



# The Advocate

Summer 2016

A PUBLICATION OF PUBLIC INTEREST ALBERTA



## MLA ADVOCACY CHALLENGE

Book a meeting with your elected representative!

## ALBERTA'S REVENUE SHORTAGE

Why public services should be strengthened, not cut

## The Advocate

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

## Who We Are

Public Interest Alberta (PIA) is a province-wide organization focused on advocacy and education on public interest issues. Founded in 2004, PIA exists to foster an understanding of the importance of public services, institutions, and spaces in Albertans' lives, and to build a network of organizations and individuals committed to advancing the public interest.

We believe that the primary responsibility of government is to advance the collective interests of the citizens of Alberta. This entails a commitment to accessibility, equity, inclusion, and democracy in our communities, institutions, and society.

### Executive Director

Joel French

### Office Administrator

Monica Walker

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Aleah Loney

## Share Your Voice!

Submit letters, articles and contributions, (which may be edited) for the next issue of *The Advocate*. Send all correspondence to:

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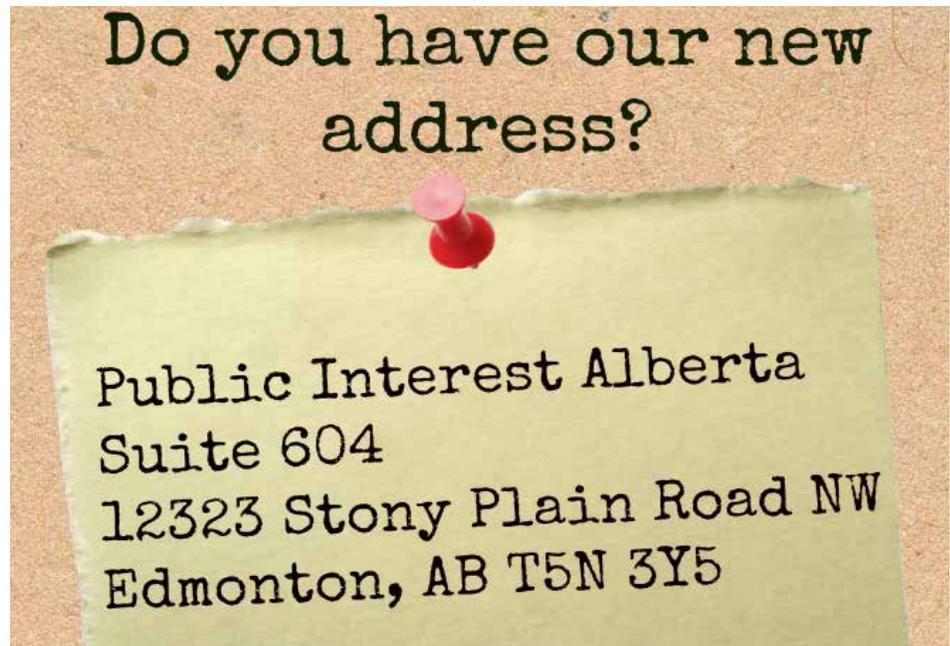
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## Board Announcements!

At Public Interest Alberta's 2016 Annual General Meeting, the 2016-17 board was elected. Neither **Grace Thostensen** (United Utility Workers' Association) nor **Elisabeth Ballermann** (Health Sciences Association of Alberta) ran for re-election. Thanks to both of them for their service and dedication to Public Interest Alberta.

We would like to welcome **Ken Mackenzie** (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 424) to the 2016-17 Public Interest Alberta Board of Directors. To see the full updated list of our Board of Directors, visit [pialberta.org/board-directors](http://pialberta.org/board-directors).



# Advocacy challenge: meet with your MLA!

By Larry Booi  
PIA Board Chair

Here we are, a year after Alberta's momentous provincial election. So much has happened (not all good, but a lot of progressive changes,) summer is upon us, and it's time to relax, right?

The answer is yes – but only partially. In terms of citizen advocacy, there is one big task for each of us in the coming months, and I hope that every PIA member and supporter will take advantage of the summer's big opportunity to make a difference in promoting the positive changes that our province badly needs.

Despite the new government's positive moves of the past year – increasing the minimum wage, banning corporate and union political contributions, getting rid of the flat tax, acting on climate change, refusing to make cuts to public services despite deep fiscal problems – there is much more to be done.

At PIA's Annual Advocacy Conference in April, a strong consensus emerged that the most important advocacy opportunity is with Alberta's MLAs, and in particular with individuals meeting face to face with their local MLA to advocate for progressive directions.

We should not be surprised that Alberta's elected representatives are hearing a lot from wealthy and conservative forces who are opposed to further progressive changes. But are they hearing enough from their constituents who favour pushing ahead with stronger public services, democratic renewal, and revenue reform?

As always, politics is about pressure: you don't get what you need or deserve, you get what you fight for, and that means strong and effective advocacy. We need to ensure that our MLAs across the province hear directly from their constituents who feel strongly about the need for progressive changes, and this summer is a perfect time for that to happen.

Now that the spring legislative session is over, MLAs will be taking advantage of opportunities to re-connect with constituents, take the pulse of their publics,



and think about the political issues and choices in front of them after this dramatic first year of a new government and legislature.

It is important to remember that most of Alberta's MLAs are new to the Legislature, with 50 out of 54 NDP MLAs and a majority of Wildrose MLAs serving for the first time. It is an ideal time for individuals to establish a lasting connection with their MLA, and to make the case for the need for further progressive change.

NDP MLAs are likely to be sympathetic to progressive proposals, and it is important to understand that opposition MLAs are motivated to listen to the views of constituents as well.

The process is simple: Contact your MLA's constituency office, book a time for a meeting this summer, and let your elected representative know your views on the issues and directions that are most important to you as a constituent.

In preparing for the meeting, once you have selected your priority concerns (e.g. seniors care, revenue reform, early learning and care, post-secondary education,

democratic reform, health care, K-12 education, human services and poverty, environment) be sure to check the PIA website to get a sense of the directions that are being promoted by others who share your views and concerns.

Remember that the goal is not to convince the MLA that you are right, but rather to strongly communicate that these are the issues and directions that are important to you as a constituent, and to urge that your views be taken into account.

It is also important to let your MLA know that you will be back, and that you look forward to an ongoing relationship with your elected representative in order to ensure that your views are considered on an ongoing basis.

This type of grassroots action is fundamental to effective advocacy. I urge all PIA members and supporters to meet with their MLA this summer, and to do so two or three times a year over the years remaining in this legislative term. Let's take full advantage of this important opportunity to make a difference as engaged citizens.

# Public services should be strengthened, not cut

By Joel French

PIA Executive Director

Alberta's severe shortage of government revenues is arguably the most important public policy issue our province faces today. There are two sides to the revenue shortage coin: first, it gives fuel to conservative parties and lobby groups calling for massive cuts to public services, and second, it makes it far more difficult for progressive advocates to push for any kind of change that requires more public dollars to be invested.

The revenue shortage is a problem that will continue until our provincial government, whether it is the current one or a future government, takes significant steps to solve it. There are really only two ways it can be fixed: either we raise substantially more revenue or we make massive cuts to public services. Ralph Klein's government took the latter approach to the extreme by cutting \$3 billion from public services between 1992 and 1996, with disastrous results. In many ways, our public services have still not recovered from those cuts two decades later.

Today's revenue shortage is approximately \$10 billion. For a reference of scale, our entire K-12 education system costs \$8 billion per year. The revenue shortage problem goes far beyond "finding efficiencies," and those who say they would solve it by making cuts without affecting frontline services are being dishonest.

Albertans need public services, and they must be strengthened, not cut. Our hospital and seniors' care wait times are already too long, our classroom sizes too large, and our post-secondary tuition fees too high. Those problems are the result of sustained attacks by previous PC governments, and they must be fixed. We also need to begin to invest significantly in building a province-wide, public, early childhood education and care system to ensure every Albertan family has access to high-quality, affordable care. Any substantial new investment of that kind is unlikely to come until we address the revenue shortage.

Past practice has been to rely on revenue from non-renewable resources, mainly oil and gas, to pay for a significant portion of our public services. The large amount of such revenue has allowed Alberta to raise far less revenue from taxes than any other province, relative to the size of their economy, for a long time. Our resource revenue has been as high as \$11.7 billion in 2011-12. In contrast, the government's estimate for the current year is \$1.4 billion. Clearly, non-renewable resource revenue is far too volatile to provide stable funding for our public services.



That revenue should instead be saved for future generations through the Heritage Savings Trust Fund, not depended on to fund government's basic operations.

If non-renewable resource revenue is taken out of the budgetary equation, our fiscal situation becomes similar to that of every other province in Canada. Our government's own budget documents show that the tax systems of other provinces would raise Alberta an additional \$7.5 to \$19.4 billion dollars. There are many different ways for a province to generate revenue from taxes, but only a few of them have the potential to raise substantial amounts of revenue: sales tax, corporate income tax, and personal income tax.

The biggest difference in revenue between Alberta and every other province across the country is that we have no sales tax. Saskatchewan's is the lowest at 5% (Nova Scotia and New Brunswick are the highest at 10%). If we adopted a 5% sales tax, estimates are that it would raise between \$5 and \$8 billion in additional revenue per year. Its major challenge is that low-income and wealthy individu-

als pay the tax at the same rate, which is why it is sometimes referred to as a 'flat tax.' If Alberta were to adopt a sales tax, we would need to provide mitigation measures to ensure low-income individuals are not disproportionately impacted. The federal GST cheques for low-income individuals provide a model that could be adopted.

Alberta's current level of corporate income tax, which is paid by large businesses on their net profits, is roughly the same as the national average at 12%. In contrast, in 2000 under Premier Klein, Alberta's corporate income tax rate was at 15.5%. The 2% increase (from 10% to 12%) introduced by the NDP government is projected to increase tax revenues by \$250 to \$450 million per year, so we know that corporate income tax cannot solve the revenue shortage on its own.

The alternative to a sales tax is introducing higher income tax rates than any other province. The NDP government already increased taxes on those earning more than \$143,000 per year, including a 5% increase on incomes over \$268,000 per year. Those increases will raise about \$1 billion annually. While more revenue could still be raised from the wealthy, far more significant dollars come from adjusting rates in the lower and middle income brackets.

The bottom line is that solving Alberta's revenue shortage will require either the introduction of a sales tax, significant changes to personal income tax rates for most individuals, or a mix of both. No one enjoys paying taxes, nor do we enjoy the bills we pay as individuals, but we pay them to get something we value in return, such as the ability to see a doctor for free and high-quality education for all children regardless of their social or economic status.

None of these solutions is easy, but the alternative of massive cuts to our already-strained public services is a cost we simply cannot afford.

*A version of this article originally appeared in the Edmonton Journal*

# Quality and affordable child care should be non-negotiable

By Line Perron

Director, Early Childhood Development Support Services  
PIA Child Care and Early Learning Task Force

The latest data from the Early Child Development Mapping Project shows that almost 30% of Alberta’s young children enter kindergarten experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development, a higher proportion than the Canadian norm of 25%. This does not include children with severe disabilities.

The early years are a time of significant learning, growth, and development that is dependent on positive interactions with supportive and responsive caregivers. We know from research that highly trained staff and reasonable staff-child ratios consistently produce positive short- and long-term developmental gains for young children.

With the latest economic downturn, several trends have emerged creating stress fractures that limit Alberta’s ability to deliver quality, affordable, and accessible child care options for families. Parents are put in the precarious and sometimes dangerous position of having to choose between affordability and quality. Child care fees continue to rise and too many families have no choice but to use unregulated and poor quality child care – at times with tragic results. These are becoming increasingly competitive issues as the sector itself struggles to advance the educational preparation and professional development of its early learning and care workforce.

Quality child care should not be the privilege of the wealthy and upper middle class. All children deserve a fair start. Universal, non-negotiable access to high quality environments and relationships is the best way to ensure this vision is realized. There are several considerations in elevating the quality of care in our early learning and care centres and professionalizing the workforce.

First and foremost is to garner high level recognition and support for early childhood education (ECE) as a profession with all the specialized expertise and skills that entails. To achieve this, we must support raising the minimum educational qualification for early childhood educators from a 45-hour college level course in child development to a minimum two year Early Learning and Care Diploma from an accredited post secondary institution. This should also include mandatory annual professional development requirements.

Family day home providers should also be held to higher educational qualifications and be required to attend professional development annually. There has been a steep rise in applications to open a day home in the last year, likely as a result of individuals being laid off and seeing a day home as a viable way to earn an income. With centre fees increasing, many families are choosing day homes where there is little or no oversight by an accredited agency that can monitor for child-adult



ratios, safe environments, and positive interactions.

The second consideration is to adequately compensate ECE professionals. When compared to the provincial median income, Alberta ECE workers are the lowest paid in the country. Many are leaving the field, most often those who with the highest education since they can earn much more working in other environments that can make use of their knowledge and skills.

Last but not least, we need a government that is bold and brave and willing to take a stand for our young children and do what is right. It will require a long-term vision to see the incredible return on investment this strategy would have and the positive social implications for Alberta’s families and communities. It is no longer a privilege but an economic necessity for a thriving Alberta.

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# Minimum wage helps Albertans who need it most

By Joel French

PIA Executive Director

The Alberta Government's recent confirmation that they will keep their promise of implementing a \$15 per hour minimum wage by 2018 was a victory on many fronts. Pay increases for hundreds of thousands of Alberta's lowest wage earners over the next three years will lessen income inequality, narrow the gender pay gap, reduce poverty, and boost our economy.

Of course there are naysayers. Well-funded corporate lobby groups are trying to convince the government to break their election promise. Large, multi-national corporations in particular have a lot to lose. Every dollar earned by an Alberta worker is one less dollar for their shareholders around the world.

Over the past 30 years in Alberta, the wealthy elites in the top 1% have seen their incomes rise by 72%, while the other 99% of us saw only an 11% increase. That trend is not inevitable; it is the direct result of misguided government policies of the past. Minimum wage increases are one of the ways we can begin to rebalance the scales.

Gender inequality is widely recognized as requiring action in Alberta, where nearly two-thirds of low wage workers are women. Alberta women earn on average only 60% of what men earn, a problem that extends far beyond low wage workers, but increasing the minimum wage is a step toward closing that gap.

Lack of sufficient income is one of the primary reasons why so many Albertans live in poverty. Recent data shows 300,000 Albertans, including 144,000 children, live in low income households. The coming minimum wage increases will significantly reduce those numbers and help more Albertans reach their full potential.

To be clear, addressing poverty goes far beyond minimum wage policy. Thankfully, the government is using other tools to reduce and prevent poverty, including the Alberta Child Benefit, a substantial increase to capital funding for affordable housing, and increased funding for

municipal supports through Family and Community Support Services.

There are other areas related to poverty where the new government has yet to take action, including building an affordable, high-quality child care system, eliminating mandatory school fees, and increasing and indexing social assistance for those who need it most. But without increasing wages for those at the bottom of the income ladder, any strategy to end poverty would be left wanting.

Labour Minister Christina Gray has rightly pointed out that a \$15 minimum wage is a step forward but falls short of a living wage for all Albertans. An Edmontonian needs to make at least \$16.69 per hour in order to meet basic needs and maintain a modest standard of living; a Calgarian needs \$18.15 per hour. Those amounts will likely be even higher by 2018. So while we are moving in the right direction, more must be done. Every Albertan working full time should earn enough to support themselves and their families.

Wage increases for those with the lowest incomes will result in more money being spent in the communities where those individuals live. In contrast to corporate profits, much of which are paid out to

shareholders around the world or invested outside the province or the country, low wage workers spend the bulk of their earnings in their communities to meet their basic needs. At a time when our economy could use a boost, higher wages for those workers will result in more local economic activity.

The government also announced the minimum wage increases for the next three years (\$1 per hour this year and \$1.40 per hour each of the next two years). Laying out the three-year plan helps both workers and employers to plan for the future.

By keeping its commitment to a \$15 per hour minimum wage by 2018, the Alberta Government is showing leadership in addressing some of the most important issues we face today. Pressure to follow suit is mounting across North America, and other jurisdictions including Seattle, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco have already started.

Increasing the minimum wage will help us address income inequality, the gender pay gap, and poverty, while providing our economy a boost when we need it most.

*This article originally appeared in the Calgary Herald*

## PIA welcomes new staff member



Welcome to Monica Walker, who became our full-time Office Administrator in January. Born and raised in Edmonton, Monica has been an activist for over 30 years. While studying at the U of A, she volunteered with Edmonton Working Women to take hotline calls from people experiencing unfair treatment at work. From 1987 to 1995, she worked as the organization's Project Manager. After moving to the corporate sector for a few years, she then became the face of volunteer recruitment with Big Brothers Big Sisters, helping the Edmonton chapter become the largest in Canada. She later joined City of Edmonton Communications, advancing good causes in Community Services and the Edmonton Public Library. She sings with Notre Dame des Bananes choir and serves as VP Maintenance with Sundance Housing Co-op, where she lives with her son Sean.

# Private schools do not need public funding

By Joel French

PIA Executive Director

Private schools do not need public funding. That could have been the title of the Fraser Institute's recent report on private schools across Canada. The data throughout the report certainly supports that argument, though of course it is never stated.

Instead, the report, titled *A Diverse Landscape: Independent Schools in Canada*, reads like a marketing piece for private schools and is focused on dispelling a straw man argument that private schools are only for the "urban elite." Their research finds that nearly half of private schools are religious in nature and that many others are "specialty schools" with a particular curriculum focus, such as arts or athletics.

Looking beyond this main focus, the report contains interesting information related to the public funding of private schools. It points out that only five of Canada's ten provinces provide any funding for private schools: British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Quebec. Alberta funds most of its private schools at a higher rate than any other province at 70%, while British Columbia gets the award for highest percentage of private schools receiving public funding at 87.9%.

The fact that only five provinces fund private schools allows us to analyze the impact that public funding has on those schools' student enrollment, as well as the correlation between public funding and the number of private schools in each province. The data in the report paints a clear picture: public funding for private schools is completely unnecessary. The level of public funding paid to private schools has no direct correlation with student enrollment in private schools nor in the number of private schools in operation.

The release of the Fraser Institute's report was accompanied by three province-specific statements for British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario. The three prov-

inces offer very different levels of public funding, so they provide a good sample to analyze the effect of public funding on private schools. British Columbia funds the majority of its private schools at a level of 50%, while Alberta funds most of its private schools at 70%, and Ontario provides no funding for its private schools.

The Fraser Institute has claimed that private schools save public money. This claim relies on the assumption that should public funding be removed from private schools, that students from those schools would flock to the public system where their education would cost the public even more money. The problem is that their own data tells a different story.

Of the three provinces, the one giving the most public funding to private schools has the lowest private school enrollment. Alberta's rate of student enrollment in private schools is 4.4%, while British Columbia's is 11.6%, and Ontario's is 5.6%.



So although British Columbia provides public funding at a rate 20% below that of Alberta, its enrollment in private schools is more than double. And although Ontario provides no public funding at all to private schools, they have a higher enrollment rate than their Alberta counterparts. Clearly, the number of students attending private schools does not depend on the rate of public funding and can even be higher without public funding.

The number of private schools in the three provinces tells a similar story.

Alberta has one private school for roughly every 28,000 residents, whereas both British Columbia and Ontario have one for every 14,000 residents. So the province funding private schools at the highest rate (Alberta) has half the number of schools per capita than the other two provinces. Less or no public funding evidently does not lead to fewer private schools.

If the biggest benefit to the public of having private schools is to save the public money, then the data in the Fraser Institute report points in an obvious direction. Instead of Alberta funding its private schools at a rate of 70%, it could drop its funding to the British Columbia level of 50% and save even more money. Or better yet, it could eliminate public funding for private schools altogether like Ontario, where there are more private schools per capita and a higher student enrollment rate.

The NDP government in Alberta has yet to follow through on three of the education-related promises in its election platform. It pledged to reduce class sizes and increase supports for children with complex needs, reduce mandatory school fees for things like lunch supervision and bussing, and fund a school lunch program for elementary students. The platform pegged the total cost of those three promises at \$140 million per year, and the plan was to begin that funding in 2015. Last year, Alberta gave more than \$200 million in public funding to private schools.

The Fraser Institute's report, true to its purpose, paints a rosy picture of private schools in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. In fact, its press releases for each province are nearly identical, with an equal amount of praise doled out to each province. Which leads to the question: if the private school situations in these three provinces are to be lauded in such a carbon-copy manner, why should public money be given to private schools at all?

*This article originally appeared on [ricochet.media](http://ricochet.media)*

# Annual General Meeting

This year's Annual General Meeting, held on June 21, 2016, provided a great opportunity for our members to hear about the hard work that staff and the task forces has done over the past year. Attendees heard from Executive Director Joel French and Board Chair Larry Booi on how advocacy in Alberta has changed under new provincial and federal governments. Chairs from each task force: Seniors, Child are and Early Education, Environment, Human Services and Poverty, Post-Secondary Education, and Democracy reported back on the work they have been doing since last April. Thank you to all who attended!



PIA Executive Director Joel French addresses members at our 2016 AGM



Human Services and Poverty Task Force Chair, Vasant Chotai, shares findings from the Child Poverty Report



Public Interest Award recipient, Susan Wright, with Joel French and nominator Carol Wodak

# Public Interest Awards

Each year, the Public Interest Awards are presented to individuals or organizations who are making an exemplary contribution to the public interest in Alberta.

This year's recipients were Elisabeth Ballermann (northern Alberta) and Susan Wright (southern Alberta). Elisabeth's dedication to the labour movement and social justice over the past 20 years and Susan's highly informative blog, *Susan On the Soapbox*, made each of these women outstanding candidates for the Public Interest Awards. We thank them for their service to Albertans and the public good!

We would like to thank Alberta Views Magazine, Pages on Kensington, and Audrey's Books for providing gifts for this year's awards recipients.



Public Interest Award recipient, Elisabeth Ballermann, with Larry Booi, nominator Gil McGowan, Siobhan Vipond, and Joel French (L-R)