

The Tsuu T'ina nation contributes its public money to the Liberal party of Canada. This is certainly legal, but Tom Flanagan, a professor of political science at the University of Calgary, wonders if it is appropriate.

Indian bands unwise to give public money to political parties

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During the four years from 1993 to 1996, the Tsuu T'ina Nation contributed \$19,047.57 to the Liberal party of Canada. The information is not secret; it comes from the Registered Political Parties Fiscal Returns compiled and published by Elections Canada. The law requires disclosure of the identity of anyone who gives \$100 or more to a federal party in any year.

The Indian Act allows band councils to spend money for the benefit of the band; apparently this band council thinks it gets value for money by giving it to the Liberals. The Elections Act does not prohibit political contributions from aboriginal governments, or any other government, for that matter. Indeed, I have been told by a leading authority on this subject that it would be legal for the city of Calgary, or any other city or village in Canada, to give money to a political party.

But not everything that is legal is necessarily right or wise. There are a number of reasons why it is a questionable practice for an Indian band council to make political contributions.

Do we really want local governments, Indian or otherwise, giving money to political parties? Would we be happy to see the Calgary city council spending our money this way? Calgarians are divided into supporters of all parties, and I am sure the same is true of residents of Indian reserves. Voters should make their own decisions about what parties to support.

Residents of reserves elect chiefs and band councils to run their local affairs, not to play national politics.

Most First Nations are almost completely dependent on taxpayers' money transferred to them by the federal government.

(The Tsuu T'ina Nation has some income from resource development and business enterprise, but it too gets most of its revenue from Ottawa.)

These expenditures are voted by Parliament to serve community needs on reserves, such as providing roads, houses, and schools.

I wonder how reserve residents feel about donations to political parties. Do they even know about them?

If they had a chance to vote in a referendum on the subject, would they endorse the idea of reducing services by several thousand dollars a year in order to give that money to a political party?

Parliament has legislated other means for the sup-



may be another party, perhaps one that doesn't even exist yet.

Band councils, like all local governments, should be able to deal neutrally and professionally with senior governments, regardless of their political stripe. Band councils, like local governments, also have to be able to deal fairly with all their citizens, regardless of their political allegiance. For local governments to contribute money to political parties is potentially a threat to equality under the law because it introduces the suspicion, and perhaps the reality, of favoritism in decision-making.

Needless to say, these considerations apply only to band councils as public bodies, not to their members as individuals.

Band chiefs and council members are as free as any other Canadian citizens to contribute to political parties.

But they should give their own money, not the dollars of Canadian taxpayers appropriated by Parliament for the needs of aboriginal communities.

It may be objected that band councils are only acting like corporations and labor unions in giving financial support to political parties. For the record, I believe that, since only individuals can vote, only individuals should be allowed to contribute to parties. The law should be amended to prohibit contributions from corporations, unions and all other collectivities.

Admittedly, however, the law currently allows corporations and unions to be donors, so why are band councils in a different category?

Simply put, corporations and unions are contributing their own money, which they get from selling their goods and services (corporations) or collecting dues from their members (unions). Band councils are contributing public money intended for other purposes — and the administration of public money should be a trust.

The Assembly of First Nations has recently signed a so-called "accountability agreement" with the Certified General Accountants Association to improve standards of training and practice in First Nations fiscal management.

I hope they will look into this issue, which is small in terms of dollars but large in terms of principle.

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port of political parties, including tax deductions for individual contributions and campaign expenditure rebates. All of this is carefully monitored by Elections Canada. It's not a perfect system, but it helps to minimize corruption in Canadian politics. Should First Nations governments become alternate channels for funneling tax dollars to political parties, outside the normal controls?

Is it really beneficial to the First Nations themselves to cozy up to political parties in this way? Parties come and go in government; the Liberals are in power now, but ten years ago it was the Progressive Conservatives, and 10 years from now it