

Hon. David Eby
Attorney General of British Columbia
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Dear Mr. Eby,

Re: Per-Vote Subsidy in Bill 3 - 2017: Election Amendment Act, 2017

We, the undersigned representatives from political parties in British Columbia and past Independent MLA candidates write to raise our concerns with proposed changes to the *Election Act*, as set out in Bill 3. We greatly welcome the proposed changes that ban corporate and union donations and allow only individuals to donate to a political party in British Columbia. We take great concern, however, with the per-vote subsidy outlined in Bill 3, and view it as a significant threat to a full and vibrant democracy.

Section 215.02 of the tabled legislation provides that a “registered political party” is entitled to a per-vote subsidy, provided that the party’s candidates receive at least (a) 2% of the total number of valid votes cast in all electoral districts, or (b) 5% of the total number of valid votes cast in the electoral districts in which the political party endorsed candidates.

This subsidy is unequivocally an affront to a fair and equal democracy in British Columbia.

First, it rewards the large established parties by providing them with a consistent source of funding for their activities. It does so at the public's expense: large parties, already in possession of substantial amounts of resources, are given public subsidies to fund their partisan business, which hinders the choices of citizens to vote for other parties during elections. This subsidy will only make it more difficult for diverse voices to establish themselves within the political discourse in British Columbia. Not only that, but the subsidy clearly benefits sitting governments over incumbent challengers: the party in government – who arguably needs it the least – gets the largest subsidy. In light of this, it is difficult to view the subsidy as anything more than a move to benefit established political power, with little thought – or blatant disregard – as to how the subsidy might affect challengers and smaller parties with new ideas wanting to provide more options to BC voters.

We must also mention that independent candidates are completely excluded from any possibility of public subsidy, even if they manage to overcome all odds and get elected to the Legislature. If the goal of election finance reform is to encourage more independence within the BC political establishment, the per-vote subsidy blatantly undermines this objective.

Second, the subsidy entrenches voters’ preferences as they were at election time. As set out in Bill 3, the subsidy is given to qualified parties every year, including non-election years. This means that if a person voted for a particular party in an election year, their vote will provide funding for that party until the next election – even if the voter no longer supports what that party is doing. While it might be argued that this is already the status quo, in that a vote cannot be changed until the next election, we do not support further weakening the connection between a voter’s interest and a party’s actions.

Additionally, the subsidy fundamentally skews incentives for new and small political parties by requiring parties to qualify for the subsidy based on the percentage of votes in ridings in which they ran candidates. Under the current system, the incentive for political parties is to run as many candidates in as many ridings as possible, in order to expose the most people to new ideas and give as many voters as possible the opportunity to vote for something new. This allows start up parties and the people who vote for them the ability to hold larger parties accountable by challenging them. The proposed subsidy in Bill 3 encourages parties to run fewer candidates and focus all their resources on a limited number of ridings to reach the 5% threshold in order to qualify for the subsidy. By discouraging parties from running candidates in as many ridings as possible, the subsidy limits voter choice, and suggests that new and alternative perspectives are not valuable in BC's democracy.

Further, the subsidy not only encourages parties to engage in toxic election campaigns, but requires that voters and citizens pay for those campaigns with their tax dollars. As James Filippelli, leader of Your Political Party of BC, states:

"The large parties are claiming there are only two options here, fund parties with large corporate and union donations, or fund them directly with tax dollars. The question we are asking is do these political parties really need to be spending so much on election campaigns? BC's election campaigns are among the most expensive in the country. Do you want attack ads, paid for by your tax dollars, bombarding you on every channel, at every commercial break during an election? Setting a more realistic spending limit for election campaigns while removing corporate and union donations will go along ways to democratizing BC politics. If you just give the existing major parties tax dollars, it will only entrench the few choices BC voters feel they have. If you believe there should be more competition for your votes, giving you an option that really represents you, this isn't the way to get it."

We understand well the cost and difficulty of running election campaigns. We have engaged in many ourselves. We therefore understand your desire to ensure that political parties, including your own, have a consistent and independent source of funding. The subsidy, however, is not the way to achieve this goal.

While it may be argued that this subsidy allows parties to be independent from wealthy donors, it does so at the cost of democratic values. The goal of independence can be achieved without this subsidy. As an alternative, we suggest imposing far stricter limits on party spending both during elections and between them. There is no need for the amount of partisan advertising we see during elections. It leads to voter cynicism and apathy. Such a limit would remove significant need for a public subsidy.

We ask that you reconsider the per-vote subsidy set out in Bill 3. This request comes from an interest in a fair and equal political system in British Columbia, which promotes the interests of all citizens of this great province. It should be our collective goal to take every measure necessary to achieve this, and our duty to make the sacrifices needed.

Sincerely,
James Filippelli
Your Political Party of BC
Zachary Johnson
BC Progressive Party
Copied to:

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