



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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## PIERRE POILIEVRE'S FEDERALIST OFFENSIVE

Mackenzie Blyth

Pierre Poilievre came to Calgary last Monday with a message aimed at two audiences at once.

The first was obvious: Albertans angry enough with Ottawa to consider voting for a future referendum on separation. The second was much larger: Canadians watching to see whether the Conservative leader can present himself not merely as an opposition fighter, but as a national leader capable of holding the country together.

Recent federal polling has shown the Conservatives slipping below 30 per cent nationally, a dangerous place for a party that, not long ago, appeared on track to form government. For Poilievre, Alberta's unity debate may offer something his party badly needs: an opportunity to change the channel.

After months of reacting to Prime Minister Mark Carney's early agenda, Poilievre now has a chance to define himself around a larger theme. National Unity gives him a platform that is emotional, economic, constitutional, and deeply political. It allows him to speak to western alienation while also reassuring Canadians outside Alberta that he is committed to keeping the country together.

This is an easier line for Poilievre to walk than it is for Premier Danielle Smith.

Smith is trying to manage a UCP membership that is far more sympathetic to independence than the general electorate. She must argue for Canada while keeping onside a base that wants Alberta to be more confrontational, more autonomous, and, in some cases, fully independent. Her challenge is to oppose separatism without appearing to dismiss the grievances that feed it or initiating a leadership challenge. Remember Jason Kenney?

Poilievre's challenge is different. As the leader of a national party, his audience is overwhelmingly federalist. He does not need to appease a pro-independence party base in the same way Smith does. He can spend the summer and fall delivering a unity message that plays in Calgary, Vancouver, St. John's, Toronto, and Quebec City: Alberta's problem is not Canada. Alberta's problem is Ottawa.

That was the core of his Calgary speech.

"We do not need a different country, Alberta. We need different government policies in Ottawa," Poilievre said.

The message from Poilievre validates Alberta's frustration without validating separation. It blames federal policy rather than Confederation itself. It allows him to stand against independence while continuing to attack Liberal energy, firearms, criminal justice, taxation, and regulatory policies.

In other words, it lets him campaign for Canada while still campaigning against the Carney government.

Poilievre's team clearly understood the importance of the moment. Before the speech was delivered, excerpts were provided to media, allowing pre-positioning stories to trickle out late Sunday and Monday morning. That advance work helped build anticipation and ensured the launch would be covered as a deliberate landmark event, rather than another speech from the Conservative leader to Albertans.

The speech itself was delivered in Calgary, at a moment when Alberta separatism continues to attract national attention. Poilievre used that attention to argue that who are considering separation should not be treated as enemies.

"As we debate the fight for a united Canada, we must remember that those who are choosing separation from Canada are not our enemies," he said. "They are our fellow citizens, family members, loved ones, business partners, neighbours and friends."

That tone is politically important. Separatism is still unpopular with the broader electorate, but a significant number of Albertans remain open to using the referendum as a way to send a message to Ottawa. Demonizing those voters risks pushing them further into the separatist camp. Poilievre instead chose persuasion.

"Demonizing people who have lost hope in Canada is no way to restore it," he said. "Name-calling, fearmongering and ostracizing will only worsen and broaden the divide."

That is also where Poilievre's speech differs from much of the federal Liberal response. Carney has called Smith's referendum a "dangerous bluff". That may be an accurate description of the political risk, but it does not necessarily persuade disaffected Albertans. Poilievre is betting that a more empathetic approach will work better: hear the grievance,



## 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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redirect the anger, and offer policy change as the alternative to separation.

The policy list was familiar. Poilievre called for unblocking resources and pipelines, respecting firearms owners, locking up criminals, relieving taxpayers, respecting provincial autonomy, and unlocking free enterprise. He urged Alberta to “lock arms” with other provinces, including Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, and Quebec, to demand change from Ottawa.

Instead of presenting these positions as a Conservative platform alone, Poilievre is now presenting them as a national unity agenda. Repealing federal “anti-development” laws, expanding pipeline access, restoring provincial authority over areas like immigration, and reducing Ottawa’s regulatory footprint are being cast as the practical path to keeping Alberta in Canada.

The Conservative team also made sure the message reached Ottawa audiences. Leduc-Wetaskiwin MP Mike Lake was deployed as the lead interview on both CBC’s Power and Politics and CTV’s Power Play, where he reinforced the core pitch: Conservatives “hear” Alberta, and a stronger Alberta means a stronger Canada.

On CBC, Lake argued that Albertans feel ignored or disrespected by people outside the province who have “very strong opinions” on what Albertans should think. His answer was not separation, but better national conversations. “Everybody wants to be respected for that contribution,” Lake said, arguing that Albertans feel that respect has too often been missing.

On CTV, Lake returned to the same practical test Poilievre set in Calgary: words are not enough. “My constituents in Leduc-Wetaskiwin want to see some action,” he said. He argued that if Ottawa repealed Bills C-69 and C-48 and moved seriously toward getting pipeline construction underway, it would “go a long way immediately to releasing some of the tension.”

But the interviews also revealed where Conservatives will face pushback.

Lake repeatedly pointed to the Harper government’s record, arguing that in 2015 there were three pipelines “in the pipeline” — Energy East, Northern Gateway, and Trans Mountain. Both David Cochrane and Vassy Kapelos challenged that framing, pointing out that Northern Gateway faced court issues, Energy East faced changing conditions and opposition, and western alienation did not begin with Justin Trudeau.

That exchange matters because it shows the limits of the Conservative argument. Blaming the Trudeau decade is politically effective, especially in Alberta. But if Poilievre wants this to become a national unity message rather than a regional grievance message, he will need to acknowledge that Alberta’s frustrations have deeper roots than one prime minister.

Still, the Conservative critique of the Carney government is clear. Smith has argued that Alberta is finally winning concessions from Ottawa, pointing to the energy memorandum of understanding and the prospect of a new West Coast pipeline. Poilievre has praised Alberta’s fight but remains skeptical of Liberal promises.

“It will take shovels moving dirt and steel pipe in the ground to show the Liberals have really changed their minds on oil and gas,” he said. “Albertans can be forgiven for demanding results, not just more promises.”

In a post-speech interview with Rick Bell, Poilievre was sharper still. He argued Carney should come to Alberta and “denounce everything he and his party have done for the last decade,” including policies on oil and gas, firearms, law and order, and carbon taxes. Poilievre suggested it would help heal national wounds if Carney admitted he was wrong.

It is vintage Poilievre: combative, direct, and relentless in linking Carney to the Liberal record. But will it work?

With the campaign barely underway, it is too early to say. The launch received coverage. It generated attention in Alberta. It gave Conservative MPs a message to carry into national media. But it did not dominate the week. Despite advance excerpts, the Calgary speech, and Lake’s media circuit, the story did not lead news cycles for long.

National unity campaigns are not won in a single speech. They require repetition, regional presence, disciplined messaging, and credible surrogates. If Poilievre and his caucus spend the summer consistently making the case that Alberta’s place is inside Canada, while arguing Ottawa must change to make Confederation work better, they may shape the referendum debate on terms favourable to Conservatives.

The opportunity is real. Polling continues to show that most Albertans want to remain in Canada. Recent Calgary numbers are especially blunt: three-quarters of Calgarians reportedly favour remaining in Canada, while only about one in five support moving toward a yes-or-no independence vote. That gives federalists room to be confident, but not complacent.

The danger for Poilievre is that his message may sound too much like the separatist diagnosis with only a different conclusion. Critics have already argued that by blaming Ottawa so heavily, he risks reinforcing the anger he claims to be trying to redirect.

If he can become the face of a confident, reform-minded federalism, the unity campaign could help broaden his appeal at a moment when his party needs it most. If the message fails to travel beyond Alberta, it risks becoming just another regional grievance exercise.

Poilievre is not trying to outflank Smith on separatism. He is trying to offer Conservative voters a federalist off-ramp — one that lets them reject separation without surrendering their anger at Ottawa. In a country where national unity has once again become a live political issue, that may be exactly the role he wants to play.



## 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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## ALAYACARE: TRANSFORMING THE FUTURE OF HOME-BASED CARE

As healthcare systems face growing demands from aging populations, workforce shortages, and increasing pressure on resources, technology is playing an increasingly important role in how care is delivered. AlayaCare is helping lead that transformation.

Founded in Montréal in 2014, AlayaCare is a Canadian health technology company dedicated to improving the future of home and community care. Through its cloud-based software platform, the company empowers care providers with the tools and insights they need to deliver more efficient, coordinated, and personalized care. Its mission is rooted in a simple but powerful objective: enabling better health outcomes by helping providers focus more time on care and less time on administration.

AlayaCare has developed an end-to-end platform that supports the entire care journey. From client intake and assessments to scheduling, clinical documentation, billing, payroll, and virtual care, the platform brings critical functions together into a single integrated system. This approach helps organizations streamline operations, improve communication, and gain real-time visibility into the delivery of care.

AlayaCare combines traditional home care services with advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, remote monitoring, and digital health solutions. These tools help providers anticipate client needs, make more informed decisions, and deliver care that is increasingly proactive and personalized.

Today, AlayaCare supports a diverse range of home and community care organizations across Canada and around the world. Its platform serves public, private, and non-profit providers, helping them navigate a rapidly evolving healthcare landscape while improving outcomes for the individuals and families they serve.

While AlayaCare's roots remain firmly Canadian, its impact extends far beyond the country's borders.

The company supports care providers across North America, Australia, and New Zealand, helping organizations modernize operations and strengthen service delivery. By connecting caregivers, organizations, patients, and families through a unified platform, AlayaCare is helping create a more integrated care experience.

As demand for home-based care continues to grow, AlayaCare continues to invest in research, technology, and innovation. Its vision is clear: the future of healthcare is connected, data-driven, and delivered wherever people call home.



## Our Services

- Political and Communication Strategy
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- Designing/Editing Creative for all Platforms
- Registration and Logistical Campaign Set-Up
- Ad Targeting
- Website Design
- Ad Reporting/Website Analytics



# POLITICAL EVENTS

## Meet the Minister Breakfast with Rechie Valdez Mon, June 22 – 8–9:30am

Location: Sandman Signature Lethbridge Lodge, Aspen Room

- The Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce will host federal Minister of Women and Gender Equality and Secretary of State (Small Business and Tourism) Rechie Valdez for a breakfast discussion with the local business community.
- The event will focus on federal priorities related to small business, tourism, entrepreneurship, and economic growth, with opportunities for engagement with regional business leaders.

## Town Hall with Premier Danielle Smith and MLA Martin Long Tues, June 23 – 6pm

Location: Best Western High Road Inn, Edson

- Premier Danielle Smith and West Yellowhead MLA Martin Long will host a town hall for UCP members to discuss key issues facing Alberta.
- The event will provide an opportunity for attendees to hear directly from the Premier and engage in discussion on the government's priorities and plans for the province.

## Town Hall with Premier Danielle Smith and MLA Tara Sawyer Wed, June 24 – 5:30pm

Location: Pomeroy Inn & Suites at Olds College, Olds

- Premier Danielle Smith and Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills MLA Tara Sawyer will host a town hall for UCP members on key issues facing Alberta.
- The event will provide an opportunity for attendees to hear directly from the Premier and engage in discussion on the government's priorities and direction for the province.



Source: LinkedIn

### KEY INFLUENCER PROFILE

## MATT DE JONG

CHIEF OF STAFF, MINISTRY OF JOBS, ECONOMY, TRADE AND IMMIGRATION

Mackenzie Blyth

Matt de Jong has served as Chief of Staff to Alberta's Minister of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration since May 2026. In this role, he oversees ministerial operations, stakeholder relations, and political strategy within one of the Government of Alberta's most economically significant portfolios. The ministry is responsible for supporting investment attraction, economic development, labour force growth, international trade, and immigration policy, placing de Jong at the centre of many of the province's key economic priorities.

De Jong brings experience from both provincial and federal politics. Prior to joining the Government of Alberta, he worked in Ottawa in a series of increasingly senior political roles, including Issues Manager in the Office of the Leader of the Opposition and Director of Parliamentary Affairs for both the Office of the Leader of the Opposition and the Office of Jacob Mantle, MP. These positions provided him with direct experience managing parliamentary strategy, coordinating stakeholder engagement, and navigating the federal political landscape.

Before moving to federal politics, de Jong spent more than two years as a consultant with Wellington Advocacy. In that role, he advised clients on government relations, stakeholder engagement, and public policy matters, developing relationships across government, industry, and the broader advocacy community.

De Jong joined Alberta's Ministry of Jobs, Economy, Trade and Immigration as a Policy Advisor in April 2026 before quickly being elevated to Chief of Staff.

With experience spanning government, federal Parliament, and the private sector, de Jong brings a well-rounded perspective to the role. As Alberta continues pursuing economic diversification, investment attraction, workforce development, and expanded international trade opportunities, he will play an important role in helping shape the ministry's political and strategic direction while serving as a key point of contact for stakeholders seeking to engage with government.

## Motherhood & Politics: A Conversation Uplifting Alberta's Mothers

Sat, June 27 – 11am–2pm

Location: AspiHer Business Club, Calgary

- Equal Voice Calgary will host a discussion on leadership, public service, and political participation through the lens of motherhood, featuring elected officials and community leaders from across Alberta.
- The event will include opening remarks from Premier Danielle Smith, a moderated panel discussion, audience Q&A, and networking opportunities focused on women's representation in public life.

## Pre-Canada Day Celebration & Fundraiser with Julia Hayter & Rakhi Pancholi

Sat, June 27 – 7–9pm

Location: Private Residence, Calgary

- Calgary-Edgemont MLA Julia Hayter and Edmonton-Whitemud MLA Rakhi Pancholi will host a fundraising reception in support of the Calgary-North West NDP Constituency Association.
- The event will provide an opportunity for supporters to connect with party representatives, discuss provincial issues, and support local organizing efforts ahead of the next election.

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## 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

#### **Alberta Rolls Out New Surgical Funding Model**

The province has begun implementing an activity-based funding model for surgeries at 12 public hospitals, including Edmonton's Royal Alexandra Hospital and Calgary's Rockyview General Hospital. Under the model, hospital funding will be tied to the number and type of surgeries performed rather than a fixed budget, with government-set prices assigned for procedures such as hip and knee replacements, cataract surgeries and rotator cuff repairs. The province says the approach will improve efficiency, increase accountability and help reduce surgical wait times while maintaining quality care.

Sarah Hoffman, the Opposition NDP hospitals critic, argued that the model will not solve surgical backlogs and called on the government to invest in public surgical capacity. "Activity-based funding pushes hospitals towards quicker, less complex procedures at the expense of comprehensive care, proper followup and better health outcomes," Hoffman said.

#### **Province Introduces Combined ID and Health Card**

Alberta will begin issuing redesigned driver's licenses and ID cards on July 2nd, integrating personal health numbers and Canadian citizenship markers into a single secure card. The change is intended to reduce the need for multiple pieces of identification, streamline access to health and government services, and eventually eliminate paper Alberta Health Care cards. Critics have voiced concerns about the citizenship markers, saying it could lead to discrimination and privacy breaches.

Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction, Dale Nally, stated: "These redesigned cards are more than a visual update. They are a practical improvement that will make life easier for Albertans. The new features modernize Alberta's driver's licences and ID cards, making them more secure, more reliable and more useful for everyday service access. Having one secure card is a practical improvement that will better serve Albertans now and into the future."

#### **Alberta Updates Student Aid Eligibility**

The Government of Alberta is continuing to support post-secondary students by investing more than \$1 billion in loans, grants, scholarships and awards for the 2026-27 academic year. As part of program changes being introduced, applicants will now have parental or spousal financial contributions considered when determining eligibility, aligning Alberta's system with the Canada Student Financial Assistance Program and practices in most other provinces.

The government says these updates will ensure support is directed to students with the greatest financial need. "We know students and families are under real financial pressure, and student aid can make the difference for staying in school. By increasing non-repayable support and updating how we assess financial need, we are ensuring help is fair, transparent and focused on students who need it most," commented Minister of Advanced Education, Myles McDougall.

#### **Electoral Boundaries Panel Chair Appointed**

The UCP has appointed retired provincial judge Brian O'Ferrall to chair a five-member panel responsible for redrawing the province's electoral boundaries ahead of the next election. The review will increase the number of legislative seats from 87 to 91. The Opposition NDP has raised concerns about O'Ferrall's impartiality due to past donations to the UCP and claimed there was a lack of transparency in the selection process.

The appointment follows controversy surrounding the government's decision to launch a secondary boundary review after a previous commission completed a \$1-million consultation process. That bipartisan boundaries report was split in its recommendations.



**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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**SCOTT RATCH**  
Associate

Scott has recently completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science at the University of Alberta. While at university, he completed a co-op term as a Student Policy Analyst with the Government of Canada and served as an editor for the Political Science Undergraduate Review (PSUR).

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# ALBERTA'S PASSENGER RAIL PLAN PRESENTS A GENERATIONAL OPPORTUNITY, IF THE PROVINCE CAN DELIVER IT

**Scott Ratch**

For decades, passenger rail has been part of Alberta's long-term transportation conversation, often discussed but never fully realized. The province's latest announcement moves that conversation into a more serious planning phase, backed by a new master plan and \$15 million over three years to advance early project work. The proposal is ambitious and complex, but it also presents a generational opportunity for Alberta if the province can address the significant hurdles ahead.

The potential benefits are substantial. A well-designed passenger rail system could reshape how Albertans travel between major urban centres, airports, tourism destinations, and fast-growing regional communities. It could also provide another transportation option along some of the province's busiest corridors, support economic growth, and reduce pressure on existing infrastructure.

But the scale of the proposal makes clear that Alberta is still at the beginning of a very long road. The master plan outlines a phased approach that includes regional commuter rail with airport connections, a potential line between Calgary and Banff, and eventual high-speed rail between Calgary and Edmonton. The full network is estimated to cost approximately \$60 billion, meaning the province will need to carefully determine which projects to prioritize and how to finance them.

In the near term, the province remains focused on airport-to-downtown connections in Calgary and Edmonton.

These projects may be more achievable than high-speed rail and could help establish the foundation for a broader provincial network. If successful, they could build public confidence, attract private-sector interest, and help demonstrate whether passenger rail is viable on a larger scale.

The long-term case for passenger rail is tied closely to Alberta's projected growth. The master plan estimates that the province's population could reach between nine and ten million people over the next 60 years, with the majority of that growth concentrated in the Calgary-Edmonton corridor. As that growth continues, pressure on highways, airports, and urban transportation networks will increase. By reducing congestion on existing infrastructure, the report estimates that a completed rail system could help avoid up to 13,000 serious accidents and result in a net reduction of 30 million tonnes of carbon emissions. Planning for passenger rail now allows the province to consider how transportation infrastructure should support future population growth, economic development, and regional connectivity.

Tourism is also a major part of the opportunity. Improved rail connections between Calgary, Banff, Edmonton, and Alberta's international airports could support one of the province's most important economic sectors, while offering visitors and residents a more sustainable way to travel. Private-sector proposals, including Liricon Capital's long-standing interest in developing a Calgary-Banff rail link, show how targeted regional projects could complement the province's broader ambitions. "It's quite a remarkable business opportunity from the province's perspective," said Adam Waterous, chair of Liricon Capital.

Still, the hurdles ahead are substantial. Financing a project of this scale will require difficult decisions around public funding, private investment, and long-term capital planning. Land acquisition may be equally complex, particularly where new corridors must be assembled across municipal boundaries, private land, Indigenous communities, and existing transportation networks. The master plan also notes that existing medians along Highways 1 and 2 are not wide enough to accommodate rail, which could require more complex infrastructure.

Governance will be another major question. The master plan notes that delivering a multi-decade passenger rail network would likely require a dedicated entity, potentially a new Crown corporation, to oversee implementation, operations, and maintenance. Without clear governance and accountability, the risk is that the plan remains aspirational rather than actionable.

Premier Danielle Smith has emphasized that passenger rail is a major long-term goal of her government. "We heard many perspectives, but one thing was abundantly clear: a feasible passenger rail network is no longer just a vision for Alberta, it's a goal," said Smith. That is an important signal. However, the feasibility of the project will depend on the province's ability to sequence projects, manage costs, acquire land, and build durable partnerships.

Alberta's passenger rail plan is not a promise that high-speed rail is around the corner. It is a long-term infrastructure strategy with major potential and equally major hurdles. If the province can move carefully from planning to implementation, passenger rail could become one of Alberta's most significant infrastructure opportunities in a generation.

