Parkland Institute was founded in 1996. During its 20 years of existence, the institute has established itself as one of the most cited and influential think tanks in Alberta and Canada. At the same time, Parkland has remained true to its mandate of bringing together the academic and wider communities in pursuit of public policy research for the common good. What explains Parkland’s success? How has a small institute been able to play such an important role in shaping policy debates? To answer this question requires going back to the institute’s roots.

Setting the Context

Parkland’s founding in 1996 occurred against a backdrop of enormous political, economic, and cultural changes sweeping across Alberta, Canada, and the world. The collapse of the post-war Keynesian consensus in the mid-1970s was replaced by a new form of elite agreement based on notions of limited government, including a reduced welfare state, while giving more powers to the market through deregulation, privatization, and attacks on unions. These policy prescriptions — what is today termed “neoliberalism” — were given a boost after the late 1980s with the signing of a series of free trade deals.

Many of these neoliberal ideas found a ready audience in Alberta. In 1993, the Progressive Conservative party had been in office for 22 years. Formerly, the party had been activist — if still pro-business — on economic issues, and progressive on some social issues. Amidst recurrent oil price shocks, however, and fearing electoral defeat, the party in December 1992 elected a new, populist leader in Ralph Klein.

The political strategy worked; the PCs were re-elected based on a political narrative that argued Alberta’s problems lay not in the problems of a boom-bust economy but in government waste and inefficiency. The government subsequently adopted a policy agenda straight out of the neoliberal playbook. In one of its first actions, the government sold off Alberta’s lucrative retail liquor operations.

The privatization of the Alberta Liquor Control Board (ALCB) set in motion the process of Parkland’s creation. Viewed as the opportunity to examine on an empirical level the consequences of the sell-off, four academics — Gordon Laxer and Trevor Harrison (Department of Sociology, University of Alberta) and Duncan Green and Dean Neu (Faculty of Management, University of Calgary) — looked at the consequences of ALCB privatization. The study, published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in September 1994, examined in detail the consumer, social, and financial impacts of privatization.

The ALCB study’s impact emboldened many progressive Albertans, both inside and outside the academic community, to consider a larger, more thorough study of the Klein government’s radical policy agenda. Their efforts resulted in the publication in 1995 of The Trojan Horse: Alberta and the Future of Canada. Though attacked in the legislature by the premier and some government officials — who threatened the careers of some of the academic authors — the book proved an immediate and even long-term success, being used for several years in university classrooms throughout the province.
The impact of *The Trojan Horse* caused many people to ask how the book’s practice of hard-hitting critique could be institutionalized, and Parkland Institute was founded out of this desire and the discussions that followed.

**Parkland’s Founding**

Spearheaded by Gordon Laxer, discussions began in early 1996 towards creating a think tank based on the Canadian tradition of political economy. In April, a founding meeting of the still-unnamed institute was held. In May, the University of Alberta’s Arts Faculty Council granted approval for its establishment. That same month, the institute’s first meeting of the interim (founding) board was held.

CD Howe Institute, Fraser Institute and now...the Parkland Institute

*New Institute established to broaden debate on public policy issues*

*By Michael Robb*

Canada’s established think tanks have been at the centre of public policy debates, particularly during the last decades. The CD Howe Institute and the Fraser Institute, for example, have played an important role in shaping these debates, sometimes even publicly challenging the government’s policies and actions. Given the institute’s meagre finances, however, much of the early work was done by eager and dedicated volunteers, including many who served on the institute’s research, communications, and other committees.

Parkland’s vision and mission, set down in its first constitution, was simple and straightforward, and remains the hallmark as stated in its revised 2014 constitution:

*The Parkland Institute conducts applied research within the broad progressive tradition of Canadian political economy that contributes to evidence-based policy; and otherwise works for the common good through the publication and dissemination of ideas, the education of the broad public, and the training of future leaders.*

**The Years of Challenge**

In January 1997, Parkland in conjunction with the University of Alberta Press published Kevin Taft’s *Shredding the Public Interest*. The book, which took its title from an incident in which the government intentionally destroyed evidence contrary to the narrative that health care spending was out of control, quickly became a best-seller and prompted then-premier Klein to criticize it as a work of “communism.”

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The new institute has funding of $50,000 per year for five years from the Faculty of Arts, some in-kind support and has received donations from individual and organizations to help the institute get on its feet. And it has established an 18-member board of directors to chart the institute’s future. A board of directors has been formed, members are being sought and a home has been found for the fledgling institute in a Government building. The institute is in the research network throughout Alberta; it has received support from the Alberta government and the federal government, and will seek out research grants from private donors.

Then, as now, the 20-member board was designed to bring together academic researchers with a wide swath of civil society groups, including labour, private business, professional associations, and community groups with their particular perspectives and interests. The board’s construction reflected the strong belief that the institute should bring together the academic community and civil society groups, but emerged also out of the practical difficulty of financing a progressive institute in a province heavily dominated by corporations. Finally, while it was clear that it must logically be centred at the University of Alberta, the institute from the beginning was designed as a province-wide endeavour.

On September 16, 1996, Parkland Institute moved into its first office at 11044 90th Avenue on the University of Alberta campus in Edmonton under the directorship of Gordon Laxer. Two weeks earlier, the institute had hired its first employee, Trevor Harrison, who took on the role of research director. An administrative assistant, Lorraine Swift, soon joined him. Given the institute’s meagre finances, however, much of the early work was done by eager and dedicated volunteers, including many who served on the institute’s research, communications, and other committees.

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In the fall of 1997, Parkland held its first annual conference, titled Globalization, Corporatism, and Democracy: Alberta and Canada, with John Ralston Saul giving the first keynote address.

Nonetheless, Parkland’s reputation for independent and solid policy research continued to grow during this early period. The institute was particularly acknowledged for its work in examining the government’s education, health, and fiscal policies. But it also garnered attention for its research in areas of public interest too often ignored, such as income inequality, the youth justice system, and democracy. During this period, Parkland also established its reputation as the critical voice looking at Alberta’s royalty structure and energy policies more broadly.

This work gradually won more supporters both within the academic and wider communities. As the first decade proceeded, Parkland’s organizational structure became more established. Gordon Laxer remained director, but other organizational changes also occurred. In 1997, Bill Moore-Kilgannon became Parkland’s executive director, and long-time office manager Cheri Harris joined in 1999.

The institute was being readied for take-off.

Growth and Consolidation

In 2000, Parkland Institute’s Gordon Laxer initiated the $1.9 million Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) project, *Neoliberal Globalism and its Challengers: Reclaiming the Commons in the Semi-Periphery*. Parkland housed the project within its offices and played a unique role in disseminating its findings.

In 2002, Ricardo Acuña took over as executive director, a position he continues to hold today. In 2004, Diana Gibson became research director. Together, these changes strengthened the institute’s administrative and research capacities.

During its second decade, Parkland’s reputation and profile continued to strengthen, across the province and...
throughout the rest of Canada. One measure of Parkland’s status was the more ready access to media coverage obtained during this period. Similarly, Parkland became a more regularly invited, if not always listened to, voice at government meetings.

In addition to hosting its annual fall conference — which has brought to Alberta such noted speakers as Vandana Shiva, Naomi Klein, Helen Caldicott, Maude Barlow, and Tariq Ali — Parkland also expanded its educational programming in its second decade. The institute toured an annual spring speakers series throughout the province from 2001–2003, and has acted as the Alberta host organization for the Next Up youth leadership program in Edmonton since 2008 and Calgary since 2009.

While not abandoning areas of traditional research interest, Parkland has continued also to expand research agenda. In recent years, the institute has added to its repertoire of research areas, including doing work on private contracting, elder care, and workplace health and safety.

Since its founding, Parkland has published over 100 reports, fact sheets, and books — averaging almost a research product published every other month for two decades.

In the fall of 2015, it was announced that Parkland, in conjunction with the University of Victoria, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives BC and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Saskatchewan had garnered a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant of $2.6 million over six years. The Corporate Mapping Project further establishes Parkland’s status as a centre of critical research.

As a requirement of its affiliation with the University of Alberta, Parkland underwent independent institutional reviews in 2009 and 2015, both of which reflected Parkland’s important role in Alberta’s political discourse. In the words of the 2015 review panel:

In Alberta, with its history of one party government and a rather truncated culture of political debate, voicing alternatives and critiques of government policy are both necessary and risky. Parkland’s willingness to take on this risk — with the important support of the University of Alberta — makes an invaluable contribution to public debate, offering perspectives and policy alternatives that enrich our democratic culture.

Parkland’s Future

Much has happened since Parkland Institute was founded. Most obvious is the change in government that occurred in May 2015 when the New Democratic Party under Premier Rachel Notley ended nearly 44 years of uninterrupted Progressive Conservative rule.

But the province has also changed, demographically, socially, and economically. Alberta today sports a much larger, younger, and urban population. It is more socially liberal. And, though still too dependent upon resource royalties for its revenues, Alberta is also more economically diverse than it was in 1996.

Parkland Institute remains a proudly independent voice of academically-sound critique, dedicated to making Alberta a more economically, socially, and politically progressive province. The past 20 years have proved the value of such a voice; the promise of even better days, both for Parkland and the province, remains before us.

Written by Trevor Harrison, Parkland Institute Director