

*Priorities for*  
**ADVANCING**  
*the* **PUBLIC INTEREST**



**Public Interest Alberta**  
Advocating for a Better Alberta for All

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# { INTRODUCTION }

Albertans will head to the polls in the spring of 2019 to make important decisions about our province's future. Leading up to that election, all political parties will be determining what direction they want to take Alberta.

Our aim with this document is to provide clear suggestions about progressive directions for activists and advocates across the province to help educate their friends, families, and coworkers about what they should expect of their elected officials and political parties in the important time ahead.

For decades, Alberta was governed by conservative parties who, at best, put a low priority on improving public services and at other times actively attacked, privatized, or dismantled them. These assaults were made much worse by those same governments dramatically reducing their own base of tax revenue, primarily with large tax cuts for wealthy individuals and large, profitable corporations. Those wealthy interests have also guided much of the governments' decision-making, leaving citizens and civil society with little voice in policy direction.

Since Alberta's NDP government was elected in 2015, considerable progress has been made in many areas of public policy. Despite inheriting a severe shortage of annual tax revenue, the new government reversed its predecessors' plans to cut health care, education, and other public services. It made significant new investments in programs like Early Learning and Child Care Centres, affordable housing, and the Alberta Child Benefit. It reduced the role of big money in election campaigns by banning corporate and union donations, introducing spending limits, and lowering contribution limits. For the first time, an Alberta government took meaningful action to begin addressing climate change by introducing a carbon tax and a host of programs to lower greenhouse gas emissions.

The new government also made changes to Alberta's tax system, increasing revenues from wealthy individuals and large corporations. However, the changes were not nearly enough to fix the severe shortage of tax revenue created by the conservative governments' years of massive tax cuts and the drop in the global price of oil, which led to a sharp drop in resource royalty revenues. Those factors have left Alberta short approximately \$10 billion in annual revenue. A solution to that shortage is required to ensure the province can sustain its existing public services and expand them to improve the lives of all Albertans.

We need to address these crucial concerns and to focus clearly on priorities and directions that will not just preserve but actually enhance and revitalize our public services, substantially increase government revenue, and strengthen our democracy. We need big changes and bold advocacy.

These proposals in this document are the result of input from a wide range of organizations and individuals who advocate for a more just and fair Alberta, including Public Interest Alberta's Task Force members, our board of directors, attendees at our annual advocacy conference, and Friends of Medicare. We asked them all to give us their best advice on two things: the current situation in their policy focus area and the priorities elected officials and parties should adopt to improve the situation. Their collective insights represent clear, progressive directions for the lead up to the 2019 election and beyond, and provide a basis for the important advocacy efforts that must follow.

# { REVENUE REFORM }

## The Current Situation

Alberta's severe revenue shortage is the most far-reaching problem the provincial government currently faces. With resource revenues disappearing due to the low global price of oil, Alberta is no longer exceptional as a province. The problem is important to solve, particularly since conservative politicians and corporate lobby groups use the pretext of government deficits to fuel their constant calls for cuts to health care, education, and other public services.

Such voices treat budgetary deficits as cause for alarm and immediate action. However, a more constructive approach to public policy is to determine if budgetary problems are short-term or structural in nature and, if they are structural, to work toward a long-term solution.

On the positive side, the NDP government has made two major changes to increase public revenue:

- Increasing income taxes on incomes higher than \$140,000 per year
- Increasing the tax rate on the profits of large corporations from 10 per cent to 12 per cent

The government also made two decisions that make solving the revenue shortage more difficult:

- Reducing the tax rate on the profits of smaller corporations from 3 per cent to 2 per cent
- Largely maintaining the oil and gas royalty structures put in place by previous conservative governments that sell our resources to corporations at ludicrously low prices, particularly when resource prices are high

Recent Alberta governments have been content to rely on high oil and gas prices to fund their operational budgets. The review of royalties, completed in 2016, missed an opportunity for Albertans to receive fair returns from our oil and gas resources. However, the current fiscal situation shows relying on non-renewable resource revenues to fund government operations is not sustainable in the long term. Canada's Parliamentary Budget Officer reports that Alberta needs permanent tax increases or spending reductions in the amount of \$14.1 billion per year to be fiscally sustainable.

On the positive side, comparisons to other provinces clearly show that Alberta's tax system could be improved to raise significantly more revenue. If the province adopted the tax system of any other province in Canada, we could raise between \$8.7 billion and \$22.4 billion in additional annual revenue, which would reduce or eliminate the need to fund operational budgets with non-renewable resource revenue.

Most of the additional revenue would need to be raised via a sales tax and/or higher personal income taxes for most Albertans. Each one per cent increase on incomes between \$18,000 and \$143,000 would raise approximately \$1 billion, while each one per cent increase in sales tax would raise between \$1 billion and \$1.6 billion annually.

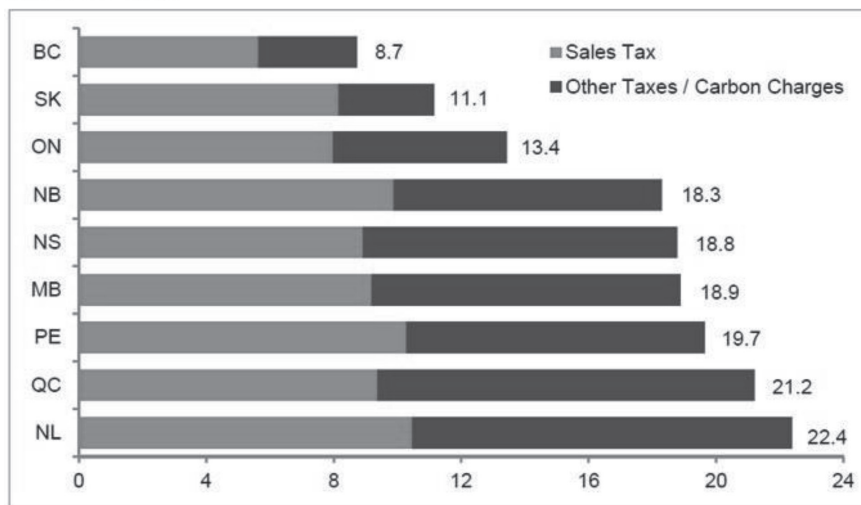
Counting on resource revenues to fund government's basic operation is not sustainable, so Albertans must decide how to solve our revenue shortage through fair taxation.



The Government of Alberta should prioritize action in the following areas to give it sufficient capacity to invest in a more just and fair province.

- 1. Reform the government revenue system to raise significantly more tax revenue using the following options:**
  - Increase income tax rates for middle and upper income brackets
  - Introduce a sales tax, mitigated to ensure the impact is minimal on Albertans with low incomes
- 2. Introduce fair royalty rates on non-renewable resources to save for the future**
  - Increase royalty revenue Albertans receive from our oil and gas resources, particularly when prices are high
  - Allocate non-renewable resource revenue to long-term investments for the benefit of future generations

**Alberta's Tax Shortfall**  
(billions of dollars)



# { CHILD CARE AND EARLY EDUCATION }

## The Current Situation

In 2015, Albertans elected a government that campaigned on promises to make child care more affordable and to pursue greater gender equality in the province. The first budget released in October 2015 went further, committing the government to create child care spaces that were more affordable, higher quality, and more accessible for families. These commitments represent the most forward-thinking approach to child care Albertans have ever had from a government.

Poor access to child care disproportionately affects women. Lack of access to child care hinders women's ability to full economic participation, and many child care workers, who are overwhelmingly women, report low wages and limited professional opportunities, resulting in high staff turnover rates. The current government has taken significant steps towards a better child care system and greater gender equality within Alberta. These include:

- Creation of the Ministry of the Status of Women, which includes a mandate to create and support a regulated, affordable child care system in Alberta.
- Implementation of the Early Learning and Child Care Centres pilot project to support greater affordability, accessibility, and quality in non-profit centres across Alberta.

Under previous governments, child care was not a high priority. New investments were few, and the sector was often saddled with cuts, such as the 2013 elimination

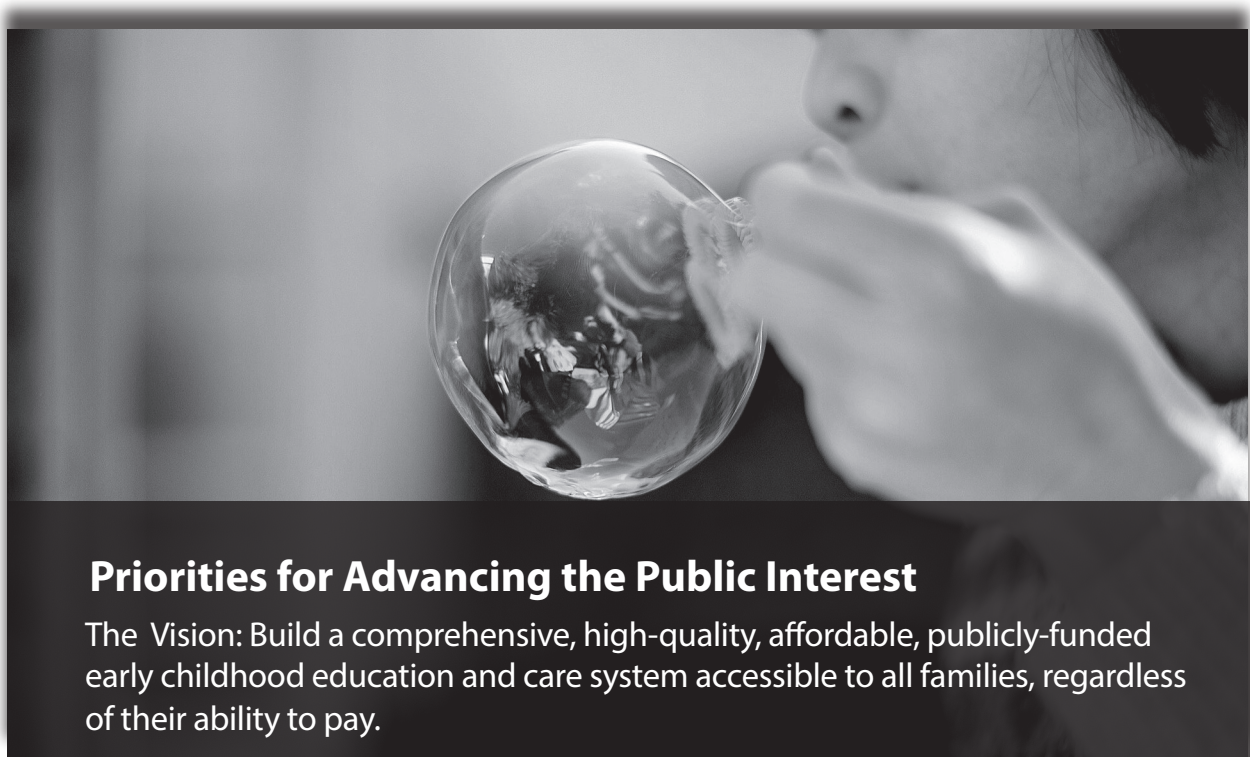
of the Quality Enhancement Grant. Recent years have also seen continual growth in the proportion of child care centres run as for-profit operations.

Child care costs in Alberta's two major cities are some of the highest in the country. Subsidies to both families and child care professionals are insufficient, with the maximum allowance of \$628 per child leaving many families still paying hundreds of dollars in monthly fees.

Due to unaffordability of quality care, many families have had no choice but to use poor quality, unregulated care or are forced to leave the paid workforce when they cannot afford the costs of child care. Women remain the most likely to leave the paid workforce due to inaccessible child care, and child care continues to be an issue that disproportionately disadvantages women.

Despite the current government's revenue shortage, it has taken some tentative steps towards the creation of a more comprehensive child care strategy. A new federal government has also allocated funding to begin planning a child care system for Canada. However, as child care has not been a priority of previous governments, the sector is still in need of significantly more support.





## **Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest**

The Vision: Build a comprehensive, high-quality, affordable, publicly-funded early childhood education and care system accessible to all families, regardless of their ability to pay.

The Government of Alberta should prioritize action in the following areas to ensure families are fully supported in the care and development of their children:

### **1. Continue investment in a universal, truly affordable, high quality child care system**

- Establish long-term, stable funding for Early Learning and Care Centres (ELCCs)
- Raise the standards for staff training in ELCCs to increase the quality of care

### **2. Support the professionalization of early childhood educators to improve quality**

- Strengthen training standards for early childhood professionals by phasing in a requirement for at least a two-year diploma in the field, with support for workers already in the field to meet the new requirements
- Increase wages of workers to retain well-trained staff in front-line positions.
- Immediately begin developing a strategy to support child care centres implementing the province's early learning and care curriculum framework

### **3. Improve accessibility to high quality early childhood education and after school care programs**

- Invest in increased access to child care spaces for families with infants, children with special needs, and those living with lower incomes
- Improve hours of accessibility to child care spaces to support families with non-traditional working hours
- Require all new schools and other publicly-owned facilities to incorporate additional space for early childhood and after school programs
- Consider underutilized schools as sites for child care centres where there is an unfilled need in the community

# { EDUCATION }

## **The Current Situation**

Alberta's K-12 education system continues to suffer from a combination of increased expectations and inadequate resources. For years, unstable, unpredictable, and inadequate funding has led to larger and larger class sizes. The PC government's final provincial budget in 2015 planned not to fund the projected enrolment growth of 12,000 students.

While classrooms across the province are growing increasingly complex, supports are not keeping up with those needs. In fact, research by the provincially-funded Early Child Development Mapping Project ([www.ecmap.ca](http://www.ecmap.ca)) shows that Alberta children are already behind in their development before they begin kindergarten. The number of English language learners is also increasing without sufficient support.

Since the 2015 election, the new Alberta government has fulfilled some of its promises to improve the province's education system, including fully funding student enrolment growth, building new schools, introducing a school nutrition program, and reducing mandatory school fees.

The province's Early Learning and Child Care Centres pilot project that are funding several non-profit programs was also a significant step in the right direction, in prioritizing the development of children in their early years (0-5).

At the same time, some of the government's campaign platform promises remain unfulfilled: reducing class sizes, increasing supports to respond to the increasing complexity of classrooms, and phasing in all-day kindergarten.

At the same time, the provincial government continues to provide a substantial amount of unnecessary funding to private schools, totalling more than \$100 million per year, excluding special needs schools. That money would be better spent strengthening our Public, Catholic, and Francophone school systems.





## Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest

The Vision: A fair and just Alberta for all requires strengthening our K-12 education system so that every child in the province has a fair start.

The Government of Alberta should prioritize changes in the following areas to ensure we develop the full potential of every child:

### 1. Strengthen our public and separate school systems

- Immediately implement the campaign platform promise to reduce class sizes
- Develop province-wide class size maximums and fund school boards to meet them
- Increase supports in classrooms to respond to increasingly complex needs

### 2. Enhance equity in education

- Phase out public funding of private schools and reallocate that funding to needs in the Public, Catholic, and Francophone school systems
- End the charter schools experiment by turning them into private schools or integrating them into public school systems

### 3. Prioritize authentic and meaningful learning

- Reform provincial assessment and evaluation practises to focus on more meaningful outcomes of learning
- Ensure curriculum is designed to develop well-rounded citizens and includes arts, languages, and social sciences as priorities alongside science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)
- Respect the professionalism of teachers as those best positioned to assess student progress and needs

### 4. Prioritize investments in early learning

- Expand the pilot project for Alberta's Early Learning and Child Care Centres toward a universal system of early learning and care
- Phase in all-day kindergarten to make it available to all Alberta children

# { POST-SECONDARY } EDUCATION }

## The Current Situation

Alberta has a wide variety of universities, colleges, and technical institutes providing high quality education to Albertans, as well as Canadians from other provinces and people from all over the world. However, over the past two decades, successive provincial governments have treated post-secondary education, at best, as a low priority.

Under Peter Lougheed's government in the 1970s, Alberta had the lowest tuition rates in the country. Twenty years later, tuition rates skyrocketed under Ralph Klein, as his government's massive cuts degraded public services overall and downloaded more and more costs onto Albertans.

In 2013, the PC government made deep cuts of

7.5 per cent that resulted in many staff layoffs, the reduction or elimination of programs, and increased class sizes. Its 2015 budget, which projected a growing deficit, showed plans for further cuts to a system already stretched thin.

The NDP government elected in 2015 reversed the planned cuts and froze tuition levels. The measures relieved pressures in the short-term. Early in 2017, the Minister of Advanced Education publicly expressed an interest in making tuition free for lower-income families, following models in Ontario and New Brunswick. The government is currently reviewing many aspects of post-secondary education in the province, so there are big opportunities for a new long-term direction to emerge.



# Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest

The Vision: Embrace more enlightened policies and sustained investment in building a more accessible, affordable, and high quality post-secondary education (PSE) system.

The Government of Alberta must take the following steps to improve post-secondary education in the province:

## 1. Decolonize and indigenize our post-secondary institutions

- Make Indigenous education a priority
- Ensure governance structures recognize and respect Indigenous peoples
- Implement intellectual and cultural traditions of Indigenous peoples through curriculum and learning approaches relevant to learners and communities
- Support increasing understanding and reconciliation
- Increase the number of Indigenous employees and senior administrators
- Establish Indigenous-centric services
- Actively build relationships with and be accountable to Indigenous communities

## 2. Reverse past policies that have transferred more of the costs of post-secondary education onto students

- Increase government investment for post-secondary institutions
- Make tuition fees more affordable so PSE is accessible to everyone, regardless of socioeconomic situation
- Regulate tuition fees for international students to ensure changes to their tuition levels are proportional to those of domestic students
- Provide more grants for low-income, rural, and Indigenous students to ensure PSE is truly open to all
- Strictly regulate mandatory non-instructional fees

## 3. Improve the quality and accessibility of post-secondary education

- Increase program spaces to the national average to stop turning away so many qualified prospective students from colleges, institutes, and universities, and to allow many more students to develop their full potential
- End the systemic practice of precarious employment for faculty and support staff at post-secondary institutions to improve conditions for students in their research and education

## 4. Recognize and support quality research at post-secondary institutions as a public good

- Make investments in quality post-secondary education sustainable so Alberta will be able to develop the diverse knowledge and skills of professionals and tradespeople needed for the future
- Focus on attracting and retaining quality faculty, staff, and graduate students to improve post-secondary education, conduct important research, and provide a foundation for a more robust economy
- Recognize in policy and practice that the purpose of post-secondary education goes beyond vocational training to improve our economy and includes equipping students with critical thinking and analysis skills to be engaged citizens

## 5. Reform the governance of post-secondary institutions to focus on the public interest

- Make the recruitment process for boards of post-secondary institutions far more transparent with a clear departure from past government practices of using them for patronage appointments
- Ensure strong representation on institutions' Board of Governors from undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and support staff
- Replace the ability of boards to unilaterally decide who is or is not considered a member of faculty associations replacing it with a more collaborative approach.

## 6. Address the mental health needs of students and staff

- Immediately fund the implementation of the recommendation from *Valuing Mental Health: Report of the Alberta Mental Health Review Committee 2015* that reads: "Create healthy and supportive post-secondary campus environments through health promotion, addiction and mental health campus services, and community partnerships."

# { HUMAN SERVICES AND POVERTY }

## The Current Situation

The 2015 election saw dramatic political transformation in Alberta. The current provincial government has been taking significant action to assist those living in poverty. The government has also resisted immense pressure from conservative parties and organizations to make cuts to frontline services in response to the current shortage of tax revenue.

Since May 2015, the government has made some significant positive steps to alleviate poverty, including funding increases to Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) and women's shelters, including increasing the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, creating a Status of Women Ministry, funding a new Early Learning and Care Centre program, and implementing an ambitious Alberta Child Benefit focused on supporting families with the lowest incomes.

Despite these actions, Alberta's women and children are still affected the most by income disparity. The rate of children living in poverty in Alberta has remained virtually unchanged for 25 years. Helping children and their parents who continue to live in poverty must remain a priority. Many families continue to struggle to afford quality and accessible child care. Women are disproportionately affected by the lack of access to child care because it hinders their ability to fully participate in the economy, while children in poverty do not have access to quality care and early interventions.

Action must be taken to help all Albertans, including those without children. The gap between Alberta's richest and poorest citizens has widened to unprecedented levels over the last 30 years. Further, economic instability has resulted in many full-time jobs being lost, and youth and Indigenous peoples have been hit hardest.

In addition to affordable childcare, many Albertans lack access to affordable housing, despite the increasing rental vacancies. Steps have been taken by the current government to create more accessible housing. However, the provincial government must continue to fund, support, and build more affordable housing options in communities where it is needed. Safe, appropriate, and stable housing is a key determining factor in the health and wellness of Albertans. This includes seniors, Albertans living with physical and mental disabilities, and low-income families.

In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work, Alberta has much to do, in partnership with the federal government, to ensure principles of justice and fairness include Indigenous communities.





## Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest

The Vision: Create a comprehensive framework to prevent, reduce, and ultimately eliminate poverty. This framework should align with the local poverty reduction initiatives that are happening in municipalities across the province to effectively meet local community needs.

The Government of Alberta should implement the following priorities to support vulnerable Albertans and eliminate poverty:

- 1. Work in partnership with Indigenous communities to ensure access to culturally relevant and appropriate services and programs**
  - Provide more targeted support and training for Indigenous peoples and communities
  - Develop new Indigenous cultural centres in major cities, specifically targeted at meeting the needs of Indigenous peoples living in urban areas
  - In cooperation with Indigenous leaders, the federal government must take appropriate steps to strengthen services on reserves, such as schools and health care centres
  - Undertake an evaluation of the relationship between Indigenous communities and Child Protective Services
  - Further incorporate Indigenous worldviews and histories into the elementary and high school curriculums in a culturally appropriate and relevant manner
- 2. Build a comprehensive, quality, affordable child care and early learning system**
  - Provide greater access to affordable, quality child care spaces to develop the full potential of every child and to ensure that those wanting to participate in the work force or to increase their earning power through training or education can do so, particularly for women and single parents
- 3. Provide better supports for all Albertans with low incomes**
  - Orders of government should adopt living wage policies for their employees and contracted services
  - Provide additional support for language and employment training for Albertans who need to upgrade their skills and literacy or be re-skilled
  - Increase social assistance rates, which are currently the lowest in Canada, and index income support programs like Alberta Works and Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped to inflation
  - Increase earnings exemptions and asset limits to make income support programs more fair and effective at lifting Albertans out of poverty
- 4. Substantially increase investment in affordable housing initiatives**
  - Increase direct to tenant rent subsidies to enhance affordability for low-income families and individuals
  - Remove the budget cap on rent supplements, which currently leaves eligible Albertans without that support after the government's budgeted amount has been spent each year
  - Ensure affordable housing units are available within all neighbourhoods and municipalities
  - Significantly increase asset limits for eligibility to social housing and lengthen the transition time for Albertans moving out of social housing
  - Extend the Health Benefit to low-income working Albertans
  - Extend the Alberta Family Employment Tax Credit to all low-income Albertans, including those without children



# { ENVIRONMENT }

## The Current Situation

Since the 2015 election, the Alberta Government has put a price on carbon, capped oil sands emissions at 100 Mt, set targets for significantly cutting methane emissions from oil and gas operations, and begun phasing out coal-fired power. Additionally, the government has set a target to get 30 per cent of Alberta's electricity from renewable resources such as wind, hydro, and solar by 2030.

With an investment of \$645 million from its carbon levy, the provincial government created Energy Efficiency Alberta, a new crown corporation to implement many of its programs to reduce energy usage in residential and commercial settings. The government has also made changes to increase Albertans' engagement in micro-generation of renewable power and launched programs to support Indigenous communities and school boards to help them shift their electricity base away from reliance on fossil fuels and toward renewable energy generation.

In 2016, the provincial and federal governments committed to protecting at least 17 per cent of land and inland water systems by 2020 by building networks of protected areas and implementing other conservation measures. Action on that promise has included protection of the Castle Wildland Provincial Park, home to many at-risk species in southern Alberta.

At the same time, the Alberta government has been actively lobbying for approval of new oil and gas pipelines, which run counter to its climate change commitments. Without the

consent of Indigenous peoples whose lands are directly affected by these projects, successive governments have failed to fully implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which would enshrine land rights and the self-determination of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities in law.

Alberta's Climate Leadership Plan is missing clear targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Between 1990 and 2015, our emissions increased by 56 per cent, primarily due to the increase in oil and gas exports. Due to a lack of public reporting, Albertans currently have no way of knowing if the climate policies being implemented are actually reducing our emissions.

The federal government's commitment in signing the Paris Accord on climate change, which commits to keeping global warming below two degrees Celsius compared with preindustrial times, was followed up with a federal carbon price floor to be phased in beginning in 2018. The federal carbon price standard will reach its maximum of \$50 per tonne by 2022. However, according to the Pembina Institute, a carbon price of at least \$140 per tonne would be required for Alberta to make its fair contribution to reducing Canada's emissions.

Our federal and provincial governments do not yet have clear plans to meet our international commitments to prevent catastrophic climate change. Without such plans in place, we are unlikely to meet the challenge climate change poses to our planet for the sake of present and future generations.



## **Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest**

**The Vision:** Protect our environment and support a just transition away from the use of fossil fuels to a green economy powered 100% by clean and renewable energy, ensuring workers in affected sector do not bear the brunt of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The Government of Alberta should adopt the following priorities to ensure we have clean air and water, as well as a healthy planet to live on for generations to come:

### **1. Set greenhouse gas emissions targets in line with the science of climate change and clear plans to meet them**

- Implement measurable greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets that correspond with Alberta's share of Canada's international climate commitments
- Adopt a clear system of regular public reporting on emissions levels
- Phase in a higher carbon price that will allow Alberta to meet our fair share of Canada's emissions reduction targets

### **2. Fully implement the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

- Fulfill the promise to fully implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and advocate the federal government do the same
- Oppose pipeline projects that cross Indigenous lands without each First Nation's free, prior, and informed consent

### **3. Support community renewable energy projects and micro-generation**

- Focus support for new energy generation on publicly owned projects in partnership with municipal governments, school boards, First Nations, and Métis settlements
- Create greater incentives for small-scale owners of renewable energy sources to sell excess power into the grid

### **4. Work closely with communities in transition**

- Ensure workers and communities that are heavily reliant on fossil fuel industries are fully supported in their transitions to clean industries

### **5. Increase investments in sustainable transportation**

- Reduce Albertans' need to rely on personal vehicles for routine transportation, particularly in large and medium-sized cities, by investing more in public transit
- Expand investment in regional public transportation in consultation with communities across Alberta
- Support cities to make walking and biking more safe and accessible

### **6. Protect our lands and water**

- Continue adding ecologically-important land and water areas to the government's protected list to meet or exceed the current 17% commitment

# { HEALTH CARE }

## The Current Situation

Canada's universal public health care system was created over 50 years ago with a promise that services are available to meet health needs regardless of ability to pay.

In Alberta, advocates recently saw an end to 44 years of a government that had created many of today's problems through privatization and underfunding.

This led to a change in direction, with planned health cuts reversed. Privatization stopped for Edmonton Laboratory Services and Medicine Hat's laundry services, and the first plans in years were made to build public long-term care beds; however, challenges remain. Private delivery and for-profit care continue to flourish in Alberta.

The principles of Medicare have yet to be expanded to key areas. Canada is the only country with a universal public health system that does not include prescription medication coverage. One third of Alberta's workers do not have health benefits, and one in five Alberta households say they experience financial barriers to getting their prescribed medications.

Our drug costs continue to rise, with the United States being the only developed country with higher costs than Canada. Drug approvals favour drug company profits over efficacy and patient well being.

Momentum is growing for a co-ordinated national approach to adding prescription drugs to our Medicare system. At the same time, if we do not see this change at the federal level, we need Alberta to be leaders and show that we can provide prescription medication coverage here as an example for the rest of Canada to follow.

We continue to see the proliferation of private clinics that conflict with the core values of Medicare. Membership fees to concierge clinics of thousands of dollars and service fees for diagnostics go against the spirit, if not the letter, of the Canada Health Act. While improvements are needed in the public system, relying on the private sector will not get us there. Private delivery provides incentives for excessive referrals and unnecessary procedures which are becoming a growing contributor to health care spending and wait times.

We need to improve our public health care system, which will reduce demand for private care and ensure everyone, not just the wealthy, gets the care they need. It is a myth that Canada is over-reliant on public health care funding. Only 71 per cent of our health costs are publicly paid, making us more privatized than many countries including Germany, France, and Japan.

Provincially, Alberta has been consistently one of the lowest spending provinces on health care when measured as a percentage of our economic production. At the same time, failed health accord negotiations with the federal government mean that Alberta and all provinces will be losing out on much-needed sustained growth in federal transfer payments.

While we must always recognize that any funding increases that are lower than combined population growth and inflation amount to a cut, it is not good enough to simply hold the line. The promise of Tommy Douglas' vision for Medicare where services like pharmacare, dental, vision, and seniors care are covered for all are still not realized and will require more investment in the health of Albertans, not less.



## Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest

The Vision: Expand our public health care system to ensure all medically necessary care is covered by the public system. Alberta should move away from private corporations and organizations providing care and instead expand public delivery of care.

The Government of Alberta should adopt the following priorities to ensure residents of our province have access to the best care, regardless of their ability to pay:

### 1. Implement universal prescription drug coverage for all Albertans (and Canadians)

- Work with other provinces and negotiate with the federal government for a cost-shared national universal prescription drug plan
- Base coverage on an evidence-based formulary of what is medically necessary with no co-pays or dispensing fees
- Establish a made-in-Alberta pharmacare plan if the federal government is unwilling

### 2. Address concerns with private clinics

- Establish a moratorium on new private clinics while we improve the public system
- Monitor and enforce the Canada Health Act
- Identify gaps in regulation that allow the spirit of the Canada Health Act to be broken
- Expand the audit of the Copeman clinic to all for-profit concierge clinics in Alberta

### 3. Increase public funding for health care

- Engage the public in the need for tax revenue reform
- Allocate additional funding to support wellness initiatives and tackle social determinants of health
- Expand the Medicare umbrella to include coverage for dental care, vision, mental health services, and seniors care



# { SENIORS }

## The Current Situation

Alberta's seniors built our province and deserve access to the supports they need to age with dignity. As health needs increase, Albertans should be able to count on excellent pharmaceutical coverage and a quality continuing care system without worrying about financial hardship.

Our continuing care system is rife with problems of inadequate or inappropriate staffing, reports of neglect and abuse, gaps in care, wait times, unnecessary transitions, preventable hospitalizations, inappropriate pharmaceutical use, and more. Whether the underlying cause is a failure of policy or a failure of policy implementation, it is clear the system needs improvement. Despite the attention given to seniors' care issues, the system continues to suffer, with a significant presence of private, for-profit care and the downloading of costs from government budgets to seniors and their families.

In recent decades, the system has become increasingly complex and confusing for Albertans to navigate, in part due to constantly changing terminology and a lack of transparent reporting. "Continuing care" now refers to a variety of living models (see Figure 1). These models range from Home Living, where individuals live independently but are assessed as having serious health needs requiring Home Care support, to facility-based long-term care, where residents are charged a daily fee that covers the cost of basic accommodation, as well as medications and medical supplies and equipment.

Starting in 2003, the creation of Supportive Living residences led to the separation of health care and

accommodation costs; some health care would be covered by the government, but other costs would not be. Albertans who would have gone to long-term care were instead sent to Supportive Living, where the costs of pharmaceuticals and medical equipment and supplies are offloaded to the individual or family.

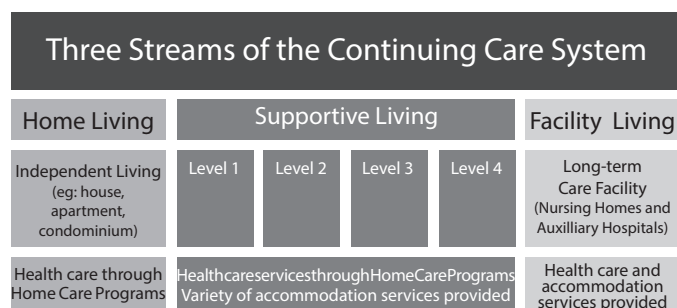
Instead of public bodies operating Supportive Living facilities and services, most are operated by private corporations and organizations contracted by government and subsidized with public funding. These operators led the creation of the care and accommodation standards still largely in place today, which are not adequately monitored or enforced for quality and to ensure safety of residents, their families, and staff. Further, care standards themselves, as well as monitoring and public reporting, do not guarantee quality of care or quality of life for the residents.

Until the 2017 announcement of 345 of a promised 2,000 new public long-term care beds, the Government of Alberta had for more than a decade focused solely on funding private organizations and corporations to build and operate new Supportive Living facilities.

Home care services are now approved only as a last resort and are intended only to supplement what can be provided by others, downloading even more costs on to patients' families. However, the 2016-17 provincial budget significantly increased home care funding, which could be used to strengthen home care and make it more available to those who need it.

The existing Seniors Drug Plan, despite governments' attempts to alter it, remains a universal program. However, it covers only a very limited selection of prescription drugs, resulting in high out-of-pocket costs for basic health care-related expenses.

Clearly, the status quo is inadequate and has been made worse in many ways. A new path is needed to ensure Alberta's seniors receive the care they need and deserve.



Source: Continuing Care Health Services Standards, 2013

Figure 1





## Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest

The Vision: Develop an integrated and comprehensive public system across the entire continuum of seniors' care ensuring that all seniors have access to dignified and quality care that meets individual health and social needs in their home communities when they need it.

The Government of Alberta should take the following actions to ensure the seniors who built our province can live with the dignity they deserve:

### 1. Address the needs across all streams of continuing care

- Increase the general public's awareness and understanding of how Alberta's continuing care system works
- Make continuing care comprehensive and fully integrated by developing a new, more responsive Vision and Master Plan that avoids relocating residents when their care needs change
- Ensure that provided services are adequately resourced, monitored, and evaluated
- Evaluate how the system can better meet the needs of specific demographic groups, including early-onset dementia, Indigenous, LGBTQ, and English Language Learner patients
- Expand the roles of the Health Advocate and Seniors Advocate to allow direct intervention in unsatisfactory situations
- Ensure any changes to the system by government, its agencies, and other care providers are subject to high standards of transparency and accountability

### 2. Improve the quality of all residential seniors' care

- Improve monitoring of residential seniors' care by prioritizing health, safety, and quality of life outcomes
- Phase out private ownership and operation of residential seniors' care
- Disclose the contracts between Alberta Health Services and private facility operators to the public
- Ensure effective Resident and Family Councils are present in every residential care facility in the province to improve care quality and provide a means for residents and their families to address unsatisfactory situations
- Allow for quicker adjustments to individual care plans in response to changes in needs
- Change measures of hours of care per resident to "hours worked" rather than "hours paid"
- Strengthen the facility inspection process by creating an independent oversight body to ensure compliance with care standards and providing for unannounced inspections
- Base care provided on the medical, rehabilitative, social, and overall health needs of individual residents

### 3. Reform home care services

- Implement the government's promise to introduce a new model for expanded public home care, guided by meaningful consultation with seniors, families, and directly-involved medical staff
- Phase out corporate, for-profit home care providers to ensure quality care is the top priority
- Ensure Albertans receiving home care have their health care needs met without charge to the patient

### 4. Strengthen pharmaceutical coverage

- Expand the list of pharmaceuticals covered by the Seniors Drug Plan to include all appropriate pharmaceuticals prescribed by a doctor or other approved prescriber
- Fully integrate pharmaceutical coverage into the public health care system, ensuring access to prescription drugs is not based on a patient's ability to pay or care setting

# { DEMOCRACY }

## The Current Situation

In Public Interest Alberta's 2015 *Priorities for Change*, the Democracy Task Force introduced its recommendations with the following observation:

“By almost any measure, Alberta is the least democratic province in Canada. Our province’s democratic deficit is deep and broad, and our current system gives wealthy and corporate elites undue influence and control at the expense of ordinary citizens.”

The Task Force identified detailed proposals regarding three top priorities for change in order to address the key concerns:

- Campaign and Party Finance Reform
- Electoral System Reform
- Strengthening citizen engagement in governance and decision making

It is encouraging to see that, three years later, the situation with respect to democracy has improved, as a result of changes made by the current Alberta government. The changes are largely in the area of campaign and party finance legislation, but also include the appointment of a Minister responsible for Democratic Renewal. As a result of these changes, the Government of Alberta has taken some meaningful steps toward strengthening our democracy – but there is still a great deal to be done.

In terms of campaign and party finance legislation, the new contribution limits are still far too high: the annual limit of \$4000 still allows for undue influence of money in politics. In addition, the government did not apply the new legislation to civic elections, with the result that corporate and union contributions, high contribution limits, and the absence of spending

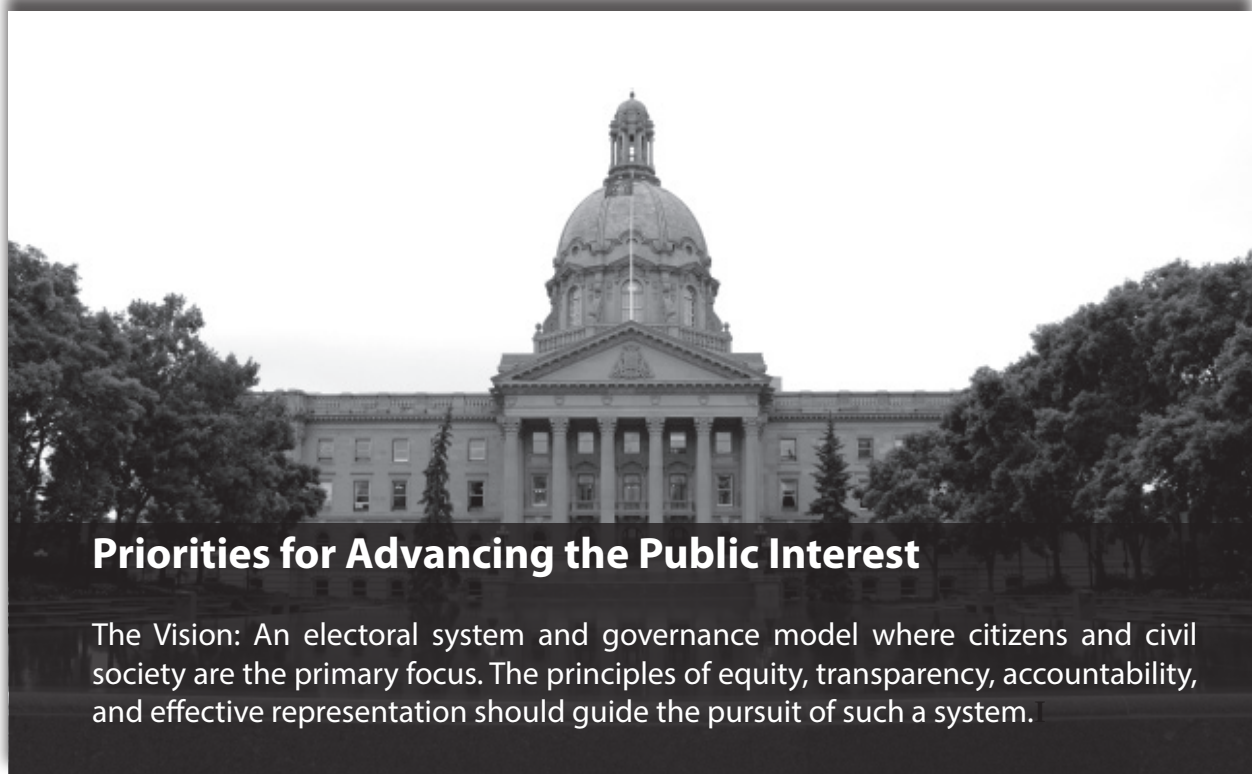
limits will continue to allow for undue influence of money in municipal elections across the province. As well, the recent emergence of raising money through inadequately regulated Political Action Committees raises further problems that will require additional action.

The area of electoral system reform still requires action: our first-past-the-post system continues to undermine basic democratic elements of majority rule, minority rights, and political equality, and significant ranges in constituency populations undermine representation by population. We have seen some solid progress in the work of Alberta’s Electoral Boundary Commission, but major legislative changes are essential in order to bring about comprehensive electoral system reform.

In 2015, the Task Force characterized the situation as follows:

“...the important decisions about legislation and policy are increasingly made by the premier and cabinet, without meaningful engagement of citizens and organizations; at best, ‘consultations’ by government are limited, perfunctory and ‘safe.’”

Unfortunately, the situation has not improved under the new government, and major changes are needed. Alberta’s concentration of far too much power in the hands of the premier and the cabinet also mean that the roles of MLAs, legislative committees, and the Legislative Assembly as a whole are marginalized, unsupported, and inconsistent with the requirements of elected representatives who exercise the legislative function in a strong democracy.



## Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest

The Vision: An electoral system and governance model where citizens and civil society are the primary focus. The principles of equity, transparency, accountability, and effective representation should guide the pursuit of such a system.

A comprehensive and systematic approach to further democratic reform in Alberta should include the following changes:

### 1. Improve citizen engagement

- Put in place a comprehensive program of policies and practices to ensure systematic engagement of citizens and civil society groups in the development of public policy in our province
- Use the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's "Ten Principles for Open and Inclusive Policy-Making" to guide the development of policies and practices in Alberta
- Establish an Office of Democratic Engagement to support and monitor the efforts of government departments in meeting the requirements for engagement of citizens and groups in policy development
- Provide new supports for legislative committees and MLAs in their efforts to facilitate ongoing democratic engagement by their constituents
- Establish a Public Centre for Democracy in order to further foster a democratic culture

### 2. Remedy issues with our electoral system

- Reduce the current legislated 25% maximum variance for average constituency population size to 5%
- Eliminate "special exceptions: constituencies, which allow up to a 50% maximum variance from average constituency population size
- Increase support to MLAs to assist them in effectively representing their constituents and addressing their varying needs
- Replace the first-past-the-post electoral system with a model of proportional representation

### 3. Further strengthen campaign and party finance legislation

- Establish public per vote subsidies and campaign expense rebates
- Reduce the maximum annual contribution limits from \$4000 to \$1500
- Apply similar campaign and party finance laws to elections at the municipal level

### 4. Strengthen the role of our elected legislature

- Establish an all-party committee to consider how to strengthen the role of MLAs
- Limit the independence of the roles of the premier and cabinet

# {WHAT CAN YOU DO?}

Elections are perhaps the best opportunity for citizens to engage with elected officials and those seeking elected public office. Leading up to Alberta's next provincial election in the spring of 2019, politicians, candidates, and political parties will be determining the direction their policy platforms will take and which issues will be their priorities.

Public Interest Alberta will be doing all we can to draw public attention to the priorities contained in this booklet. Influencing the positions of political parties requires individuals and organizations to work together and form common positions. We need you to take action in your own community to move our province closer to achieving these priorities. Choose one or more priority issues from this booklet you are passionate about, and advocate for them by:

## **Engage with your MLA and candidates**

- Contact the MLA who represents you in the Alberta Legislature. Find their contact information at [www.assembly.ab.ca](http://www.assembly.ab.ca), and e-mail or phone their office to request a meeting
- Give them a copy of *Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest*, and talk to them about your priority issues. Let them know you expect them to take action
- As representatives of different political parties are nominated in your constituency, communicate your views to them on these issues as well

## **Educating your community**

- Give copies of this booklet (or the online link: [www.pialberta.org/priorities](http://www.pialberta.org/priorities)) to your friends, family, neighbours, co-workers, and members of organizations you are involved in. Tell them about the specific priorities you care about, and encourage them to take action

- Spread the word on social media about the importance of your issues. Include a link to this document in your post
- Write a Letter to the Editor of your local newspaper about why it is important all elected officials commit to taking action on these issues

## **Supporting the work of organizations with public interest values**

- Promote initiatives and campaigns of other organizations advocating for the public interest like the Alberta Federation of Labour, Friends of Medicare, and the Parkland Institute. They can provide you with additional information and ideas to use in your community or with your organization

Alberta's election in the spring of 2019 will set the provincial government's direction for the following four years. If individuals and organizations across the province work together to draw constant attention to priorities that will advance the public interest, we can make a difference. We need your help to create the expectation that every elected official take action on these priorities, to ensure that we are firmly on the path toward a more just and fair Alberta.







**Public Interest Alberta**  
Advocating for a Better Alberta for All

Suite 604, 12323 Stony Plain Road NW,  
Edmonton, AB T5N 3Y5  
Phone: 780-420-0471  
E-mail: [office@pialberta.org](mailto:office@pialberta.org)

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