

## Unions' use of dues for politics under fire

### But members have option of tossing leaders

By Craig McInnes, Vancouver Sun - November 2, 2012

Philip Hochstein, president of the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association of B.C., is never shy about pushing the interests of his members, and he understands the advantages of having friends in government.

Elections BC records show the ICBA donated just over \$87,000 to the Liberal party over the past seven years, and it has bankrolled ad campaigns supporting the Liberals and attacking the NDP.

So he had more than a theoretical interest in the issue when he spoke at the Liberal convention last weekend in support of a motion that called for a prohibition against public-sector unions using union money for political gain.

But just because he was speaking in self-interest, doesn't mean he was wrong.

The motion passed by the Liberals echoes a private member's bill put forward by Liberal MLA John Rustad that would make it illegal for any union to use dues for any purpose that wasn't related to bargaining or dealing directly with employers.

The Liberal motion is directed at curbing the power of public-sector unions, which have contributed millions of dollars over the past several elections in support of the NDP.

Unions donate to the NDP for the same reason the ICBA contributes to the Liberals. Both will argue that their actions are in the best interest of the general public, but they are also baldly promoting their own agendas.

Hochstein and others who would like to see the influence of unions curbed argue that a fundamental difference between the business associations and the labour unions is that businesses that support the ICBA's political action do so voluntarily. They don't have to belong to the organization or pay dues if they disagree with how it spends their money.

Union members, on the other hand, have no choice. They are required to pay dues. If they don't want to support the New Democrats, their only immediate option is to quit their jobs.

On the face of it, that's not fair. Why should anyone be forced to watch their money be used for a purpose that flies in the face of their beliefs?

Why should card-carrying Liberals be forced to support the New Democrats?

It's a fair question, but one that shouldn't be considered in isolation. Arguments that are made in support of the rights of individuals in the context of organized labour are usually aimed at weakening unions, and they impose standards that other democratic institutions can't meet.

In a way, unions are like our governments. We don't have any direct control over how our taxes are spent. So, for example, card-carrying New Democrats are not able to send a note to the Liberal government asking for a refund of their portion of the \$15-million self-promotion budget being used to pay for the ads now running that trumpet the success of the Liberal government's BC Jobs Plan.

Those ads have no purpose other than to enhance the Liberals' chances of being re-elected in May, yet all taxpayers are required to pay for them regardless of whether they support that outcome.

The Liberals will argue that they are acting in the interests of all British Columbians and, at least until the next election, they have a mandate to spend tax dollars as they see fit.

Similarly, the elected leadership of unions have a mandate to use their budgets as they see fit to further the interests of their constituents. That includes bargaining with employers, but also political action in pursuit of legislation that will make it easier to organize workers and make gains at the bargaining table.

If union members don't like what their leaders are doing, they can vote them out, seek majority support to join another union, or have their union decertified.

All of this can be construed as a restriction of individual rights, which it is. But our rights are equally constrained to make our democratic system of government work.

In order to achieve the greater good of a stronger voice for workers and a better return for their work, the right of individuals to opt out has to be limited. Otherwise the union - or our governments - would be crippled by free riders, people who want the benefits of organized society without paying their share of the costs.

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