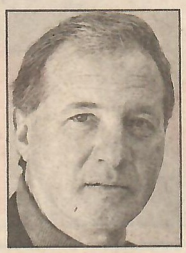
EDITORIAL

# Give us real electoral reform

## City must act to safeguard against potential for voter fraud

If the committee examining the Local Authorities Election Act was listening to the submissions from Calgary, they would not have come to the conclusion municipalities needed more independence — they would have concluded they needed much less.

Yet, MLAs Ray Prins, Lloyd Snelgrove and Ron Liepert declined to put tighter reins on city council in an effort to avoid voter fraud such as that found in Ward 10 in 2004. The question now is whether city politicians will pass tough by laws to govern themselves.



Calgary MLA Ron Liepert

Although a few new powers have been granted to the chief returning officer (to flag suspicious ballots, for instance), the problem with most of the MLA committee's proposals is they provide cities with "the discretion" to undertake policy changes: whether it is allowing mail-in ballots, requiring voter ID, undertaking a third-party independent review of campaign expenses or legislating rules around campaign surpluses — all gaping holes in existing bylaws.

These are not safeguards that should be left to discretion.

Most troubling, the committee demonstrated it was all but blind to problems raised through the course of the public consultation — lax rules that allow the mayor and aldermen to pocket campaign funds personally, a lack of a mechanism to ensure they are abiding by existing campaign expense rules.

Citizen presenters raised the alarm about charities and city-owned entities contributing to candidates' campaigns, the lack of disclosure of the names of all donors, the absence of an audit to ensure submitted returns comply with the campaign financing bylaw, the fact campaign funds are not held in trust and campaign surpluses are pocketed by candidates once they leave office.

At the provincial level, there are laws governing all of these aspects of campaign financing for MLAs. It is bizarre that the MLA committee should not think such laws ought to be mandatory at the local level, too.

"Democracy is not to be left to politicians to say it's at their discretion," says Marcel Latouche, of the Institute for Public Sector Accountability. "Nothing will happen if it is left to politicians who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo."

Shortcomings in existing rules could have been remedied through mandatory changes in provincial law. B.C., Quebec and Ontario all have provincewide legislation governing campaign finance rules for local authorities. Alberta could have, and should have, done the same.

The committee merely recommended a handful of cosmetic changes to provincial legislation, mirroring the recommendations from Bob Clark's inspection report. It was hardly worth the $40,000 cost and effort of the consultation.

It falls to the city to pass laws to prevent the fraudulent use of mail-in ballots and tighten campaign financing rules. Both are areas where the city has failed to draft effective bylaws in the past, leaving little evidence to suggest things will improve.