

CORRIGAN'S CORNER

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A political scandal erupted this past summer which captured the attention of the London media. Elections Canada disclosed that the City of London paid \$1,500 to the Liberal Party of Canada for three City officials to attend a fund-raiser with Finance Minister Paul Martin.

The London Free Press broke the story on August 14, 2001 and two days later in an editorial stated that, "the fact any public money was spent to curry favor with federal Liberals is wrong, wrong, wrong." This is a sentiment that this councillor shared from the beginning. When the story broke I was quoted as follows: "I think that it's inappropriate to use taxpayers' money for partisan purposes. There is some utility to attending events with senior government officials, but we should separate nonpartisan from partisan opportunities." (London Free Press August 16, 2001).

Those that defended the practice stated the donation was "the price of access." One councillor went so far as to say, "It's the cost of getting senior government grants." Councillor David Winninger moved to have Council adopt a policy to ban partisan political donations. A poll showed a split Council with 7 opposed to the political donations; Joni Baechler, Roger Caranci, Ab Chahbar, Ed Corrigan, Susan Eagle, Sandy Levin and Joe Swan. Eight members of Council initially defended the practice "if it furthered the City's interests."

A motion was made at Council's meeting on September 4, 2001 to ban political donations by the City of London. However, it was amended to allow London's intergovernmental affairs' director to attend government fund-raising events. Elected city councillors would be barred from having the London taxpayers paying the cost of attending partisan events. This amended motion passed with the following councillors voting to oppose all City political donations; Joe Swan, Sandy Levin, Bill Armstrong, Harold Usher, David Winninger; Susan Eagle and Ed Corrigan. Deputy mayor Russ Monteith was not present for the vote.

The London Free Press then broke the story that at least 6 city councillors attended the Paul Martin event, with the \$500 price tag being picked up by unknown parties. The media and others questioned the propriety of elected city councillors receiving such a benefit and what strings might be attached. A number of councillors including both Ward 6 and 7 councillors called for full disclosure and raised concerns of an appearance of a conflict of interest in accepting the \$500 gift. Later it was disclosed that a developer had paid for some tickets.

Deputy Mayor Russ Monteith then brought forward a motion to Board of Control to prohibit any use of London taxpayers' dollars for partisan purposes. On September 17 Council passed a motion 13 to 6 and got the two-thirds vote to over turn the matter on a reconsideration. With this last vote the issue has been finally put to rest.

It is not appropriate to spend tax payers dollars in support of one political party, even if they are the government, as many residents of London do not support that party and as a council we have to represent all Londoners. There are many other ways of accessing other levels of government and they are generally anxious to meet with City officials. Paying money for access is wrong and there are far cheaper and more effective ways to represent the interests of Londoners.