



ALBERTA COUNSEL

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The News from Alberta Counsel is Alberta's premier review of provincial politics and government vitality. As an original source of political news and commentary, The News will provide a fresh look at legislation, policy, committee debates, the civil service, along with party updates and events.

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TOP FIVE STORIES FROM THE 2026 SPRING LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mackenzie Blyth

1. Separatism

Of course, separatism had to take the top spot. No issue attracted more political attention this session, not only in Alberta, but across the country.

For Premier Danielle Smith, the issue has required the most delicate balancing act of her premiership. On one side sits a vocal segment of her base demanding greater autonomy, and in many cases outright independence. On the other sits a broader electorate firmly committed to remaining in Canada, even while expressing frustration with Ottawa.

The result has been a political tightrope unlike any seen in modern Alberta (Canadian?) politics.

Ironically, Smith has become the first federalist premier in Canadian history to initiate a province-wide vote on separation – or more accurately, a referendum on whether Alberta should begin the process of pursuing a referendum on separation. While critics have accused her of legitimizing the movement, Smith has argued that suppressing the debate would only intensify it. “Alberta’s future will be decided by Albertans, not the courts,” she declared in her address to the province.

At the same time, she has become increasingly forceful in outlining the realities of independence. This week saw Smith make her most aggressive case yet against separation, pointing to estimates that an independent Alberta could face nearly \$400 billion in start-up costs, along with the challenge of assuming portions of the national debt, establishing military and border infrastructure, and recreating federal programs from scratch. “People need to understand what it would be to set up a fully functional national government from scratch,” Smith said.

Smith has begun invoking Brexit as a cautionary tale, arguing that political divorces are rarely as simple as their advocates suggest. Interestingly, while many separatists point to Brexit as proof their movement can succeed, they are less inclined to reference the far more comparable Scottish independence referendum, where voters ultimately chose to remain within the United Kingdom.

With a referendum now scheduled for October, the debate has moved well beyond the political fringe. Whether separatism is a political force to be reckoned with, and whether Smith can hold together a divided coalition, remains to be seen.

2. Pipeline MOU

While separatism continues dominating headlines, the Alberta-Ottawa Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) may ultimately prove to be the most consequential policy development of the session.

For years, Alberta conservatives argued that federal policy under former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had made major infrastructure projects impossible to build. Under Prime Minister Mark Carney, Ottawa is taking a markedly different approach. The MOU signed with Alberta commits Ottawa to supporting a new Indigenous co-owned West Coast pipeline, abandoning the federal emissions cap, shelving the Clean Electricity Regulation in Alberta, and reducing the trajectory of the federal carbon tax.

In many respects, it represents the Carney government's clearest departure from the Trudeau-era climate agenda.

Smith called the agreement proof that “Canada and Alberta are serious about expanding market access, building major infrastructure and creating the conditions for long-term investment in our province’s energy sector.” Carney framed the deal as evidence that “one project means one review” and that governments can work together to advance major projects.

The politics behind the MOU are impossible to ignore. With separatist sentiment rising, Ottawa has every incentive to demonstrate that Alberta’s concerns are being heard. Smith herself has suggested the MOU will help win back Albertans who have become disillusioned with Confederation.

Not everyone is convinced. British Columbia NDP Premier David Eby accused Ottawa of “rewarding bad behavior” and questioned why a pipeline without a route or proponent was receiving federal attention. His criticism may resonate in Victoria, but it creates an awkward dynamic for Alberta’s NDP. While Naheed Nenshi has criticized aspects of the UCP’s approach, attacks from Eby risk reinforcing the UCP’s longstanding argument that the NDP is one environmental monolith opposed to Alberta’s economic interests.



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, staffing cabinet ministers 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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Whether the MOU ultimately results in a pipeline remains an open question. But politically, this plan for a plan marks a real shift in federal-provincial relations. Alberta and Ottawa are finally talking about how to build energy infrastructure together, rather than fighting over whether it should be built at all.

3. Immigration and Constitutional Reform (the other referendum)

While the separatist question has understandably attracted the most national attention, the UCP's broader October referendum may still prove politically useful.

The ballot will include nine questions focused on immigration and constitutional reform, including whether Alberta should take greater control over immigration, restrict access to some provincially funded services for non-permanent residents, require proof of citizenship to vote, and pursue constitutional changes around judicial appointments, Senate abolition, opt-outs from federal programs, and provincial authority in areas of shared jurisdiction.

Politically, the immigration questions are where the UCP is on the strongest ground. Public frustration is no longer confined to the UCP base. It has moved into the broader electorate, particularly as voters connect population growth to pressure on housing, schools, emergency rooms, and social services. One CBC-commissioned poll found 57 per cent of Albertans support the province taking more control over immigration.

Smith has framed the referendum as giving Albertans "a direct say on immigration and constitutional questions that affect our economy, our public services and our province's future." Justice Minister Mickey Amery similarly argued the vote is about "prioritizing the needs of citizens and making Alberta stronger."

The political logic is clear. If voters reject a future separatist referendum but support the immigration and constitutional reform questions, the UCP may gain something close to an ideal outcome: a way for its base to vent frustration with Ottawa while giving the broader electorate a less destabilizing alternative to independence.

4. Electoral Boundaries

For decades, Alberta has relied on an independent Electoral Boundaries Commission to redraw riding boundaries after public consultation. This year, however, the government declined to simply accept the commission's majority report and instead created a special legislative committee to oversee a new review process. That decision is unprecedented and has immediately triggered accusations that the UCP is attempting to politically shape future electoral maps.

Opposition members have repeatedly described the process as illegitimate. During the committee's first meeting, NDP MLA Kathleen Ganley argued that the government had overridden "the normal process" and inserted politicians into a task that should remain independent, saying that "politicians should not be picking their voters."

The controversy deepened when Alberta's Acting Chief Justice declined a committee request to help recruit judges for the new advisory panel, describing the process as an "irregularity" and noting that the usual conventions surrounding electoral boundaries commissions had not been followed.

Compounding concerns is evidence that the competing minority report would have produced substantially different political outcomes. A CBC analysis found that, had the 2023 election been conducted under the minority report's proposed boundaries, the UCP could have won as many as 56 seats rather than 49, while several closely contested urban and suburban ridings would have shifted in the party's favour.

The government rejects allegations of political interference, arguing that its goal is to ensure "effective representation" while expanding the Legislature from 89 to 91 seats. UCP MLA and Committee Chair Brandon Lundy said the new process is intended to "ensure effective representation as guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms."

Still, the politics of the issue are unlikely to fade. If the eventual map closely resembles the minority report or otherwise produces boundaries that appear unusually favourable to the governing party, accusations of gerrymandering will intensify. The debate has already been coloured by procedural controversies.

5. Dual Practice Health Care

If there's one issue that has defined provincial politics across Canada, it is health care. That is why Alberta's move toward a dual-practice health care model may ultimately prove to be one of the most politically consequential decisions by Premier Smith.

The policy would allow physicians to participate in both the public and private systems, providing publicly insured services while also offering private-pay care under a regulated framework. The government argues the model will increase capacity, reduce wait times, and help attract and retain health professionals in a highly competitive labour market. Premier Danielle Smith has described dual practice as a "practical, proven tool" that will allow surgeons to do more procedures while shortening wait lists.

For years, health care privatization has been treated as a third rail in Canadian politics. Governments have often flirted with private delivery or market-based reforms but have generally avoided openly embracing them. Smith has taken a different approach. Rather than sidestepping the debate, she is deliberately challenging long-standing assumptions about how health care should be delivered.

It is a significant political gamble. The government is betting that Albertans care more about getting timely access to care



ALEXANDRA BALLOS

Associate

Alexandra Ballos is a public affairs professional, researcher, facilitator, and communicator with a strong understanding of Alberta's political landscape. Born and raised in Alberta, she is deeply passionate about provincial politics and brings particular knowledge of rural Alberta, municipal issues, and the complex narratives that shape public policy and decision-making across the province. She helps clients navigate government, understand stakeholder dynamics, and approach complex issues with clarity, strategy, and strong relationship-building.

Her background spans public and government affairs, political research, stakeholder engagement, and strategic communications. She has worked on municipal campaigns and worked with provincial elected officials outside the election period, giving her firsthand experience navigating both campaign and non-campaign political environments. She approaches challenges with a multi-partisan perspective, focused on finding common ground across perspectives.

In addition to her professional work, Alexandra is the Founder and Executive Director of the Gravel Road Civics Project and a co-founder of Municipal YYC, reflecting her strong commitment to civic participation and community leadership. She holds a First-Class Honours BA in Political Science from the University of Alberta, where she worked on the Common Ground Initiative research team, and is completing a Master of Arts in Political Science at the University of Calgary.

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than they do about preserving traditional distinctions between public and private delivery. If wait times fall and more physicians choose Alberta because of the added flexibility, the government will point to the model as evidence that reform works. If public system pressures worsen, critics will argue the province has accelerated a drift toward a two-tier system.

That debate is already underway. Health advocacy groups have argued the legislation risks undermining the principles of the Canada Health Act, while physician groups have called for extensive safeguards to ensure the private system does not draw doctors and staff away from public care.

As implementation of the dual-practice model moves forward, Albertans can expect a growing debate over whether the government is modernizing the system or privatizing it. Regardless of where voters land on that question, it is almost certain to become a major point of discussion heading into the 2027 election campaign. Volunteers should expect to hear strong opinions from voters at the doors.



HINES HEALTH SERVICES: PROTECTING WORKFORCE HEALTH IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

Hines Health Services (HHS) has established itself as a trusted provider of emergency medical services, occupational health solutions, and medical staffing support for industrial, government, and remote work environments across Canada and the United States. Founded in Fort McMurray in 2012, HHS delivers integrated healthcare solutions designed to support workforce safety, operational continuity, and rapid emergency response in high-risk and logistically complex sectors.

HHS specializes in 24/7 emergency medical coverage, mobile response units, remote clinic operations, occupational health programming, and professional medical recruitment. Its multidisciplinary teams support clients across energy, construction, infrastructure, and public-sector environments, providing services ranging from on-site EMS and fit-for-duty testing to workforce wellness programs and large-scale staffing deployments.

The company has built a strong reputation for its ability to scale quickly and operate effectively under pressure. During the COVID-19 pandemic, HHS expanded to more than 250 staff, operated 19 pop-up clinics, and deployed a fleet of 50 vehicles to support emergency response and healthcare delivery efforts. Today, the organization continues to provide occupational health and EMS support across Alberta and the United States, with operations in Colorado, Wyoming, and Texas.

Alongside its emergency response and occupational health capabilities, HHS has become a growing leader in medical recruitment and staffing. Through its proprietary Hines Automated Recruitment Platform (HARP), the company maintains a network of more than 2,100 credentialed healthcare professionals, enabling rapid deployment of nurses, paramedics, occupational health professionals, physicians, and allied health staff to clients in both temporary and long-term roles.

By combining frontline medical expertise with staffing solutions and digital innovation, Hines Health Services continues to position itself as a key partner for organizations seeking reliable healthcare support in demanding operational environments.

Our Services

- Political and Communication Strategy
- Writing, Revising, & Refining Advertising Messaging
- Designing/Editing Creative for all Platforms
- Registration and Logistical Campaign Set-Up
- Ad Targetting
- Website Design
- Ad Reporting/Website Analytics

POLITICAL EVENTS

A Conversation with Naheed Nenshi, Leader of the Official Opposition

Mon, June 15 – 8–10am

Location: Hyatt Regency Calgary

- The Calgary Chamber will host Official Opposition Leader Naheed Nenshi for a discussion on Alberta's economic future and policy priorities.
- The event will feature remarks from Nenshi followed by a fireside chat focused on economic development, business competitiveness, and opportunities and challenges facing Alberta communities and industries.

A Conversation with Hon. Jason Nixon, Minister of Finance

Wed, June 17 – 11:30am–1:30pm

Location: Fairmont Palliser, Calgary

- The Calgary Chamber will host Alberta Finance Minister Jason Nixon for a discussion on the province's fiscal outlook and economic priorities.
- The event will feature remarks from Nixon followed by a fireside chat focused on Alberta's evolving economic position, fiscal planning, and key issues affecting businesses and investment.

Calgary Stampede LPC Breakfast Event

Sun, July 5 – 9–11am

Location: Calgary

- Calgary MP Corey Hogan will join federal ministers and community leaders for a Calgary Stampede breakfast hosted by the Liberal Party of Canada.
- The event will provide an opportunity for supporters and stakeholders to connect with Liberal representatives and discuss federal priorities in an informal setting.

Breakfast with the Chiefs

Sat, June 13 – 7:30–9:30am

Location: Hyatt Regency Calgary

- The Alberta NDP Indigenous People's Caucus will host a fundraising breakfast featuring Chiefs Sheldon Sunshine, Desmond Bull, and Troy Knowlton.
- The panel will discuss Treaty rights and responsibilities, Indigenous-Crown relations, Alberta separation proposals, and opportunities for allyship and engagement in the current political environment.

THE NEWS
from ALBERTA COUNSEL



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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Source: LinkedIn

KEY INFLUENCER PROFILE

ZOE ADDINGTON

CHIEF OF STAFF TO THE MAYOR OF CALGARY

Mackenzie Blyth

Zoe Addington has served as Chief of Staff to Calgary Mayor Jeremy Farkas since January 2026. Hired shortly after the 2025 municipal election, Addington is responsible for overseeing the Mayor's Office, coordinating strategic priorities, managing stakeholder and intergovernmental relationships, and supporting the advancement of the mayor's policy agenda. Mayor Farkas described her as a "steady, experienced leader" capable of moving complex priorities forward while keeping

Calgarians at the centre of decision-making.

Addington brings more than two decades of experience spanning government, business, public policy, and stakeholder relations. Prior to joining the City of Calgary, she served as Assistant Deputy Minister of Energy Transition in Alberta's Ministry of Energy and Minerals, where she led a newly established division focused on navigating the province's evolving energy landscape. Earlier, she held senior leadership roles within Executive Council, including Associate Deputy Minister of the Policy Coordination Office and Assistant Deputy Minister of Economic Policy, placing her at the centre of provincial policy development and government decision-making.

Her career also includes experience in Alberta's business community. From 2017 to 2019, Addington served as Director of Policy, Research and Government Relations for the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, where she became a prominent voice on issues affecting employers, economic competitiveness, labour policy, and municipal-provincial relations. Prior to that, she worked as a Senior Policy Analyst with Cenovus Energy, providing her with direct exposure to Alberta's energy sector and regulatory environment.

Addington's political experience predates her senior public service career. She served as Deputy Chief of Staff and Director of Policy in Premier Jim Prentice's office and previously held federal staff roles under former federal cabinet minister Jim Prentice. During Alberta's conservative reunification discussions in 2017, she was viewed as a respected policy voice within Progressive Conservative circles, though she ultimately declined involvement in the formal merger discussions between the Progressive Conservatives and Wildrose Party.

A graduate of the University of Calgary with both a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Communications and an MBA from the Haskayne School of Business, Addington's career reflects a blend of political, bureaucratic, and private-sector experience. As Calgary navigates challenges related to economic growth, housing, infrastructure, and its relationship with the provincial government, Addington's extensive network and policy expertise position her as one of the most influential figures shaping the strategic direction of the Mayor's Office.

AT A GLANCE

In the Media

Western Premiers' Conference Concludes

The annual Western Premiers' Conference concluded this week in Kananaskis, where discussions on trade, economic growth and energy security were largely overshadowed by Alberta's decision to include a separation question on October's referendum ballot.

Premier Danielle Smith called for a "spirit of collaboration" among western leaders, but several premiers pushed back against the timing and message of the referendum. Manitoba Premier Wab Kinew urged Alberta to pause the debate, arguing that western provinces should instead focus on advancing major projects. The tension highlighted a broader divide between Alberta's push to assert greater autonomy and other provinces' desire to maintain a united front on shared economic priorities.

Jason Stephan Resigns Parliamentary Secretary Role

UCP MLA Jason Stephan quietly resigned in April from his role as Premier Danielle Smith's parliamentary secretary for constitutional affairs after publicly supporting a separatist petition campaign. Stephan drew criticism in March after writing an opinion piece encouraging Albertans to sign the Stay Free Alberta petition seeking a referendum on provincial independence.

His comments intensified accusations from the Opposition NDP that Smith's government was tolerating separatist sentiment within its ranks. Smith previously defended Stephan's views as part of caucus diversity, while continuing to state her government supports a sovereign Alberta within Canada. Stephan did not provide reasons for stepping down.

New Funding to Address Organized Crime

Alberta's government is investing nearly \$8 million in one-time funding to strengthen the province's response to organized crime, gang activity and extortion. The funding will support the Edmonton Police Service, Calgary Police Service, Alberta RCMP and Alberta Law Enforcement Response Teams (ALERT) with advanced investigative tools, including surveillance, intelligence and digital forensic equipment.

Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services, Mike Ellis, stated: "This targeted investment gives law enforcement the tools and resources they need to take down criminal networks. Organized crime doesn't stop at city limits, and neither does our work. This funding ensures police forces across Alberta can stay ahead of evolving threats and respond quickly and decisively to keep families and communities safe."

CASA House Construction Underway in Calgary

Construction has begun on a new CASA House in Calgary, a specialized mental health treatment facility for children and youth in grades 7 to 12 experiencing complex mental health challenges. Developed through a partnership between Alberta's government and CASA Mental Health, the 20-bed facility will provide live-in and day treatment programs focused on therapy, skills-building, on-site schooling and family involvement. The facility is expected to open in late 2027.

Minister of Mental Health and Addiction, Rick Wilson, commented: "Every young person deserves the opportunity to live their best life. With this important milestone, we're starting to see the Calgary CASA House come to life. We are committed to ensuring Albertans have access the right care, in the right place, at the right time."



PASCAL RYFFEL
Senior Vice President

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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**JWANE
IZZETPANAH**
Associate

Jwane Izzetpanah is a Senior Associate at Alberta Counsel, with experience spanning federal politics, public affairs, and stakeholder engagement.

She began her political career in the Senate of Canada, working with Independent Senators on national policy initiatives, including Arctic and Northern Affairs and National Finance. She later worked with the Leader of the Official Opposition, where she managed stakeholder relations within the Opposition Leader's Office and in the federal war room, supporting engagement and coordination across key policy areas including energy, infrastructure, Indigenous relations, and economic development. In this role, she supported the alignment of policy, communications, and issues management.

Jwane also brings private-sector experience across technology, architecture, and real estate, where she has supported business growth, operations, and brand development. In 2022, she was a candidate in Ottawa's municipal election, further strengthening her understanding of grassroots engagement and public sentiment.

She is known for her ability to navigate complex political and policy environments, and works with clients to anticipate challenges, shape effective engagement strategies, and advance their objectives with clarity and confidence.

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ALBERTA'S OPENING IN CANADA'S NEW DEFENCE ECONOMY

Jwane Izzetpanah

Canada's defence debate is no longer only about what we need to buy; it is about what we can still build, and where that capacity will take root.

For years, federal defence debates were too often about delay, process and managing scarcity. That is changing. The question is no longer whether Ottawa will spend more. The question is where that investment will land, who will be ready to capture it, and which provinces will turn national security spending into jobs, technology and long term economic strength.

At CANSEC this past week, the federal government sent a clear signal. Defence is no longer only about buying equipment. It is about domestic production, allied supply chains, sovereign industrial capacity and whether Canada can build enough of what it needs to defend itself.

The most visible example is Ottawa's decision to enter discussions with Saab as the preferred supplier for Canada's future Airborne Early Warning and Control capability. Saab's GlobalEye platform, built around Bombardier's Canadian made Global 6500, is intended to strengthen long range surveillance, support NORAD and improve operations across remote regions, including the Arctic.

But the larger story is the machinery being built around procurement: a Defence Investment Agency, a Defence Industrial Strategy, faster Industrial and Technological Benefits approvals, strategic partnerships and more direct support for Canadian firms.

That is where this province needs to be sharp about its own story.

Too often, the national defence economy is imagined as shipyards, fighter jets and Ottawa contracting rooms. But modern defence is energy, sensors, drones, artificial intelligence, manufacturing, communications, maintenance, logistics and the ability to operate across difficult geography. Much of that is already familiar terrain to Albertans.

De Havilland Field in Wheatland County is moving from ambition to construction, with a 1,500 acre aerospace campus that will include aircraft assembly, parts manufacturing, distribution, maintenance and repair. The project is expected to create 3,000 permanent operational jobs. The University of Alberta's DEFENDS initiative has secured \$21 million in provincial support to connect researchers, companies and defence users. The province is backing LIFT to help local firms compete for national and international defence contracts. Ottawa has invested more than \$9.3 million in local defence innovation and manufacturing, including companies working in drones, Arctic monitoring, defence electronics and deployable command environments. Foremost already offers one of Canada's most important drone testing environments.

These should not be treated as isolated announcements. They are the early pieces of a serious defence economy.

Alberta's case to Ottawa should be practical: this is a place where Canada can build, test, power, maintain and scale capability. It has industrial land, reliable energy, aviation assets, skilled trades, research capacity, transportation corridors, Indigenous and regional partnerships, and a private sector that deeply understands execution.

The Arctic is part of this opportunity, but not as a slogan. Northern security depends on infrastructure, communications, surveillance, energy security and the ability to move people and equipment across vast distances. This province is not the Arctic, but it can be one of the most practical platforms for supporting and defending it.

Canada is rearming. Allies are rebuilding. Investment will flow to places that offer certainty and deliver results. Alberta has the ingredients. Now it needs the ambition to become central to Canada's defence future.