

## **Marni Soupcoff: On campaign finance, Wild Rose should respect voters enough to let them decide what's unacceptable**

MARNI SOUPCOFF - October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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By now the Alberta Conservatives may be wondering whether the \$300,000 or so in donations they received from billionaire Edmonton Oilers owner Daryl Katz, and his family and colleagues, were worth the ensuing headaches. Alberta's Liberals, NDP and Wild Rose Party are all — with Danielle Smith vocally leading the charge — implying that Alison Redford's party is being unduly influenced on policy matters by Katz through the large Katz-related contribution. The calls for stricter campaign finance rules — namely, rules that would ensure that Alberta's current \$30,000 limit on individual donations can't be skirted by a person who has multiple donations made in the name of family and colleagues — are coming fast and furious.

Ms. Smith is not wrong to alert Alberta voters to the fact that Katz both 1) has donated a great deal of money (especially considering the contributions from those close to him together with his own) to the governing party, and 2) wants \$100-million from the very same government for a hockey arena.

But given that this information is completely open and available to the public, why not let Albertans decide for themselves whether these two facts are enough to turn them off the Conservatives, rather than calling for more legal limits on contributions? (At this point, the outraged hollering seems premature in any case given that the Conservatives have yet to provide any money for the arena.)

And should it really come as a shock to anyone that if government is going to be in the business of doling out millions of bucks to businesses and industries, potential recipients will try to do what they can to increase the odds of being the chosen beneficiaries?

The good thing about campaign contributions is that they are on the books and potential conflicts can be debated in the open (as is happening with the Katz money). Restrict such publicly recorded opportunities for those seeking to get in a party's good graces and people and businesses will simply resort to currying favour with politicians in shadier ways that cannot be tracked.

Plus, there is nothing inherently evil about giving money — even large amounts of it — to a particular party or candidate. This is a valid form of expressing a preference and making a political statement. It's a way of championing a cause that is close to the heart. It often involves some degree of self-interest (though not always), but so do most human actions, and that does not mean that many positive benefits won't also flow from them.

Besides, if Smith and her fellow opposition leaders are really so concerned about the dangers of political contributors with deep pockets they should consider this: At a very basic level, government could go a long way toward curbing the incentive for influence-seeking by simply not handing out as much cash. A bare-bones government that involved itself minimally in Albertans' business and lives (giving and taking as little money as possible, and regulating only when there is no reasonable alternative) would have a lot less to offer mega-contributors looking to enrich themselves.

As far as I can tell, focusing on this small-government end of the solution, rather than crying out for more regulation, would be more in keeping with the Wild Rose Party's general ideology. So would respecting voters enough to let them police contributions themselves, with the help of inevitable heads-ups from the opposition, and decide if and when a particular instance of funding has gone too far.

No one wants a rich person's vote to go further than a poor person's vote. Contribution limits are often undertaken with the thinking that they will protect the little guy and ensure his political voice isn't drowned out by those with more money and power.

The problem is that the stricter the contribution limits, the harder it becomes for anyone but an independently wealthy person who can finance himself to run for political office, which is hardly a democratizing effect. As the Cato Institute's Doug Bandow (and other libertarians) have pointed out, the limits also end up providing certain categories of people who already have an inordinate amount of influence, such as journalists and columnists, with even more power since they take away the ability for people who don't work at newspapers to express a political preference with a financial contribution. Power takes many forms, but money happens to be one of the most democratic of them. Better

to have the list of those with the power to influence politics include “anyone who can cobble together some degree of cash” than to have it be restricted to those who work in the media, those who know people in high places and those with the right surnames.

Yet the insistence on viewing campaign contributions, particularly sizable ones, as distasteful — and even immoral — continues. That may, as we are seeing with the Katz kerfuffle, be good news in so far as it keeps voters tuned in to potential connections between political donation money in and government money out, which are certainly worth tracking. Or, possibly, it may reflect an unfortunate trend toward increased regulation: Putting tighter caps on how much money people can freely give to parties and candidates that they wish to support — an area in which Alberta has been comparatively laissez faire.

Is that really what Danielle Smith wants? Can such a policy make sense for a party that has pledged to give citizens the power to initiate referenda and recall elected officials? Or should the Wild Rose take a closer look at what empowering voters really means?