



THE ADVOCATE



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THE ADVOCATE

We hope you enjoy this issue of our newsletter. It is intended to be a space to share stories and ideas for advocacy. The Advocate is published three times a year.

WHO WE ARE

Public Interest Alberta is a non-profit, non-partisan progressive advocacy organization.

We envision a just future for all Albertans and advocate for the strengthening of public services and institutions. In our two decades of operation, Public Interest Alberta has emerged as one of the premier progressive voices in Albertan civil society.

WHAT WE DO

Public Interest Alberta builds power through a network of people and organizations committed to advancing the public interest to government, corporations, civil society, and the public. We serve as a connector for activists and advocates working in our seven action areas — child care and early learning, democracy, K-12 education, environment, human services and poverty, post-secondary education, and seniors' issues. With the guidance of advocates and frontline workers, we undertake campaigns to win the policies we need to create a better Alberta for all.

Executive Director

Bradley Lafortune

Finance and Administration Officer

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Share Your Thoughts

Submit letters, articles, and contributions (which may be edited) for the next issue of The Advocate:

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Who will stand for universal access to strong public education in the next election?

Every child, regardless of income, identity and ability, should have the right to access a quality education that allows them to attain their full potential. This is the vision of public education: a public system that responds to the unique needs of all children and prepares them for full democratic participation in our society with the skills and knowledge they need. But, in Alberta, public education is under attack, while supporters of public education are urgently seeking strong positions as we gear up for this spring's provincial election.

Alberta subsidizes private schools at a rate of 70% per-student funding with public dollars, the highest subsidy rate in Canada.

The fact that private schools receive public funding at all is bad public policy. Provinces such as Ontario give no public funding at all to private schools – yet nearly one thousand private schools operate in Ontario. Parents can send their children to private schools, but this choice should not be subsidized at the expense of the public education system.

Charter schools are just another form of exclusivity by another name. Alberta is the only province in Canada to have embraced this controversial American model. These exclusive schools masquerading as public schools receive full per-student funding, capital, and infrastructure funding. They run like private institutions by allowing private groups

to provide boutique programming for select groups of students, all on the public dime. They side-step democratic accountability as they are not governed by publicly-elected trustees or locally-elected boards. In some specific and well-documented cases, they screen out students with complex needs.

Charter schools are a central policy proposal in a well-worn playbook of privatization: starve the public service of necessary funding so that it does not operate properly, then bring in a privatized “solution”. First, they break it, then they ‘fix’ it.

As supporters of public education, we are rightfully angry. As we gear up for a provincial election, where are supporters of public education supposed to go?

The UCP relentlessly attacks public education with budget cuts. These cuts have resulted in about 860 fewer teachers and 1400 fewer support workers across the province compared with three years ago. They also passed legislation that eliminated the provincial cap on the number of charter schools and permitted new charter applications to circumvent public boards.

These changes are accelerating the erosion of every child's right to an equitable public education.

The Alberta NDP currently has no policy to reverse the UCP's charter school expansion nor to reinvest public funds away from private schools and back into the public system.

If governments continue to allow for the privatization of public education, what happens to the public system in the long term? Does it change and become something unrecognizable?

Essentially, what's happening to our public education system, and the lack of adequate reinvestment in the system with strong controls against privatization, is a slow-motion version of what we've seen in healthcare. Only bold and massive reinvestments and shifts in policy will reverse the tide.

When asked in Alberta Views why they continued to fund private schools with public dollars, former NDP Education Minister David Eggen said, "[I]t's important to have different choices available and to respect parents' choice for education...I recognize the importance of the diversity we have—public, separate, private, charters, home schooling. Together it's a strong system."

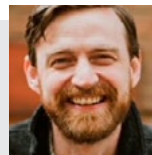
"Choice" is a powerful concept. But the rhetoric of "choice" as it relates to our public services conceals an ulterior motive under a façade of empowerment – one of privatization and individualized programs, which erode our ability to collectively provide universal access to high-quality education for all children.

After all, when political parties are seeking to enshrine the "right to choose" for students to go to exclusive private schools where the tuition for one child can be more than some people earn in a year, or decimate the public sector to hand off public dollars to private groups to run charter schools, whose "choice" are they prioritizing? It is certainly not the "choice" of working families who won't be able to access high-quality education for their children at their neighbourhood school because of increasingly-underfunded classrooms.

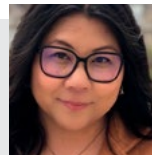


As all political parties in Alberta prepare their policy platforms for next year's election, they must clearly articulate their stance on charter and private schools and commit to doing away with privatizing directives.

This is the only way parents, educators and voters concerned with public education can make a clear choice about who is investing in a bright future for all students, not just those who already have a leg up.



Bradley Lafortune
Executive Director
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Support Our Students Alberta



Julie Hrdlicka
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Alberta's wicked continuing-care system must be reformed

This article has been reprinted from The Progress Report, an independent and proudly left wing media project produced by Progress Alberta. The only way the Progress Report are able to keep their fiercely uncompromising independent journalism going with the help of donations from people like you — become a patron today.

I was waiting for the results of a COVID-19 test when the long-term care home called to say my mom didn't have long to live.

It was April 2020, about a month after pandemic restrictions began. Back then, it could take days to get test results back.

So, while my mom's life ebbed away, I was trapped in my home. She was five minutes away by car, but a world away. So near, but so far.

My mom, Shirley Inigo-Jones, was in the late stages of dementia. She couldn't talk. I don't think she understood what anyone was saying any more, but she loved being with people.

If I held her hand while she was falling asleep, her smile would light up the room. When I pushed her around in her wheelchair, she'd wave and smile at everyone we passed. The wonderful staff at the Carewest Colonel Belcher facility said she waved like the Queen. They'd stop, give her a hug and a kiss and call her "Mama."

That was before the pandemic. Before the virus swept through continuing-care homes and took far too many lives.

Mom didn't die directly from COVID-19, but I believe her death was indirectly due to the virus.

Before the pandemic, mom had visitors every day. I was with her three or four times a week. My wife, my brother and his girlfriend would visit. But when the restrictions came, all visits stopped immediately.

Front-line staff were overworked before the pandemic, but as they fought to care for those who got sick, their workload became unimaginably tough. There was simply no time.

For the first month, I'd go to the ground-floor window of mom's room to look for her. She wouldn't have recognized me through the window, but seeing her would, at least, give me some comfort.

She was almost always in bed when I called around, not out and about in the facility.

Alone in her room for endless hours, my mom died of loneliness.

She hung on longer than expected. A nurse called me and said: "She's waiting for you." Mom didn't want to go without seeing me. I felt like I had betrayed her when she needed me the most.

Thankfully, my brother and wife were able to take turns with her. My brother held her hand as she breathed her last breath. I wonder how many passed away without even that little bit of comfort.



I had to say goodbye to my non-verbal mom on the phone. “It’s OK mom. You can go now. Go and be with Granny and Gramps. I love you.”

That is not a conversation you want to have over the phone.

I can live with that pain, even though it swells up and threatens to overwhelm me from time to time. What causes me more pain and anger is seeing us learn nothing from the pandemic.

For a long time, it has been obvious to anyone who has had a loved one in continuing care that the system is broken.

My mother was moved five times in five years, which is terrible for someone with dementia. Each facility would accept mom – until her condition declined. At that point caring for her became too expensive and inconvenient and she was booted out. Then there would be a scramble to find a new place, pack and move her, try to get her settled in unfamiliar and frightening surroundings.

The profit motive at corporate-run continuing care facilities and the need to cut costs at private non-profit facilities always overrode the need for mom to have stable care. We only found that stability when mom ended up in a publicly-run home, the Colonel Belcher.

Research, including a report named *Delivery Matters* from Parkland Institute at the University of Alberta, has shown that residents get more hours of care in public facilities than in private for-profit or not-for-profit ones.

The corporate presence in continuing care is so great that it has become the model for how all homes operate. In their striving to cut costs and boost profits (which go to shareholders and executive bonuses), they have created a wicked staffing model.

Yes, wicked. I choose that word deliberately. Staffing in long-term care means that very few front-line workers get full-time hours or decent benefits. In fact, the shortage of hours and low wages force many of these dedicated caregivers to hold down two or three part-time jobs.

Staff turnover, particularly in private facilities, is often high, which leads to lower levels of care. Low wages, poor benefits, lack of sick days, lack of job security, exhaustion from working multiple jobs – all these are the result of the current staffing model.

What else can it be but wicked when it’s clear that this model leads to inferior care? To pursue a course that you know will hurt frail patients is abuse. To treat workers with that kind of contempt while calling them heroes is abuse.

Yet, Alberta’s UCP government has decided that despite the blatantly obvious failings of continuing care before and during the pandemic, it will continue with this approach. Sadly, the NDP did the same when elected back in 2015.

Come the next provincial election, Albertans should demand that reforming continuing care is a top priority. The only reform that will work is to bring all continuing care under the public umbrella. It’s the only way to ensure decent standards for our elders and for workers.

When it’s your turn to be old and frail, you’ll pray that we got this right.



Terry Inigo-Jones
Freelance Journalist and
Member of the Canadian Freelance Union

Engaging the Heart, the Head and the Hands: Storytelling for Advocates

Picture this: You put off grocery shopping for the week, and now the only time you can go is on a busy Saturday morning. It's crowded and you've got plans you need to run to soon. You've got to pick up some breakfast cereal.

You enter the aisle with your cart. You see colourful boxes, cartoon characters, promises of high fibre, price stickers, sales.

How do you choose? Do you read all of the nutritional information and ingredients for each selection? Do you compare each of the prices on dozens of products?

If you're like most people, you make a snap decision based on your past experience. Maybe you grab what your kid likes, or the one you ate growing up, or the one marketed as the most healthy option. Maybe you compare the prices on a couple similar products, but you've more or less made up your mind before you enter that aisle.

A lot of our decisions—maybe more than we'd care to admit—work like the decisions we make in the cereal aisle. And that includes our political decisions.

We are all a lot less logical than we'd like to think we are. We make our decisions based on emotion, personal histories, habits, and experiences, and the opinions and beliefs of those around us. **In truth, the reasons why we believe and act in the ways we do largely amount to the narratives we believe to be the most convincing, the most in tune with our own experiences or those that confirm our pre-existing biases.**

This is why it's rarely a successful advocacy strategy to dump a bunch of facts on the people whose minds you want to change. [If I link to the 99.9% of studies that agree that human behaviour is driving climate change](#), will that change the minds of anyone who is committed to the worldview that the universities are only one part of a vast conspiracy by a global elite to suppress 'the truth' about climate change? Or COVID-19 and vaccine dangers? Or any other issue where it can feel like you're living in a different reality?

The fact is, life is getting harder for most people. [Real wages have been stagnant for decades](#). Inequality is on the rise. The costs for core needs like housing have exploded. The price for groceries and utilities is soaring. Canada's social spending ranks amongst the lowest in industrialised nations—lower even than the United States. And these issues have only been supercharged by the pandemic.

Who is profiting from the decline of quality of life of the rest of us? The 1%. According to Oxfam International, **since the start of 2020, the world's ten richest men more than doubled their fortunes from \$700 billion to \$1.5 trillion.** That's a staggering rate of \$15,000 per second or \$1.3 billion a day.

It makes sense why so many people are sceptical and mistrustful of authority and existing institutions. It makes sense why so many are angry and alienated.

Right-wing politicians excel at capturing the legitimate pain and fear so many are in and using it to push through their corporatist agendas.

And that's why we as progressives need compelling narratives of a better vision for our province and our communities.

Harnessing the power of emotion through stories is critical to this work. Stories can help us feel and embody what matters to us. We don't have to lecture others on what we value because stories allow us to express our lived experiences, not as abstract principles, but as common and shared experiences.

Stories have the power to move others to see things from our perspective.

But how do we do it? How do we build effective stories that demonstrate the real solutions to the multiple and intersecting crises of our time?

Public Narrative is one powerful approach.

Public Narrative is a model for storytelling designed to move people to take collective action. It was developed by renowned organizer Marshall Ganz. Ganz cut his teeth with Cesar Chavez in the United Farm Workers' struggle for migrant rights, and in the civil rights movement in the 60s. He also devised the [grassroots organizing model](#) that was used to great effect by Barack Obama's campaign team.

An effective Public Narrative has three components: the Story of Self, the Story of Us, and the Story of Now.

THE STORY OF SELF: This is the story of a key moment of choice in your life—a moment when you were called to action and how undertaking that action has defined your beliefs and actions since. When did you have a poignant moment of awakening to the reality of suffering in our world? Or a hopeful moment where you saw a better world was possible? What led you to be someone who is demanding change?

THE STORY OF US: This is the story of why we are called to act together. It demonstrates why we are capable of being leaders in a movement for change by drawing on the past, exploring the history of ordinary people banding

together for collective power. We are telling a story that invites others in and accentuates the connection between our story and theirs.

THE STORY OF NOW: We all know the world needs changing, but the task can seem insurmountable. In this story, you answer the question: how do we transform the present—as brutal, as inhuman, as frightening as it is—into a moment of hope, challenge, and change?

I know I'm not the only one who often feels overwhelmed by the “now” we find ourselves in. For years now, we've been living that apocryphal curse of living in “interesting times.”

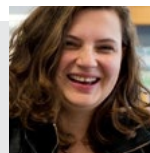
The thing is, if the times are “unprecedented,” so too can be the outcomes. But we can't leave that up to chance.

It's up to us to engage our hearts, heads, and hands to pitch in to build a better Alberta for all. We need your stories. We need your ideas. And we need you to take action.

I'm ready for change. I know Public Interest Alberta's wide network of allies is too.

Are you?

If you or a group you work with are interested in a training session on Public Narrative, contact Laura at communications@pialberta.org.



Laura Kruse
Director of Communications
and Organizing
Public Interest Alberta

Our Priorities for Change: Putting Albertans at the Centre of a Positive Vision for Alberta

Albertans are making a massive decision this year — one that will have impacts far beyond another four year election cycle. To shape our priorities and engage in the democratic process, we need to all work together.

Do we want four more years of the same distractions, chaos, cuts and privatization? Or do we want something different?

When we talk to Albertans across the province, the answer is clear. Whether it's healthcare, affordability, K-12 education, post-secondary education, or climate action, Albertans want strong and bold leadership on the issues that matter most to them.

We aren't distracted by the meaning of "sovereignty." We're worried about our kids' class sizes. We aren't thinking about board governance at Alberta Health Services. We're stressed out trying to find a family doctor. And we aren't interested in Danielle Smith endlessly pointing her finger at Ottawa.

We're up late at night wondering if it's ever going to be a little bit easier to make ends meet and save for the future.

Every single one of us has a role to play in refocusing our priorities for change.

Why is it so hard for the UCP government to get focused on what really matters? It's not so much that Danielle Smith's government is incompetent (although it may very well be that too!). I think that at the most basic level, they believe if they successfully distract us, then they can "win" another term of government, cement their destructive policies, and shore up their political power.

Since I took on the role of Executive Director at PIA two years ago, our efforts have been focused on building another kind of power: community engagement and strong alliances toward a just future for all. Because we believe that everyone — absolutely everyone — deserves to have a safe, happy, healthy and dignified life here in our province.

The stories we repeat become the realities we experience. Alberta is a caring place with good people working together every day to imagine and build a better future. Alberta is also a place where we reckon with history to reconcile our colonial past with our current reality and potential future. Stories matter because stories become our reality. I feel so fortunate to learn from inspiring stories in the work we do here at PIA. It's these stories that give me hope that our best days are ahead.

The truth that Danielle Smith and the UCP want Albertans to ignore is: you can't cut or privatize your way to a better future. That story has been told too many times and it is based in a scarcity mindset that has been perfected by austerity-driven deficit hawks in this new gilded age. This story makes some shareholders happy, but you can't tell this story to build a better future for all Albertans.



We need to fix healthcare, wrangle the cost of living crisis, and rebuild a sustainable economy for the future. Healthcare, affordability and the economy. That's what Albertans are saying is keeping them up at night and that's what should be keeping politicians up at night, too.

Below the surface of each of these issues is anxiety about the future. Albertans want a clear vision for the future that tends to these issues — and the underlying anxiety — in a way that animates our hopes and speaks to our need for a plan that makes sense — one that is bold and believable.

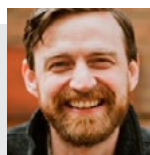
Going forward, we're going to be talking about that plan and you're going to be hearing a lot from us about our priorities for change.

We believe our priorities will put Albertans at the centre of a new way forward.

We've been working hard with our partners from across the province and the good news is this: hope and frustration is being channelled into something special. Perhaps it's possible to tell a new story.

We need you to help us. Please get involved anyway you can - PIA events, community organizing, coffee parlours, door knocking, or dinner parties for change.

Every conversation contributes to this new potential story. Use whatever you have in you to give because it all matters. I truly believe that advocacy is for everyone and that if we all dig in for the public interest, we can build a new consensus for a just and sustainable future for all. We can't afford not to.



Bradley Lafortune
Executive Director
Public Interest Alberta