

## Labour leader offers to endorse Stelmach's election finance reforms - as long as they put an end to all big money in politics, not just union money and third-party ads

McGowan sends letter to Premier urging him to "give politics back to the people"

EDMONTON, May 9 /CNW/ - The leader of one of the labour organizations involved in the Albertans for Change campaign says he will get behind election finance reform - as long as those reforms put an end to all big money donations, not just those coming from unions to fund third-party ad campaigns.

In a letter sent today to Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach, Alberta Federation of Labour President Gil McGowan said "big money" is having a "corrosive effect" on democracy and the political process in Alberta.

"Ironically, that was one of the reasons we decided to get behind the Albertans for Change campaign," wrote McGowan. "It was, in part, an effort to provide a counter-balance to the multiple millions of dollars that flow into the Progressive Conservative party's coffers every year from the big donors in the corporate community."

McGowan encouraged Stelmach to give "democracy back to the people" by banning all organizational donations to political parties - similar to what's been done at the federal level and at the provincial level in Manitoba.

McGowan argued that if all Premier Stelmach does with his proposed reforms is to go after third-party spending during election campaigns, it will leave all sorts of troubling questions in the minds of Albertans about his true motivations.

"Albertans will wonder if the Premier is really being driven by a desire to take big money out of politics, or by a desire to punish an identifiable group that dared to criticize his party and his government during the last election. They will also wonder whether he is really trying to clean up politics or simply moving to protect his party's historic - and overwhelming - corporate funding advantage."

According to official disclosure documents posted on the Elections Alberta website, the Alberta Progressive Conservative party regularly collects between \$1 and \$2 million a year in donations from corporations. In the 2004 election campaign, the Conservatives spent more than \$2 million - with about \$1.6 million of that coming from corporations. In 2005, the Conservatives collected about \$1.4 million in donations from corporations and in 2006 they received more than \$1.2 million. Figures for 2007 and 2008 are not yet available.

"Contrary to popular belief, the big problem in Alberta politics is not union money, it's corporate money," says McGowan. "Our spending during the last campaign is a drop in the bucket compared to what has been spent by big corporations on donations to the Conservative party over the past 37 years.

These donations have allowed the Conservatives to outspend opposition parties by a factor of more than 4 to 1 in recent elections."

McGowan says that if the Premier really wants to level the playing field and allow all parties to operate on an equal footing, then he should consider publicly financing parties based on the number of votes they win in general elections. Given that the Conservatives won about 500,000 votes in the last election compared to the 460,000 earned by the other four parties, they would still have a funding advantage - but not such a disproportionate one.

"Election finance reform is long overdue in Alberta - and we in the labour movement will support it whole-heartedly," says McGowan. "But if all this proposal amounts to is a witch-hunt against a group that dared question the government, then we'll be weakening democracy in Alberta, not strengthening it."

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