



ALBERTA COUNSEL

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## SMITH'S REFERENDUM GAMBLE: IMMIGRATION, SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE POLITICS OF THE DEFICIT

Mackenzie Blyth

Last week, Danielle Smith took to the airwaves with a primetime Address to the Province where she announced a provincial referendum focused on immigration and constitutional reform. While the subtext was a focus on growing fiscal pressures and their impact on delivering services, the political reaction was fierce and indicative of the tenor to be expected in the legislative session beginning this week.

The October 19, 2026, referendum will ask Albertans to vote on a sweeping series of questions pertaining to jurisdiction over immigration, eligibility for provincial services like health care and education, proof-of-citizenship requirements for voting, and structural constitutional reforms aimed squarely at strengthening Alberta's autonomy within Confederation.

In a single address, Smith tied oil prices, deficits, immigration levels, and federal overreach into a narrative that Alberta is carrying disproportionate costs, Ottawa is making unilateral decisions, and structural change is needed.

The next day, Smith went further with this argument.

The immigration system, she said, used to work and was once "one of the single biggest drivers of our success". Now, however, she claims Ottawa has "upended 40 years of policy" by placing less emphasis on individuals who can "immediately contribute to our economy" and have "increased the volume of newcomers to an unprecedented level". This argument builds on the Premier's criticism of the former Prime Minister in her address, where she called out "Justin Trudeau's disastrous open border immigration policies, which have caused an unprecedented strain on our health care, education, and other social programs."

Smith emphasized that every province is running a deficit this year. Alberta's red ink, in her telling, is not an outlier but rather part of a national pattern exacerbated by federal decisions. Every \$1 drop in the price of oil means \$750 million less in oil royalties for the province. Oil prices have fallen sharply since 2023, turning a \$12 billion surplus at \$90 oil into a large deficit at \$60 oil.

The fiscal story is not simply that Alberta is running deficits. It is that those deficits are being driven by factors beyond the control of the provincial government.

The Premier is not calling for zero immigration. Rather, she emphasized wanting greater authority to offer permanent residency to skilled workers, or a model "similar to what Quebec has had since 1991". That comparison is deliberate. Quebec has long exercised unique powers over immigrant selection and United Conservatives have consistently cited their desire to have the same privileges as Quebec. By invoking that model, Smith is reframing aspects of her proposal as parity, not provocation.

The proposed referendum questions are crafted to focus on prioritizing economic migrants, imposing waiting periods for non-permanent residents to access social supports, potentially charging "reasonable" premiums for health and education, and requiring proof-of-citizenship to vote. When pressed by journalists comparing a health premium to a head tax, the Premier pointed to Ontario's health premium for non-permanent residents as not violating the Canada Health Act or necessitating federal intervention.

As expected, the NDP is having none of it.

The official NDP response from Deputy Leader Rakhi Pancholi was blunt: "Cut the bullshit. Call the election." She accused the Premier of trying to distract Albertans from a "UCP budget that will contain billions of dollars in deficits" and "from separatism" while rejecting any attempt to shift blame onto oil prices and immigration. She highlighted that the UCP did not campaign on nine new referendum questions and pointed to Smith's previous calls for higher immigration levels and population growth under the 'Alberta is Calling' campaign.

This response defines what the next eight months will look like. The NDP strategy will be to undermine the UCP framing of immigration as a central fiscal challenge, tie constitutional reform arguments to separatism, and demand a general election as the legitimate forum for direct democracy. But the polling complicates that challenge.

With the UCP maintaining a polling advantage, demanding an election is less threatening than it might appear. It even risks reinforcing the perception that the government is acting from a position of strength. The referendum allows Smith to define the political question before the scheduled 2027 election. It's no longer a question of budgetary management, but whether Alberta should assert greater control over immigration and federal-provincial relations. The constitutional component is central to that framing.



## MACKENZIE BLYTH

Associate

Mackenzie Blyth is an Associate, External Relations at Alberta Counsel, where he supports clients through strategic communications, stakeholder engagement, and government relations initiatives. Mackenzie brings extensive experience working within Alberta politics, having worked in communications roles with the United Conservative Government Caucus and as Press Secretary in multiple ministries.

Prior to joining Alberta Counsel, Mackenzie worked as Manager of Strategic Communications for the UCP Government Caucus, overseeing media monitoring, message development, and communications coordination with elected officials. His background includes drafting speeches and communications products, cabinet ministers and at events and announcements, and collaborating closely with policy advisors and department staff to deliver accurate messaging on complex and time-sensitive issues.

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Abolishing the Senate, allowing provinces to opt out of federal programs without losing funding, prioritizing provincial laws in shared jurisdiction, and shifting judicial appointment authority are not completely new ideas. They represent a long-standing current in Western Canadian populist politics that hasn't always fallen on the right of the political spectrum. Abolition of the unelected Senate has been a basic tenet of NDP policy since the party was first established.

While advocating for constitutional reform, Smith continues to reject outright separatism, positioning the UCP's approach to sovereignty "within a united Canada." The distinction is deliberate. Separatism remains a minority position among the broader electorate, even if it resonates within segments of the UCP base. By emphasizing Quebec-style powers rather than separating, the Premier seeks to consolidate a majority without alienating too many moderates. The language is assertive without crossing the line.

The NDP is aware of the vulnerability in that tension. Pancholi's remarks deliberately linked the referendum to separatism, CPP withdrawal, and charter breaches. This strategy attempts to raise the perceived stakes and force moderates to consider whether this referendum is just another step towards something more disruptive. The NDP's call to "denounce separatism and proudly stand on Team Canada" signals they topline messaging the intend to use.

Opposing the referendum is not without political risk. Public frustration with federal policy, particularly around immigration, is not imaginary. Nor is service strain. If the opposition fails to acknowledge those concerns, it risks appearing disconnected from lived experiences and beholden to its own base.

Outside the Legislature, the implications for businesses and non-profits are significant. Changes to eligibility for provincially funded programs will alter labour market dynamics. Waiting periods and premiums for non-permanent residents affect employers reliant on temporary foreign workers and international talent. Conflict with Ottawa introduces regulatory uncertainty, especially in sectors dependent on federal approvals and funding. The referendum campaign itself may influence investor sentiment if it signals prolonged federal-provincial confrontations.

The risk for the UCP is overreach. Referendums can only simplify complex issues so much. They elevate emotion and polarize the electorate. If turnout is low or margins narrow, the mandate of the government to implement its desired changes may be weakened.

The risk for the NDP is miscalculation. If voters perceive the referendum as an effective means to manage growth pressures and protect Alberta's interests, dismissing it as a distraction could backfire.

One thing is certain. A legislative session that was expected to revolve around oil prices and spending restraint has expanded dramatically.



## CLIENT SPOTLIGHT

### CHAMPIONING ALBERTA'S STORIES AND ELEVATING LOCAL VOICES

The Book Publishers Association of Alberta (BPAA) has been at the heart of Alberta's publishing landscape since 1975, fostering a dynamic and resilient book publishing industry that elevates local voices and shares Alberta's stories with readers at home and around the world. With over 30 member companies spanning small independent presses to established publishers, the BPAA strengthens the province's cultural fabric by supporting the creation, production, and promotion of high-quality books.

Founded to grow a vibrant publishing sector beyond Canada's traditional hubs, the BPAA provides advocacy, professional development, marketing initiatives, and essential industry resources that empower Alberta publishers to thrive in a competitive marketplace. Their work helps publishers connect with authors, illustrators, editors, booksellers, libraries, and readers, creating pathways for local stories to reach global audiences.

Central to the BPAA's mission are initiatives like Alberta Books for Schools, which connects educators and students with curriculum-mapped local titles, supporting literacy and a deeper connection to our province's culture. Their annual Alberta Book Publishing Awards celebrate excellence in publishing and spotlight exceptional achievements in storytelling, design, and innovation. Their weekly Bestseller Lists, the Read Alberta eBook Collection, and curated marketing campaigns increase visibility for Alberta-published works across platforms and communities.

A cornerstone of this work is Alberta Book Day, an annual initiative that brings BPAA member-publishers together with MLAs and government staff to showcase the depth and diversity of Alberta's publishing sector.

Beyond events and promotion, the BPAA is a vital source of professional development and industry insight. Workshops, seminars, and networking opportunities help members stay ahead of publishing trends, strengthen their businesses, and adapt to the evolving needs of authors and readers alike.

The BPAA's ongoing commitment to accessibility and creative expression ensures a wide range of voices are nurtured and amplified throughout Alberta's cultural scene. By championing the province's storytellers and connecting communities through books, the Association plays a foundational role in shaping not just the publishing industry, but Alberta's cultural identity itself.

# POLITICAL EVENTS

## An Evening with Naheed Nenshi

Tues, March 10 – 7-9:30pm

Location: Private Residence, Edmonton (location for this event will be shared once your registration is confirmed)

- Alberta NDP Leader Naheed Nenshi will host an evening fundraiser featuring discussion on the upcoming provincial election and the party's path to government.
- Attendees will have the opportunity to connect with Nenshi and NDP MLAs; proceeds will support the Alberta NDP's next election campaign.

## Politics & Prosecco in Calgary

Tues, March 3 – 6-8pm

Location: The Ranchmen's Club, Calgary

- UCP Leader Danielle Smith, along with MLAs Rebecca Schulz and Tanya Fir, will host the party's annual Politics & Prosecco event celebrating women in politics.
- The evening will focus on networking and engagement with party leadership; proceeds support the United Conservative Party of Alberta.

## What the Budget Means for Business: Post-Budget Conversation with Minister Nate Horner

Mon, March 2 – 1-2:30pm

Location: Sandman Signature Lethbridge Lodge

- The Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce will host Finance Minister Nate Horner for a members-only discussion on Alberta's 2026 provincial budget and fiscal outlook.
- The session will feature keynote remarks followed by a moderated Q&A focused on impacts to Southern Alberta businesses, workforce development, and regional economic growth.



Source: LinkedIn

### KEY INFLUENCER PROFILE

## SAM BLACKETT

### PRESS SECRETARY TO THE PREMIER

Mackenzie Blyth

Sam Blackett has served as Press Secretary to the Premier of Alberta since June 2023, immediately after the most recent provincial election. In this role, he's responsible for managing media relations, shaping executive messaging, and supporting strategic communications at the most senior level of the provincial government. As a top communications advisor in the Premier's Office, Blackett plays a central role in turning government priorities into clear, consistent public narratives.

Prior to his current role, Blackett served as Press Secretary to then Minister of Advanced Education Demetrios Nicolaidis, where he managed announcements, media engagements, and messaging within a complex government portfolio. His promotion into the Premier's Office reflects both his growing influence within government communications and the trust placed in him to manage high-stakes messaging at the centre of executive decision-making.

In addition to these roles in government, Blackett was Campaign Manager for Nicolaidis in the battleground Calgary-Bow constituency during the 2023 provincial election. The campaign was a success with Nicolaidis defeating NDP candidate and longtime Calgary Councillor, Druh Farrell, by 385 votes.

Earlier in his career, Blackett served as a Communications Officer with the United Conservative Government Caucus, supporting local and constituency communications for UCP MLAs and Ministers.

Blackett holds a Bachelor of Commerce in Marketing from the University of Alberta. His professional strengths include media relations, strategic communications, team leadership, and digital media management.

## Ask Me Anything – The Alberta Office of the Ethics Commission

Wed, March 18 – 12-1pm

Location: Virtual

- The Public Affairs Association of Canada (PAAC) Alberta will host Alberta's Lobbyist Registrar and General Counsel, Josh de Groot, for an interactive discussion on lobbying rules and ethics oversight.
- Session will explore Alberta's lobbying framework, transparency requirements, and the role of the Office of the Ethics Commissioner, with opportunity for attendee Q&A.

## Southern Alberta Economic & Tourism Summit 2026

Wed, March 25 – 8:30am-3:30pm

Location: Lethbridge Trade and Convention Centre

- SouthGrow Regional Initiative will convene municipal and business leaders for a regional summit focused on economic growth, trade, workforce development, and tourism.
- Agenda highlights include sessions on Alberta's manufacturing outlook, export tariffs, CUSMA dynamics, rural creative industries, and strategies to strengthen Southern Alberta's long-term competitiveness.

## Post-Budget Conversation with Minister Nate Horner

Tues, March 3 – 1-2:30pm

Location: Westerner Park – Harvest Centre

- The Red Deer & District Chamber will host Finance Minister Nate Horner for a post-budget discussion on Alberta's fiscal priorities and economic outlook.
- The event will include keynote remarks and a moderated Q&A focused on impacts to Alberta businesses, workforce development, and regional economic growth.



## STEPHEN BLANCHETTE

Associate

Stephen Blanchette brings a results-driven background in real estate, public policy, and strategic communications to his role as an Associate Lobbyist with AB Counsel. He spent five years in the real estate sector as a valuation and property tax consultant, progressing from appraisal work to senior consulting roles. In 2025, Stephen transitioned into politics full-time, first managing a federal election campaign and later supporting an Indigenous self-government in the Northwest Territories, where he contributed to executive operations and communications strategy.

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## AT A GLANCE

### In the Media

#### **\$400M Deal for New Wildfire Waterbombers**

The Government of Alberta has secured a \$400-million contract with De Havilland Canada to purchase five new DHC-515 waterbombers, strengthening the province's ability to respond to wildfires and protect communities. The locally built aircraft will boost Alberta's firefighting capacity and are expected to arrive by spring 2031.

Premier Danielle Smith stated: "Albertans expect their government to be ready when wildfire season hits, and that is exactly what we are doing. Our first responsibility is to keep Albertans safe. These Alberta-built waterbombers will strengthen our wildfire response, protect our communities and create hundreds of skilled jobs right here at home."

#### **Alberta Fast-Tracks Four School Construction Projects**

The province is accelerating four previously announced school construction projects as part of the School Construction Accelerator Program. Launched in 2024 with an \$8.6-billion investment to build and renovate more than 130 schools, this initiative aims to reduce delays and deliver new classrooms for students.

Minister of Education and Childcare, Demetrios Nicolaides, commented: "Fast-tracking school projects cuts months off the timelines and moves them that much closer to opening their doors for students. Families in Calgary and St. Albert will see new classrooms sooner because we're speeding up the work."

#### **New Drug Preparation Center in Calgary**

Alberta is investing \$61 million in a new drug preparation center in Calgary to improve Albertans' access to essential medications by preparing and distributing pharmaceuticals from a single, centralized location. Operated by Alberta Health Services, the new facility will replace an ageing site that can no longer meet modern medical needs. Construction is expected to begin later this year.

"Investing in a new pharmaceutical production and distribution centre in Calgary will strengthen how vital medicines are developed and delivered across the province. This project will enhance pharmaceutical services in hospitals and health care facilities, creating hundreds of construction-related jobs, while supporting more efficient and cost-effective health care for Albertans," commented Minister of Infrastructure, Martin Long.

#### **Enhancing Policing on Tsuut'ina Nation**

The provincial government is allocating \$1.5 million to support a new satellite police detachment for the Tsuut'ina Nation police Service. The funding will help build a modern facility that enhances response times and police presence across key areas of the Nation.

"We would like to thank the Government of Alberta for their funding and support of our inherent right to keep our Peoples and lands secure and protected. The Tsuut'ina Nation's ongoing growth, in close proximity to a rapidly expanding major city and neighbouring rural projects, increases the demand on Nation police services. Having resources in place assists our law enforcement efforts and enhances the overall security of the Tsuut'ina Nation," stated Chief Ellery Starlight, Tsuut'ina First Nation.



**PASCAL RYFFEL**  
VP of Corporate  
Development and  
Government Relations

After completing his MA in Media and International Development, Pascal spent four years with the Alberta NDP Caucus. Pascal has been directly involved in Alberta politics for almost two decades, including as a candidate in 2008, and has a deep and current knowledge of Alberta politics. Pascal has been with Alberta Counsel since 2015.

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**SARA BOULET**  
Associate

Sara M. Boulet was born in Edmonton, Alberta. After completing her Bachelor of Social Science with Honours at the University of Ottawa, she returned to her hometown to study law at the University of Alberta, from which she graduated with a Juris Doctor in 2018, and was called to the Alberta Bar in 2019.

Sara has a variety of experience as both a solicitor and litigator and can assist clients with residence and commercial real estate matters, employment matters, wills and estates, various litigation matters, corporate/commercial matters, including incorporations, reorganizations, shareholder agreements, partnerships, joint ventures, services/sale agreements, and leases.

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## THE REGULATORY QUESTIONS BEHIND ALBERTA'S HEALTH REFORM

By Alberta Counsel Staff

The debate surrounding public and private health care in Alberta has resurfaced following the passage of Bill 11: Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2025. The government introduced the bill with the stated goal of increasing access to health services by permitting physicians to establish dual practices—working within the publicly funded system while also offering fee-based services outside it.

The government argues that this flexibility will expand patient choice and improve system performance. Anticipated benefits include longer physician working hours, more efficient use of health care infrastructure, and improved physician recruitment and retention. However, evidence supporting these anticipated outcomes has not yet been clearly articulated. Government members note that dual practice models exist in many Western countries with high-performing health systems, while critics caution that the policy could lead to a two-tiered system similar to that of the United States.

The precise structure of Alberta's model remains uncertain, as regulations governing private practice under the legislation have not yet been released. While several comparable countries—including Norway, Germany, and Australia—permit forms of dual practice, they also implement significant safeguards. In many European systems, physicians are salaried employees rather than independent practitioners, and their public/private balance is governed by contractual requirements. These often include minimum public service obligations, revenue-sharing arrangements for use of public facilities, scheduling controls, disclosure requirements, and meaningful penalties for non-compliance. Additionally, most European countries finance a greater share of healthcare costs than Alberta, and include a wider range of services such as dental care and prescription drugs, which affect overall health.

Bill 11 includes relatively few of these guardrails. The primary requirement is that physicians offering private services must provide written information regarding costs, payment requirements, and the availability of services within the publicly funded system. It remains unclear whether additional oversight mechanisms will be introduced through regulation.

Evidence from other jurisdictions offers mixed conclusions. Some studies suggest that physicians engaged in dual practice may increase their total working hours. However, additional private hours can correspond with reduced public system availability. While overall procedure volumes may increase, this may result in shorter waits for privately paying patients without improving wait times in the public system. Australia's experience with increased privatization did not result in reduced wait times, and current wait times for procedures such as cataract surgery, coronary bypass surgery, and hip and knee replacement exceed those in Canada.

In Saskatchewan, wait times were successfully reduced, but research indicates that improvements were largely attributable to system-level reforms rather than expanded fee-based practice. These initiatives included the development of an online specialist directory, pooled referral systems, increased funding for operating room staffing, falls prevention programs, and the implementation of a streamlined single-entry referral pathway.

As implementation of the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2025 proceeds, the details of its regulatory framework will be critical. Key questions remain:

- Will minimum public service requirements be established?
- Will private services be delivered in currently underutilized facilities, or will new competing surgical centres be developed?
- Will physicians using public facilities for private services be subject to revenue-sharing arrangements?
- Will the government introduce pooled referrals and a single-entry system?
- Will additional operating room time and staffing be funded to optimize existing infrastructure?

The long-term impact of Bill 11 will depend less on its stated intentions and more on how these details are addressed.

If you would like to discuss your perspectives and concerns about the future of Alberta's health care system, our team would welcome the opportunity to meet with you.