatives, combined with a Conservative complaint to Chief Electoral Officer Marc Mayrand that the NDP violated the Canada Elections Act by accepting payments from several of its union affiliates for party convention advertising, heightened NDP suspicions that the Conservatives plan to try to attack the official opposition party in Parliament through the ties it has had to unions and labour umbrella groups since it was founded in 1961.

The Conservative party has also attempted to brand the a leading contender in the party's current leadership race, former party president and ACTRA director Brian Topp, as a "union boss" who doesn't have concern for the wider interests of Canadians, *The Globe and Mail* reported Monday.

Mr. Del Mastro (Peterborough, Ont.) criticized Elections Canada after an NDP official told *The Hill Times* last week that no one from the elections agency had contacted the NDP in the month that had passed since a lawyer for the Conservative party wrote Mr. Mayrand to complain about at least \$85,000 several unions, including the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the United Steelworkers, paid the NDP for signs displaying their union logos and insignias at the party's June convention in Vancouver.

It was the 50th-anniversary convention for the NDP, formed in 1961 through a partnership between the Prairie-based CCF and Ontario-dominated trade unions.

The former government of Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien passed legislation that took effect in 2004 prohibiting union or corporate donations to federal political parties, and the Conservative Party argues the

union “sponsorships” in Vancouver were in effect donations to subsidize the convention. The party calls the transactions “advertising packages,” which would be allowed, as long as the unions paid the NDP for the ad spots at fair market value.

Mr. Mayrand is scheduled to appear at the Commons Privacy, Access to Information and Ethics committee on Tuesday to answer questions about the controversy.

“We’re quite disturbed to hear that Elections Canada has not in fact contacted [them],” Mr. Del Mastro told *The Hill Times*. “If what the NDP was saying the other day is true, that Elections Canada has not contacted them to ask questions about the union donations that were provided to them in the June convention, it’s very surprising, obviously we’re going to ask them questions about that tomorrow.”

NDP MP Charlie Angus (Timmins-James Bay, Ont.), his party’s lead critic on the House Ethics Committee, said he believes the Conservatives are attempting to divert attention from their legal battle with Elections Canada, more than \$2-million worth of advertising the party purchased during the 2006 election campaign through individual candidate bank accounts. Elections Canada has accused the party of attempting to avoid national party spending limits through the scheme, and four top party officials who were involved have been charged under the Canada Elections Act.

Lawyers for the four, including Conservative Senators Irving Gerstein and Doug Finley, are to appear at a court hearing on Thursday at Ontario Court of Justice in Ottawa.

“I think it’s an attempt to drag us into the mud,” Mr. Angus told *The Hill Times*. “The difference between us and them is we actually talk to Elections Canada, make sure anything we do follows the rules, whereas they set out to circumvent the rules.”

He added: “They broke the, I mean the largest election fraud in history is in court now and they’re going to get a judgment, and I think sooner rather than later, that’s not going to look well on them.”

Mr. Angus noted that ethics commissioner told the Ethics Committee last week Mr. Del Mastro had written her to claim the payments also contravened the Commons ethics code for MPs, but she said she wrote Mr. Del Mastro to say she could not see any evidence of that and referred his complaint to Elections Canada.

Mr. Del Mastro denied the claim from Mr. Angus that the Conservatives are trying to divert attention from their own legal problems with Elections Canada, and the ongoing court case.

“Absolutely false, they can try and muddy the issue, they can try smoke screens like Mr. Angus has been putting up, the bottom line is the NDP does not want the light shone in their own backyard,” Mr. Del Mastro said.

He also rejected the NDP argument that the unions paid the NDP in return for acceptable advertising at the convention.

“This is not McDonald’s, it’s not Coca Cola, they didn’t do this to take advantage of marketing opportunities, these groups have spent this money at the NDP convention to buy influence, and that contravenes the Elections Canada Act,” he told *The Hill Times*.

Elections Canada spokeswoman Diane Benson declined to discuss the steps Elections Canada commissioner William Corbett has taken so far in responding to the Conservative complaint.

"I can respond with the process, when complaints go to the commissioner of Canada Elections, the process is that he would look at the information and would at some point be in contact with the complainant, but the time could depend on many factors," Ms. Benson said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Topp dismissed the anonymous Conservative attacks against him.

"As always I'm grateful for compliments from my friends in the PMO," he told *The Hill Times* through a spokesman. "I'm pleased to see I worry them, and I'll try in everything I do not to let them down."

[tnaumetz@hilltimes.com](mailto:tnaumetz@hilltimes.com)

*The Hill Times*