

NDP returns union cash, Tories want probe

By AMY SMITH Provincial Reporter
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Nova Scotia's New Democrats returned \$45,000 in union contributions Monday amid concerns the money may have been improperly donated.

NDP campaign manager Matt Hebb said the party received \$5,000 contributions from each of nine unions belonging to the Mainland Nova Scotia Building and Construction Trades Council. He said the party learned that, during discussions about making the donations, individual unions talked about whether the council would reimburse them.

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"That raised a question for us about whether the contributions were made properly under the legislation," Mr. Hebb said Monday morning. "Rather than have any contributions within our possession around which there is any potential for a question, we simply immediately returned the funds, which is what we think any responsible political party would be expected to do."

Election financing rules brought in last year limit donations from individuals and organizations to \$5,000. The rules also require that contributors be based in Nova Scotia.

Mr. Hebb said he was made aware of the situation during "an off-the-record conversation with a freelance reporter" on the weekend. He said he then confirmed with Cordell Cole, the trades council's president, that there had been some discussion about the council reimbursing the local unions. Mr. Hebb contacted The Chronicle Herald about the returned money Monday morning.

The Conservatives issued a statement Monday afternoon asking Christine McCulloch, the chief electoral officer, to call in the RCMP to investigate the campaign donations to the NDP. The party also called on Mr. Dexter and the NDP to release all information they have about donations from unions in this campaign.

"We're concerned that this could be the tip of the iceberg," Tory campaign spokesman Jordi Morgan said Monday.

"Why did they only do something when they were caught, and are there any other instances where these sorts of election financing irregularities have happened?"

"How long did they know about this? Why did they not act on it earlier if they did know? And is this the only instance where we've seen money raised in this fashion by organizations for the NDP?"

Dana Doiron of Elections Nova Scotia said Monday afternoon that his office had yet to receive the request from the PC caucus.

As for the \$45,000 in donations, he said the NDP didn't contravene election laws because the party returned the money when it found out about the concerns.

"What they did was perfectly appropriate," Mr. Doiron said. "It's the way it should be handled."

"There's no problem."

NDP Leader Darrell Dexter said he learned about the concerns from Mr. Hebb on Monday morning.

"As soon as I heard that, I said, 'Make sure that money goes back,' " Mr. Dexter said. "He said, 'That's exactly what's happening.' "

Mr. Dexter said the Tories are "just trying to push things over the top."

"The bizarre thing is, they are essentially criticizing me for doing the right thing, which is returning the money," the NDP leader said.

Liberal Leader Stephen McNeil said he questions the timing of the NDP returning the money.

"I think it's rather interesting that when they got put under the microscope about the involvement of unions in their campaign — the union leadership and the participation of the union leadership in their campaigns — that they decide all of a sudden they better start giving money back," Mr. McNeil said.

The Grit said he's heard from rank-and-file union members concerned about their leaders endorsing the NDP and working on that party's behalf.

Mr. McNeil said he expected Elections Nova Scotia would look at the matter without the Liberals getting involved. Liberal party president Derek Wells has asked Ms. McCulloch to look into a CUPE brochure and one jointly published by the Canadian Labour Congress and the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour.

When contacted Monday morning, Mr. Cole said the trades council would take back the donations and he planned to contact Ms. McCulloch for clarification. Mr. Cole said the council does not believe the unions' contributions violated election rules. He said local trade unions pay into the council.

"It's like a union member would pay union dues to a local union," he said. "These unions pay money into the council every month."

But Mr. Doiron said the council can't give money on behalf of surrogates.

"You can only give your own money," he said.

Also on Monday, journalist Parker Donham posted minutes from the trades council's April 9 meeting on his blog, www.contrarian.ca, showing that members passed one motion to change the donations policy "to support one political party" and another motion to "donate up to the maximum of \$50,000 to the NDP."

Mr. Donham wrote that he contacted Mr. Hebb of the NDP on Saturday evening about the minutes, and Mr. Hebb said he was unaware of the situation.