



Casey: Law makes it tough for Independents to raise cash

By STEPHEN MAHER Ottawa Bureau | 4:58 AM

OTTAWA — Canada's elections law makes it harder for Independent MPs to raise campaign money than party-sponsored candidates, and newly Independent MP Bill Casey is going to push for change to level the playing field.

Mr. Casey, who was ejected from the Conservative caucus after voting against a government budget bill, says the situation is "blatantly unfair" for three reasons:

- Independent candidates can raise money only after an election is called, while party riding associations can raise money at any time.
- An individual donor can give up to \$1,100 a year to a party-sponsored candidate or riding association — up to \$5,500 between elections — while a donor can only make one \$1,100 contribution to an Independent for each election.
- An Independent must give any unspent funds to the government, while a party candidate can turn the money over to the party. All of this adds up to a system that makes it very difficult for independents to raise enough money for a campaign, says Mr. Casey.

"If there's an Independent running against four other candidates from parties, it's such a disadvantage compared to the resources available to the party candidates," he said Thursday.

Liberal MP Garth Turner, who was also ejected from the Conservatives, considered running again as an Independent but ultimately decided it would be too hard to raise money.

"The rules are absolutely written for the benefit of political parties," Mr. Turner said Thursday. "There's no doubt about that."

Mr. Casey says he prefers to think the parties don't realize how unfair the system is, and he's sure they'll want to make the system fair.

"I'll be surprised if the parties don't support making it a fair system," he said.

The Conservative position on changing the system was a mystery on Thursday.

"Good luck with your story, but we've decided not to comment," said a spokesman for Peter Van Loan, the Tory minister for democratic reform.

The Liberals didn't have much more to say.

"We're happy to be on the record that we're looking into the matter and we thank Bill Casey for bringing it forward, but we don't have a clear position at this point," said Elizabeth Whiting, communications director for the party.

The Bloc Quebecois, which recently lost an MP from its caucus who is now sitting as an Independent, also didn't have much to say.

"We can't comment on a bill that hasn't been presented yet," said spokeswoman Karyne Duplessis Piche.

Only the NDP was ready to support Mr. Casey's proposal, at least in principle.

In fact, the party has already proposed allowing candidates to register at any time, not just after an election has been called, said Eric Hebert-Daly, federal secretary for the party.

The NDP would be happy to change the system to put Independents on an equal footing, so long as appropriate safeguards are in place to prevent abuses by unscrupulous individuals who would collect money without intending to use it for electoral purposes, Hebert-Daly said.

"There are things we just have to watch out for, details that need to be properly clarified before anyone can say this is fair," he said.

Elections Canada declined to comment on Thursday, saying the agency needed to first check with its lawyers and clear any response before releasing a position.

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BILL CASEYIndependent MP