

FALL 2017

The Advocate

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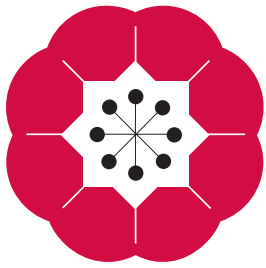
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The Advocate

We hope you enjoy this issue of our newsletter. It is intended to be a space to share stories and tools for advocacy. *The Advocate* 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

Communications Officer

Brett Lambert

Share Your Thoughts

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

PUBLIC INTEREST ALBERTA

604, 12323 Stony Plain Road NW
Edmonton, AB
T5N 3Y5

Ph: 780.420.0471

Email: office@pialberta.org
www.pialberta.org

If you want to receive *The Advocate* online instead, please contact our office.

Holiday Open House

Tuesday, December 12, 2017

4:00 - 7:30 PM

6th Floor, 12323 Stony Plain Road

You're invited to join the Alberta Labour History Institute, Alberta Workers' Health Centre, Friends of Medicare, and Public Interest Alberta for our Open House!

Please RSVP by December 6th to:
Monica Walker at 780-420-0471 or
office@pialberta.org



Renew Your Membership Today!

You can renew your membership online at pialberta.org or fill out the information below and mail to:

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University of Alberta budget cuts send the wrong message

By Quinn Benders

Board Member and Post-secondary Education Task Force Chair

This October, the University of Alberta administration announced a series of cuts that will be implemented over the next three years (four per cent in 2018/19 and two and a half per cent in 2019/20 and 2020/21). They asserted that cuts are needed in order to eliminate the current structural deficit that has been growing in the university's operating budget, to the tune of \$14 million. Administration argues that the cuts will occur in the context of two revenue generating limitations, one actual and one potential. The actual limitation is the current multi-year tuition freeze which limits the university's ability to generate revenue from students and their families. The potential limitation is uncertainty about the government's Campus Alberta funding review and if this could impact the university's bottom line.

Students, along with academic and support staff, were shocked by the announcement and are presently worried about the impacts these cuts could have. Details regarding how the cuts will be implemented are unclear. However, Provost Steve Dew commented to the *Edmonton Journal* that "everything is on the table and we want to look carefully at how we can do this in a manner that allows us to minimize impact on students and allow us to preserve our talent." The key point here is that *everything is on the table*, which could include bigger class sizes, a reduction in course offerings, and buyouts or layoffs for faculty and staff. What is particularly curious about this announcement is not the desire for responsible fiscal management. Rather, it is the timing, severity, and necessity of the cuts, and what kind of signal this will send to other institutions.

The University of Alberta Consolidated Budget, which includes both unrestricted and restricted sources of funding, is actually in a positive position and has been for years. The university has received more funding in the past three years: from \$579 million in 2015 to \$624 million this year. These increases should have given the administration the stability needed to address the operational budget and inflationary concerns, at least in part.

With this in mind, there appears to be no particular fiscal emergency that needs to be addressed at the University of Alberta by imposing cuts. While the administration is no doubt concerned with the Campus Alberta funding review, it would also seem reasonable for the



university to wait until the funding model is announced so the size and severity of the cuts, if required, can be set according to actual need.

The proposed budget cuts have two main impacts beyond reducing the operational-side deficit. First, the cuts will take place over the next three years, which overlaps bargaining with academic staff, support staff, graduate students, and postdoctoral staff. The proposed cuts will set the bar fairly low with regards to how well these associations will be able to bargain with the administration to improve conditions on campus. This is coupled with the fact that all of the associations mentioned are in a new bargaining regime and have a limited capacity to resist cuts to programming and positions, at least for the time being. Second, announcing these cuts strategically before the funding review is completed sends a clear message to the government that they will take action, such as deep cuts, if they are not consulted properly or don't hear back from the funding reviews in a timely manner.

As the flagship institution in the province, the University of Alberta's planned cuts send a message to all other post-secondary institutions in the province whether intended or not - if you are unhappy with the funding model review and the tuition freeze, and if you are concerned about entering into bargaining with your associations, *propose cuts*. It is my sincere hope that Albertans who have their educational aspirations or livelihoods tied to post-secondary institutions are not unduly harmed by cuts that seem unwarranted in their timing and severity.

From Poverty to Progress

Our latest campaign to end child poverty in Alberta

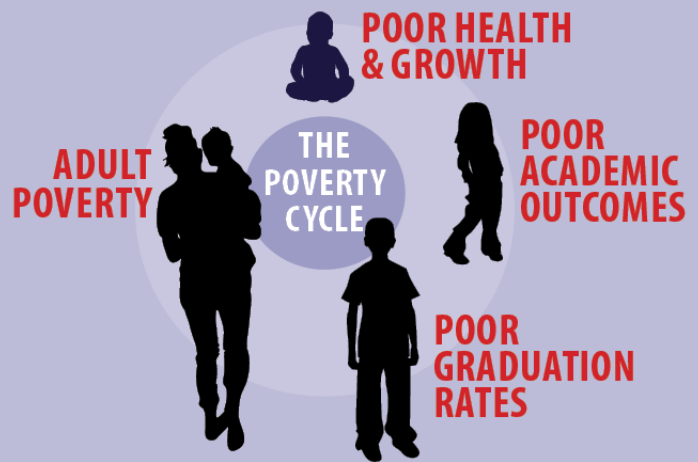
In Alberta, one in six children live in poverty, nearly 150,000 children. This statistic has remained virtually unchanged for 25 years. While poverty can be found in all areas of the province, vulnerable groups such as single parents, minimum wage earners, and racialized communities are more susceptible. This results in generation after generation of people who lack access to early education, health care supports, adequate housing, and proper nutrition.

Our latest campaign, *From Poverty to Progress*, seeks to educate the public on the problem of child poverty in the province and to mobilize the public to speak out for greater investments in poverty reduction. While the NDP government has made some positive steps to alleviate poverty – such as increasing the minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2018, implementing an ambitious Alberta Child Benefit focused on supporting low-income families, and increasing funding for women's shelters – more work remains to be done to address the income disparity that still strongly affects women and children.

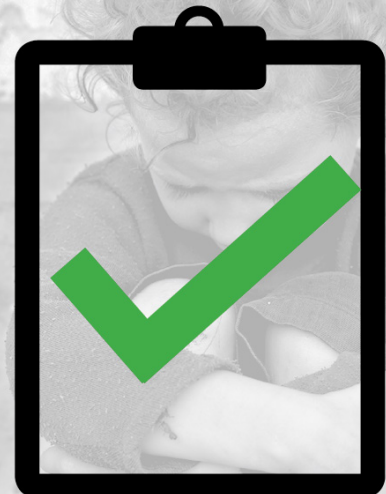
We are calling on the Alberta government to develop a poverty-reduction strategy to prevent, reduce, and ultimately eliminate poverty in Alberta. This strategy should include good jobs at living wages, affordable housing programs, affordable and accessible early learning and child care services available to all families, an effective child benefit that is indexed, affordable and accessible post-secondary education, and training programs that prepare youth and adults for employment leading to economic independence.

To learn more about our campaign and to add your signature to our online petition, please visit our website at:
www.pialberta.org/from_poverty_to_progress

1 IN 6 CHILDREN LIVE IN POVERTY



Sign our Petition



**OVER
76 THOUSAND
FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS
WITH CHILDREN
EARN LESS THAN
\$15/HOUR**

Carbon tax a cautious step forward

By Joel French

Public Interest Alberta Executive Director

Public discussion about Alberta's carbon tax tends to raise two important subjects for discussion: the urgent need for action on climate change and the severe shortage of tax revenue in our province.

On both, the provincial government's actions have been cautious and highlight the need for much more work to be done. However, the carbon levy as it is currently designed is an essential step in the right direction after decades of inaction on climate change.

Every political leader in Alberta agrees, at least in word, that human-caused climate change requires government action.

While a carbon price is not a silver bullet for tackling climate change, a plan without one would have limited impact in achieving the goals required by climate science. The most common argument against the carbon tax in Alberta is an economic one. However, nearly every economist in the world favours putting a price on carbon.

We have precedents to draw from to ensure the policies we adopt are effective both for combatting climate change and for boosting the economy. In 1991, Sweden introduced a carbon tax, which sits at \$200 per tonne today. Their economy has continued to grow at a pace similar to Alberta's and their greenhouse gas emissions have decreased by nine per cent over time.

The very limited action the previous government took in Alberta, mainly very expensive carbon capture and storage projects, had little effect by comparison. Over the same period, Alberta's emissions increased by 150 per cent. Clearly, the status quo was not working.

Alberta's carbon tax, implemented this year, started at \$20 per tonne and, following the federal government's upcoming floor price, will grow to \$50

per tonne by 2022. Alberta's carbon pricing may need to be even more ambitious than planned to achieve the emissions reductions required by climate science. Such progress need not be at the expense of the economy.

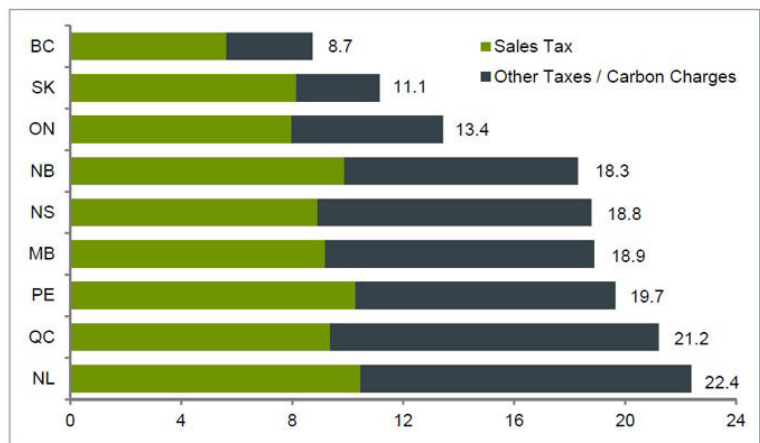
The key is to reinvest the revenue in measures that both reduce greenhouse gas emissions and spur economic growth. Investments in energy efficiency create significant numbers of good jobs and reduce emissions at the same time. Making homes and workplaces more energy-efficient also reduces power and heating bills. Alberta's climate plan puts a high priority on these measures through the creation of the Energy Efficiency Alberta agency and related programs.

The most significant piece of climate change policy our province still lacks is a way to track progress on reducing emissions. The government plan does not include specific targets or estimates of how much each measure will reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We need much more accountability for how well the plan is working.

Some say a carbon tax should be revenue neutral, meaning other taxes are cut to prevent an increase in overall government tax revenue. Not only would that prevent the above government actions from happening, but when Alberta is short roughly \$10 billion in annual operational revenue, it makes little sense.

Alberta's tax system is by far the worst in the country at raising revenue to

Alberta's Tax Shortfall
(billions of dollars)



collectively pay for public services Albertans want, need, and value. A recent poll commissioned by the Parkland Institute shows 66 per cent of Albertans support a carbon tax if the funds are used to invest in public services like health care and education.

Even if some carbon tax revenue is, at least in the short term, allocated to help address our province's revenue shortage, a more extensive conversation is needed. The tax systems of other provinces would raise between \$8.7 billion (British Columbia) and \$22.4 billion (Newfoundland and Labrador) in additional revenue if adopted in Alberta. We need a broad public discussion to figure out a fair way to close that gap to protect and strengthen our public services.

Alberta's carbon price is a cautious step in the right direction. It is necessary to make any real progress on preventing or even mitigating climate change, and those who oppose a carbon price need to state clearly what alternative measures they favour. The global transition away from emissions-intensive industries will not happen overnight, but it has already started, and any political leaders ignoring it are doing a disservice to Albertans and our future.

Originally published in the Edmonton Journal, August 23, 2017.

Jason Kenney pledges to take Alberta in some troubling directions

By Joel French

Public Interest Alberta Executive Director

At the beginning of the leadership race for Alberta's United Conservative Party (UCP), Jason Kenney issued a "Grassroots Guarantee" that he would not "impose" policy directions on the new party. Instead he laid out a plan for how the members of the party would develop a policy agenda.

Kenney did not even finish his press conference that day before telling the media where he stands on some very specific areas of policy. In fact, Kenney's website has a "Where I Stand" section with a list of his policy priorities, and he has talked about many of them in more detail in media interviews.

Kenney's agenda is best summed up in the text of a social media post he made in February:

"There is no obstacle in the NDP's legacy that we will not be able to undo. I would have the longest ever sitting of the summer session of the Alberta Legislature in 2019. I call it the 'Summer of Repeal,' we'll turn off the air conditioners in the Legislature to focus the mind. We'll start with Bill 1, the Carbon Tax Repeal Act, followed by a succession of repeals of the NDP regulatory and legislative agenda."

Kenney, platform or no platform, has taken clear positions on many issues including spending on public services, workers' rights, climate change, education curriculum, private schools, and LGBTQ rights.

Cutting public services to balance the budget

Kenney says he would eliminate the

\$10 billion annual deficit and balance the budget within three years. He characterizes Alberta's current level of spending on public services as "waste" and says spending is excessive on bureaucracy and administration. It is a popular conservative line used to justify big budget cuts, even when it has little basis in reality. Albertans already have decades of experience of conservative premiers finding "efficiencies" to cut spending on public services, which have resulted in ballooning class sizes in schools, long wait times to get into seniors' care, and minimal supports for our most vulnerable individuals and families.

One of Kenney's few concrete proposals that would affect spending is expanding the role of private corporations in health care to create more competition. Ironically, that sort of competition is what leads the United States to spend far more per capita than Canada on administration of health care.

His spending target is a massive 20 per cent, or \$11 billion, below current levels. So what would Kenney actually cut to achieve this staggering reduction? It is a question he has left unanswered. Now that he is leader of Alberta's Official Opposition party, he owes Albertans a detailed explanation of what he would cut and of what effects those cuts would have on Alberta's health care system, education system, and other public services. I'll come back to this question at the end.

Weakening workers' rights

Kenney pledges to abolish basic workplace protections the NDP



government extended to farm workers and strongly opposed changes to Alberta's labour standards that brought the province roughly in line with the rest of the country.

Reversing policies aimed at addressing climate change

Kenney has taken the position that preventing catastrophic climate change is not a priority and that Alberta's carbon tax, along with the wide variety of green programs the revenue pays for, should be scrapped. He says he is "hugely proud" of big oil corporations for their carbon capture and storage (CCS) projects. CCS was the preferred emissions remedy of Alberta's previous Progressive Conservative government, though it is a more expensive solution than wind or solar power and so questionable in its usefulness that former Premier Jim Prentice called it a "science experiment."

Kenney doesn't actually say CCS should receive more public funding. His single proposal that sounds anything like action to reduce emissions is investing in so-called "clean coal," a concept *Edmonton Journal* columnist Graham Thomson has called an "environmental unicorn."

Playing politics with education

Kenney has politicized the Alberta government's major curriculum review by accusing the government of trying to infuse its own ideology in the education system. The accusation has so little credibility that the *Edmonton Journal's* editorial board wrote Kenney and his fellow UCP leadership candidates asking them to "stop using the educational system as a political whipping boy."

He has, despite widespread criticism, stuck to a position that LGBTQ students who join a gay-straight alliance (GSA) in their school should be outed to their parents without their permission. He is also staunchly defending the generous public subsidies the government provides to private schools, which is arguably Alberta's most blatant waste of public money.

Reducing tax revenue

Kenney doesn't get as specific as his former leadership rival Brian Jean in the tax cuts he is proposing. Aside from the carbon tax, he wants to get "our other tax rates back down as quickly as we can," which presumably means bringing back the tax rates prior to the NDP's 2015 election win. That would reduce Alberta's annual tax revenue by about \$2 billion.



Balance the budget

Kenney frames his promise to balance the budget within three years as a 20 per cent reduction in spending to bring Alberta in line with British Columbia. What he doesn't mention is that average weekly earnings in Alberta are actually more than 20 per cent higher than in B.C. Employers in both the public and private sectors pay more in Alberta to retain qualified staff, which has a major effect on spending levels.

Another piece of information conveniently left out of Kenney's speaking notes is that B.C.'s tax system would raise Alberta 20 per cent more annual tax revenue amounting to \$8.7 billion annually. Alberta's tax system is by far the worst in the country at raising annual revenue to pay for public services, a problem I have called our revenue disadvantage.

We should indeed balance Alberta's

budget in the coming years, because it is absolutely essential to pay for preserving and improving our public services - but through fair and progressive taxation in the way that other provinces do, rather than relying on volatile revenue from non-renewable energy resources. It should be done by fixing our deficient tax system, not by gutting our health care system, education system, and supports for vulnerable individuals and families.

The solution to our revenue disadvantage is introducing a sales tax mitigated for low-income earners and increasing personal income tax revenue from middle and upper income earners. Of course, you won't find those solutions in Kenney's platform - but then, he doesn't really have a platform, does he?

This article is an updated version of a piece originally published online by Ricochet Media on October 19, 2017.

Public Interest Alberta welcomes new communications officer

On November 1, 2017, Brett Lambert joined Public Interest Alberta as our new Communications Officer, replacing the outgoing Judith Paquin, who took a position with Cuso International in Laos.

Brett has a diploma in Journalism from Grant MacEwan College (now MacEwan University), a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish Language and Literature, and a Master's of Library and Information Studies both from the University of Alberta.

Prior to joining PIA, he worked in various communications and administrative roles at the University of Alberta (Faculty of Agricultural, Life

and Environmental Sciences, Office of the Vice-President Research, University Relations, Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences) and Native Counselling Services of Alberta.

His past volunteer experience has included the Parkland Institute, the Non-Academic Staff Association at the University of Alberta, the Provincial Archives of Alberta, CJSR 88.5 FM, among others. He lives at home with his wife Diana and two sons, Cooper and Tyler.

Please join us in welcoming Brett to the Public Interest Alberta team!



PUBLIC INTEREST ALBERTA'S 12TH ANNUAL ADVOCACY CONFERENCE

ALBERTA AT THE CROSSROADS FORWARD NOT BACK

APRIL 5-6, 2018 AT CHATEAU LOUIS, EDMONTON



KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY ALEX HIMELFARB

former Clerk of the Privy Council and editor of
Tax is Not a Four-Letter Word

(APRIL 4 IN CALGARY)

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POVERTY ELIMINATED
FAIR TAXATION
STRONGER DEMOCRACY

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