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The Advocate

A PUBLICATION OF PUBLIC INTEREST ALBERTA

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Revenue Reno

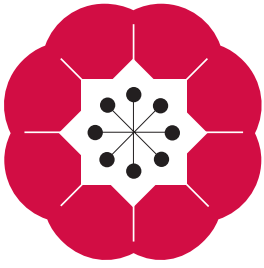
Inside our latest campaign to fix Alberta's revenue shortage to protect our public services

Child Care in Alberta

To achieve better child care, we need revenue reform



Animated artwork by Campaign Gears



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

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Office Administrator

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Share Your Thoughts

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

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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.

Public Interest Alberta joins CUPE Local 474

We are pleased to announce that Public Interest Alberta's employees recently joined the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 474 and reached their first collective agreement.

Addictions and Residential Centre workers, and Alberta Workers Health Centre.

Many thanks to all involved within CUPE and Public Interest Alberta in making this possible!

CUPE Local 474 also represents workers from Edmonton Public School Custodial Workers, Operation Friendship Senior Society workers, Salvation Army



Renew Your Membership Today!

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Public Interest Alberta

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

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If We Want Better Child Care In Alberta, We Need Revenue Reform

**By Donna Staszewski, Child Care and Early Learning Task Force Chair
and Joel French, Public Interest Alberta Executive Director**

In April 2017, the Government of Alberta announced funding for 22 Early Learning and Child Care Centres, creating nearly 1,300 new spaces with a focus on affordability and quality. They have since announced an expansion to up to 78 new centres across the province. However, if we turn our gaze westerly across the Rockies, we see a remarkable development where an even greater foundation is being laid for a publicly funded universal child care system. The British Columbia provincial government is making a \$1-billion investment over three years to increase quality, affordability, and accessibility of child care and early learning.

How is it that B.C. is able to forge ahead with an ambitious and expensive child care program that will benefit children, individuals, families, and society enormously and do so in the context of a projected balanced budget – while in Alberta we have a much smaller pilot project with little foreseeable hope for a much-needed, full-scale program, in the context of our ongoing ten billion-dollar deficit?

We care about our children and their well-being as much as people in B.C. Both provinces recognize the necessity of comprehensive, affordable, high-quality early learning and child care. Both provinces have NDP governments. Why is it that B.C. can invest so much in children, and Alberta is only able to offer a small-scale pilot project?

The answer, of course, is that the B.C. government, despite having the second-lowest tax regime next to Alberta, still raises enough tax revenue to not only balance their budget, but to embark on this ambitious and much-needed program as a priority, one which will put them next to Quebec in terms of top-quality child care programs.

As reported by *The Globe & Mail*, this program will offer benefits of up to \$1,250 a month per child, benefiting 86,000 families once it is fully rolled out by 2020. The funding is tied to income and paid to operators to reduce fees. In addition, the government is also moving to lower the cost of licensed care by \$350 a month per infant or toddler, benefiting up to 50,000 families.

These programs will cost \$630 million over three years as well as additional \$237 million funding to create 22,000 new child care spaces, maintain the current spaces, and incentivize providers to offer more flexible hours. The plan also allocates \$136 million to bolster education opportunities for early childhood educators.



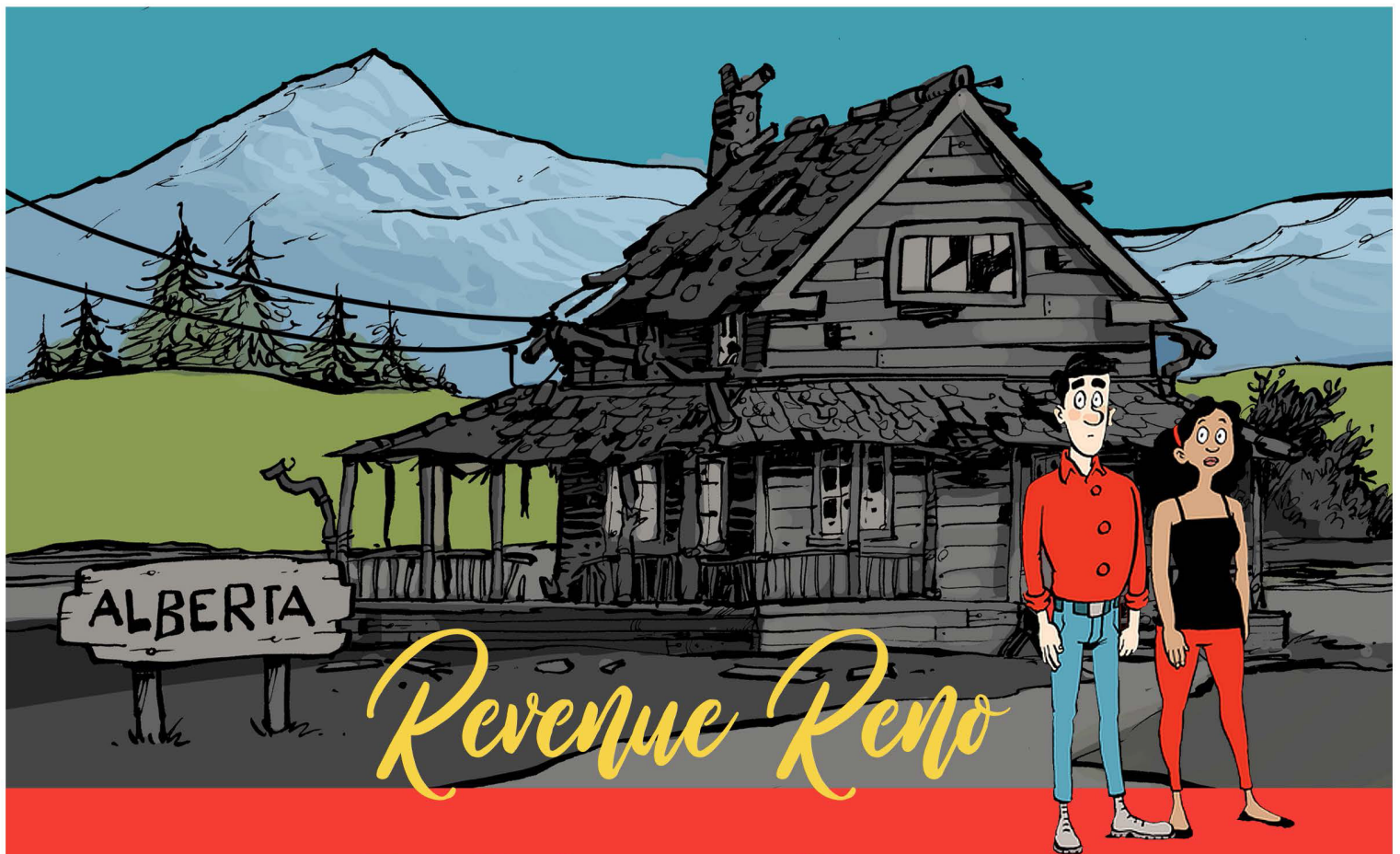
In Alberta, on the other hand, our revenue generation system gives us the worst of both worlds: a large budget deficit and the inability to do what is necessary to strengthen our public services, including child care. Our tax system has long been seen by some as the “Alberta Advantage,” but it is increasingly clear that this tax system is now the key element of what must be seen as the “Alberta Disadvantage.”

If we had B.C.’s system of taxation, we would generate \$8.7 billion more in annual revenue. For now, not only can we in Alberta only dream about such progress, we are stuck with questions of “what to cut” in a process of “compassionate belt-tightening” and trying to reduce our enormous budget deficit.

Our government and political parties seem to be vainly praying for a return of high oil prices to get us out of this hole, but all of the evidence is that is just not going to happen. Further, it probably should not happen – that is, we got in this trouble by relying on volatile oil and gas prices; we shouldn’t go back there. Revenue from those non-renewable resource would be better saved for the benefit of future generations.

The answer is clear: we need to do what B.C. and other provinces do. We must reform our tax base to increase government revenues so we can pay for much needed revitalization of our public services, including our completely inadequate child care system. The tax systems of other Canadian provinces would raise us between \$8.7 billion and \$22.4 billion in additional annual revenue, so the solutions are not difficult to find.

So, if you want big improvements in Alberta’s child care system, you need to demand big changes to our province’s tax system. Otherwise, we will be stuck talking about small-scale changes to a system that requires much bigger changes.



Public Interest Alberta has launched this new campaign calling for the provincial government to fix Alberta's revenue shortage to protect and revitalize our public services.

**Albertans need public services.
They must be strengthened, not cut.**

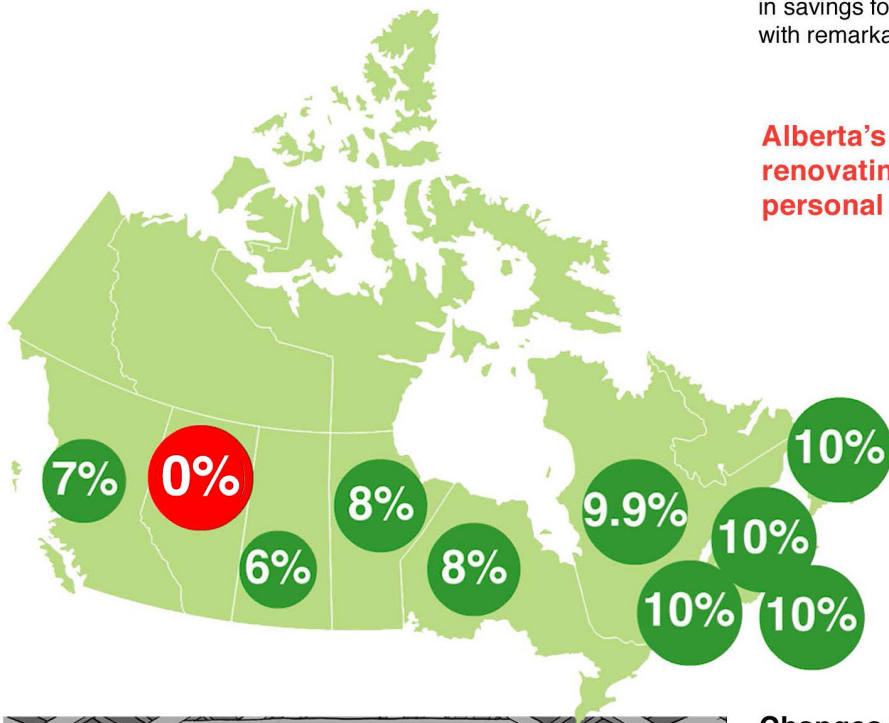
The current fiscal challenges are the result of decades of previous Alberta governments making our province's financial situation dependent on resource revenues to fund basic public services.



Alberta has a government revenue shortage that must be fixed to protect and revitalize our public services.

Oil and gas revenues are far too volatile to be relied on to fund public services that Albertans should consistently be able to count on. In recent years, government resource revenues have been as high as \$11.7 billion (2011-12) while the forecast for resource revenues in 2016-17 dipped to \$2.4 billion. The evidence clearly suggests that high oil prices will not be returning in the foreseeable future.

We should be taking these one-time revenues from the sale of our natural resources to make substantial long-term investments in savings for future generations in the way that Norway has done with remarkable results since 1995.



Alberta's revenue shortage is best solved by renovating our tax system with changes to personal income taxes and a sales tax.

When it comes to reforming our tax system, there are a variety of tools at our disposal.

If Alberta had the same tax system as any other Canadian province, we would raise between \$8.7 billion and \$22.4 billion in additional revenue.

A sales tax would generate revenue of up to \$1.6 billion for each percentage point and the costs for lower income Albertans can be mitigated with rebates.



Changes to personal income taxes could raise significant new revenues. For example, The personal income tax structures of British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Ontario would generate between \$1 billion and \$3.5 billion annually.

The time has clearly come for Albertans to pay for our much-needed public services in the same manner as all other provinces – through fair, sustainable tax revenue.

To learn more about our campaign, please visit:

www.revenuereno.ca



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Animated artwork by Campaign Gears

Public Funds Diverted to Private Schools

By Duncan Kinney

Progress Alberta Executive Director

Six new or modernized schools, 109 new playgrounds or 272 new teachers. That's what Alberta's public education system could immediately gain if we stopped subsidizing the 15 most elite private schools — schools that charge over \$10,000 in tuition per student — with \$27.4 million of public funds each year.

"We're wasting money on subsidizing a private choice," said Joel French, executive director of Public Interest Alberta. "We don't do that in other areas. If somebody doesn't want to use a public library, we don't write them a cheque from the government to go buy a book."

These highly exclusionary elite private schools are all located in or near Calgary, and include Strathcona-Tweedsmuir (up to \$22,285/year), Webber Academy (\$18,800/year), Rundle College (up to \$17,625/year), the Edge School for Athletes (up to \$18,270/year), and West Island College (\$16,120/year). Those annual tuition rates don't even include enrolment deposits, one-time payments required for acceptance at some schools, which range from \$6,000 at Webber Academy to \$7,000 at West Island College to a \$1,500 "family initiation fee" at Calgary Waldorf School.

These elite private schools are inaccessible to a vast majority of Albertan families. Yet the government continues to fund them at a per-student rate of 70 per cent compared to public, separate and Francophone students — making it the most heavily subsidized private school system in the country.

"Part of the problem is that as the private school sector grows, then parents become even more unwilling to pay taxes because they say they're 'doing us a favour' and 'why don't we do them a favour and lower their taxes?'" said Trevor Harrison, professor of sociology at the University of Lethbridge. "It's hard to know where the plateau level is,

but at some point the balance of power shifts so much that suddenly the public system just doesn't have enough funding. That's the really dangerous point."

Class sizes in Alberta's public, separate and Francophone schools continue to bulge well past recommended guidelines. That's especially the case for kindergarten to Grade 3 classes. The 2003 report by Alberta's Commission on Learning that set the guidelines still used today for class sizes recommended 17 students in each K-3 class. Yet Calgary's public school district has an average class size of 19.9 students. And Edmonton's is even worse: 22.2 students per class. Higher grade levels often don't fare any better. Red Deer's public school district has an average of 25.2 students in Grade 4 to Grade 6 classes — that number should be kept at or below 23, according to the guidelines. And Calgary's public high schools have 29.1 students per class, well over the advised mark of 27.

The report by Alberta's Commission on Learning emphasized that the numbers were guidelines, not fixed metrics. But it also wrote that it "feels strongly that province-wide class size guidelines are critical for the early grades," noting that reducing class sizes for K-3 classrooms has discernible academic benefits, especially for poor and minority children. Furthermore, it reported that inadequate funding and class sizes were the two most serious concerns voiced by Albertans during the commission's consultations.

These are issues that have only been exacerbated in recent years, as inflation and population growth have eaten away at existing funding frameworks. Between 2009 and 2017, the population of students in Alberta increased by 16 per cent — but the number of teachers only grew by seven per cent. Recent investments by the Alberta government has helped, but more is needed. There's one very obvious way to



help fix this: redirect the \$27.4 million that is currently subsidizing elite private schools into the public system, helping to fund new schools, teachers and classrooms for regular Albertan kids. This would play a significant role in ensuring that children from all backgrounds have the same opportunity to learn in classrooms with recommended sizes and opportunities to interact with teachers and support staff. It would also ensure that education is actually properly regulated and inclusive of students from all backgrounds. In 2015, Webber Academy — one of the most elite private schools in the province — was fined \$26,000 by the Alberta Human Rights Commission for refusing to allow two 14-year-old Muslim boys to pray on campus grounds. It fought the decision multiple times. Last year, school founder Neil Webber said the school "hasn't changed a thing" because of the ruling. Meanwhile, some private schools have publicly opposed gay-straight alliances, while others have been temporarily shut down for lack of transparency about funding.

Schools are supposed to be places where kids of all socioeconomic and religious backgrounds can learn in safe and accessible environments. Elite private schools are the farthest thing imaginable from that goal. Let's defund them, redirect the money to public education and build a more equal and progressive Alberta.

Originally published February 14, 2018 at ProgressAlberta.ca

Forward, Not Back

By Larry Booi

Board President and Democracy Task Force Chair

Most observers seem to agree that Albertans have arrived at an important crossroads, a classic “fork in the road” in which we face a choice of two clear directions.

This time, however, the choice is no longer one that is easily seen as “left versus right.” Rather, it now more clearly seems to be one of “forward vs backward.”

It is vitally important that progressive individuals and organizations recognize just what is at stake in the run-up to next year’s provincial election, and how crucial it is that they advocate, engage and mobilize effectively in the coming months in order to ensure that we continue to move forward in directions that became possible as a result of the 2015 election, and to prevent the very real possibility of profoundly regressive directions being put in place after the election in 2019.

And make no mistake, the directions currently being advocated by Jason Kenney’s United Conservative Party are unquestionably backward-looking.

The return of the flat tax, full funding for private schools and home schoolers, massive privatization of health care, enormous cuts to public services, a focus on eliminating the provincial debt at all costs, reducing corporate taxes and eliminating small business taxes, allowing unfettered growth in greenhouse gas emissions, and repealing the carbon tax and virtually every other initiative of the NDP government, including the new protections for farm and ranch workers. It’s as if they have been catapulted backward in time to the early Klein era, and have learned nothing from the enormous changes in the province, country and world during the past two decades.

Going backward, full speed behind.

So if that is what “backward” looks like – more privatization, weakened public services, more inequality, more poverty, less support and more downloading on to individuals and families - what should “forward” entail?

Of course, “forward” is what we make it, but the basics seem clear: strengthened and revitalized public services supported by sustainable government revenue through taxation reform; stronger protections for the environment with emphasis on renewable energy; less income inequality and poverty; meaningful reconciliation with indigenous peoples; strengthened public institutions and spaces; and more inclusive and democratic systems.

It may well be that progressives, while understanding the difficult financial situation the government faces, are frustrated with a lack of progress in some of these areas by Alberta’s NDP government, and by its emphasis on pipelines and other fossil fuel issues.

Those are fair comments, but it is also important to remember that this government has moved forward in a considerable number of significant areas, including the minimum wage, the carbon tax, more progressive taxation, the Alberta Child Benefit, the Early Learning and Child Care program, improvements to the labour code, protection for farm and ranch workers, campaign and party finance reform, freezing post-secondary tuition, and phasing out coal-fired electricity.

Perhaps part of the problem is that we are so used to decades

of protecting and defending public services and the public interest from attacks, and now we need to push harder for genuine improvements in this changed context.

This government has faced substantial pressure from right wing, corporate and wealthy interests, and they need to hear much more from those who want further progressive changes.

The year before the election is the crucial time for influencing governments and political parties. If we want more “forward” movement from this government, we need to advocate more effectively – to organize, engage and mobilize others to make clear to MLAs and government that we expect them to move ahead on the issues that are important to us.

Public Interest Alberta is committed to contributing to these advocacy efforts in comprehensive ways. I encourage those who feel strongly about and support this type of work to attend our annual advocacy conference this April, where we will focus directly on these issues and opportunities under our conference theme, “Alberta at the Crossroads: Forward, Not Back.”





PUBLIC INTEREST ALBERTA'S 12TH ANNUAL ADVOCACY CONFERENCE

ALBERTA AT THE CROSSROADS FORWARD NOT BACK

APRIL 5-6, 2018 AT CHATEAU LOUIS, EDMONTON



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former Clerk of the Privy Council and editor of
Tax is Not a Four-Letter Word
(APRIL 4 IN CALGARY)



CLOSING KEYNOTE DIANA GIBSON
Founder, Canadians for Tax Fairness
Research Associate, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

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I will be attending the keynote in: ☐ Calgary on April 4th ☐ Edmonton on April 5th

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