

WHY POLITICAL SYSTEMS DEPEND ON DONATIONS

By Howard Brown and Jeannette Chau, P.Eng.

DONATIONS, DONATIONS, DONATIONS. Charities, community groups and organizations are always in need of funds and asking for donations. Into the mix come political parties. They exhort us to donate to help them win an election—to help them be the ones in power to make the changes they’ve promised.

Former attorney general and now Energy Minister Chris Bentley, LLB, says, “Raising money is not the glamorous side of politics,” but “it is important.” Why? It’s important because our political systems operate on donations. Election campaigns are expensive. To reach tens of thousands of people in every riding, MPPs need funds to pay for brochures, offices and advertising, staffing and other campaign needs.

So, if politicians work on behalf of their constituents and are paid by taxpayers, and the government manages all the finances, why doesn’t the government just fund the political parties, say, a set amount to do their campaigning and get their messages to the public?

The answer to that question stems from the foundation of democracy our political system is based on. The government exists to govern its people, not spend taxpayers’ money to elect its own officials. Candidate politicians must garner significant support among the people they wish to represent. The premise is that if people are willing to support a candidate or party running for election, they will be willing to donate to their campaign to help them win. There are set maximum donation amounts an organization or individual can contribute to a candidate or political party to keep things fair among the parties.

For years, teachers, nurses, business people and various organizations have been contributing to election campaigns by donating to candidates of their choice. As an organization, PEO has donated to all parties and this helps to keep the regulator visible. Most of the donations PEO makes are through attendance at political fundraisers, which allows PEO representatives a chance to speak directly with MPPs and develop relationships.

At the grassroots level within PEO’s chapters, the PEO Government Liaison Program (GLP) chairs can meet with their local candidates and elected officials and engage with them. The PEO GLP is built on a multi-faceted approach that provides value to elected officials through volunteerism, financial contributions and relationship building. This approach allows GLP chairs to be known in the legislature in the event a regulatory issue of concern arises.

Many engineers across the province have worked hard in recent years volunteering for members of all parties in the legislature. Their activities have contributed to the political process and also put PEO and self-regulation of the practice of engineering on the radar. For engineers, fundraising provides a link to MPPs—a chance to share their opinions.

Engineers also have an opportunity to make contributions individually to make a difference in who is in government. Did you know that federal and provincial tax credits allowing individual donors to get back up to 75 per cent of their first \$400 donated have been available for 40 years? In other words, a \$100 donation really costs only \$25.

Howard Brown reflects: “When I ran for Toronto city council 21 years ago, I met a woman who had a disability and got around on a scooter. She gave me a \$10 donation but she may as well have given me \$1,000. For me, the gesture was huge. I will never forget her. She became a key advisor to the campaign on affordable housing issues.”

There are also different ways to donate. You can write a cheque, purchase a ticket to a fundraising event, or host a fundraiser for an MPP. PEO Government Liaison Program Weekly, an electronic newsletter (sign up at glpweekly@peo.on.ca) lists dozens of public events for MPPs of all parties.

Contributing in multiple ways to the political process is the best way to make sure PEO’s issues are on the government agenda and that MPPs can count on local relationships that enhance the public interest. Professional engineers are wealth generators, problem solvers and civilization builders; we need more of them involved in politics.

To make an impact in a democracy, support of the political system is key. For PEO to make an impact on government, developing relationships and contributing to the political process is key. Σ

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