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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.

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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
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www.pialberta.org

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

Public Interest Alberta wins Friend of Education Award

Public Interest Alberta was honoured to receive the 2018 Friend of Education Award from Edmonton Public Teachers Local 37.

This award is in recognition of our work and support in furthering the education and learning experience of the students in Edmonton Public Schools.

Our executive director, Joel French, accepted the award from Heather Quinn, president of Edmonton Public Teachers Local 37.

Renew Your Membership Today!

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

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

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Alberta at the Crossroads: Forward, Not Back
Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and calls to be bold and unapologetic in advocacy work resonated throughout the conference


The conference theme was directly focused on the crucial choices facing Albertans and on what we need to do together through advocacy to make the most of these opportunities for positive change.

Passionate support for a strengthened and revitalized public services with the right mix of progressive taxation dominated the conference proceedings, which included a pre-conference workshop on provincial budgets and taxes facilitated by Diana Gibson, founder of Canadians for Tax Fairness. She gave a comprehensive overview of Alberta’s ongoing revenue shortage with discussion on the different mixes of taxation that could be pursued to address it. Gibson also delivered the closing keynote address.

Alex Himelfarb, formerly Canada’s top public servant, delivered the opening keynote address outlining the climate of privatization and deregulation embraced by governments around the world under the ideology of neoliberalism and explored how we push back against these ideas and provide economic security in a time of precarious work.

Panel discussions included the topics of Alberta’s potential future directions, implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to action and pursuing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and the interrelated challenges of a cleaner environment and stronger democracy. Break-out workshops on advocacy work in our action areas as laid out in our *Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest* publication also generated productive discussion.

Videos of our sessions are also available at: www.pialberta.org/2018conferencerecap

Next year’s conference will take place on April 4 and 5, 2019. Be sure to save the date!
Albertans Face Choice Between Service Cuts or a Sales Tax

By Joel French
Public Interest Alberta Executive Director

Alberta’s latest provincial budget is being judged by many, less for the things it did and more for what it didn’t do. It did not make any changes to the province’s tax system to raise more revenue, and it did not make massive cuts to public services to reduce spending. Instead, the budget forecasts an increasing reliance on non-renewable resource revenues with no real plan to ensure we have stable revenues in the future to protect and revitalize our public services.

Public Interest Alberta recently launched a campaign called Revenue Reno (www.RevenueReno.ca) which advocates for protecting and revitalizing our province’s public services by solving our significant shortage of annual tax revenue. Albertans deserve to be informed about the budget choices our province is facing, and we are simply not getting all of the facts from the political parties in the legislature.

Massive cuts to public services in the budget would have been a great leap backward for the province. In fact, the budget was full of piecemeal cuts to public services, which was still a step in the wrong direction, as spending in most areas failed even to keep up with population growth and inflation. That means yet another year of our health care and education systems – among other services – being stretched even thinner.

Problems continue to plague many areas of our public services. Attention is required to improve classroom conditions in our schools, reduce wait times for surgeries in our health-care system, fix the shortage of long-term care beds for seniors, and meet even the bare minimum of ensuring inflation does not lead to recipients of Alberta Works and Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) having less and less support each year.

Albertans want to see our public services strengthened, not cut. While the recent budget’s hopes of high levels of resource revenue returning are a better alternative than massive cuts, that path is not sustainable. Resource revenues just don’t exist at the levels they used to. Even in the unlikely event that high resource revenues return for a time, they would be better saved for future generations, rather than spent on our year-to-year operations.

The hopeful news in the budget is that the problem is not our economy; it’s our tax system, which is much easier to fix. The government’s budget documents show that our tax system is grossly inferior to that of every other province in the country at raising revenue. Applying the tax system of any other province to Alberta would raise us a minimum of $11.2 billion in additional annual revenue, more than covering the projected $8.8 billion deficit in this year’s budget.

Protecting our public services from cuts is perhaps the most important reason to fix our tax system, but there are also other good reasons to do so. Universal pharmaceutical coverage becoming part of our public health-care system could happen quite quickly and would actually be a net savings for Albertans through lower drug costs and a healthier population. Classroom conditions in our schools have been slowly deteriorating, and the provincial budget’s plan to continue on that path is disturbing. Nevertheless, fixing our revenue shortage could change that by moving toward reasonable class sizes and better supports for the complex needs of today’s classrooms.

There are two clear paths in front of us, and Albertans will need to choose one sooner or later. One path is massive cuts to our public services, and it will mean big drops in the quality and accessibility of our health care and education systems, an increase in poverty levels, and higher out-of-pocket expenses on things that are currently covered by our public systems.

The only alternative to that path is renovating our tax system to raise significantly more annual revenue with a sales tax and changes to our personal income tax system.

That is the only way Alberta can protect and revitalize our public services. We need our elected officials to start that discussion now to decide what mix of changes will solve our province’s revenue shortage.

On the Road with the Revenue Reno Campaign

Campaign calling for tax reform tours Alberta with public events

Our Revenue Reno campaign is calling for the provincial government to fix Alberta’s revenue shortage to protect and revitalize our public services.

Since the launch of our campaign in the spring, we’ve been taking that message on the road throughout the province with public discussion events that were held in Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, and Medicine Hat and generated lots of media attention throughout the province. We heard from seasoned economists on Alberta’s ongoing revenue problem, showing the pathway forward to sustainability. We also heard from those working on the front lines of our public services in the areas of K-12 education, health care, social work, and post-secondary education. They explained the current situation in their field and how fixing our revenue problem can strengthen the work they do and serve their communities better.

A big thank you to all the speakers who agreed to participate on our campaign stops and everyone who made it out to these events.

If our campaign messages resonated with you, please consider supporting the campaign by contacting your MLA to let them know that our province needs stable revenue sources. Our handy online tool (www.revenuereno.ca/petition) only takes a moment to fill out and send. Feel free to personalize the template letter with your own additional thoughts.

You can also help us by:

- Sharing our website (www.revenuereno.ca) and campaign video among your networks
- Requesting copies of our printed Revenue Reno leaflets to hand out to your friends, family, and neighbours. E-mail communications@pialberta.org and we will send them at no charge.
In mid-June I had the privilege of traveling to Montreal to speak at and participate in a conference called “The Future is Public” hosted by the organization Friends of Public Services and the Municipal Services Project. It was promoted with the tagline “Building a pro-public movement for everyone.” I want to share some of my thoughts and experiences from the conference because I think there is a lot to be learned from it.

The most important thing in my mind that the conference did was flip a conventional progressive strategy on its head. Instead of the focus being on opposing privatization of public services, it was framed as being propositional – in favour of the public provision of public services. That framing went far beyond the conference title and permeated every session of the conference.

The instructions I received for the workshop I led on public education included these words: “The conference is not about the problems of privatization. It is about how we want to remake and reclaim public services in ways that make them more inclusive, more sustainable and more democratic in the future.”

On the opening night, the conference facilitators had participants get together to come up with two things: a significant victory for public services that happened in the past and a future pro-public win we want to achieve. Past victories included things like public education systems and public health care. Future goals included universal pharmacare and child care.

The overall “pro-public” framing of the conference isn’t necessarily new, but it is a change in how those of us advocating for stronger public services think of our work. I think it actually aligns extremely well with the kind of work Public Interest Alberta has been doing over the past three years since Albertans elected an NDP government.

When Alberta was governed by Progressive Conservatives, almost all of the work we found ourselves doing was on the defensive. We were trying to prevent conservative governments from handing over control of our public services to private, mostly for-profit, corporations or from offloading government costs to families. Sometimes we took direct action, like in 2014 when our Seniors Task Force occupied Health Minister Fred Horne’s office after he announced he was dismantling universal pharmaceutical coverage for seniors to save the government money (he reversed his decision).

That work was reactionary. We would watch government media releases for announcements that degraded our public services and scramble to respond with the reasons why they were working against the public interest. And that role has not disappeared. It will always be important for us to prevent things from getting worse.

Even under an NDP government, we have seen public long-term care beds closed as new private ones open. And they actually mused about bringing back Fred Horne’s idea for dismantling universal seniors’ drug coverage. So, we still have defensive work to do. But we have shifted much of our work to focus on the positive directions we think the province needs to go.

Our Revenue Reno campaign aims to get Albertans thinking about taxes in a different way; they are the way we pool our money together to invest in public services. And if we want to protect and revitalize our public services, it means raising more tax revenue. Our Public Funds for Public Schools initiative advocates for reallocating the significant public subsidies given to private schools to improve classroom conditions in our public school systems. Our From Poverty to Progress campaign is pushing for Alberta to develop a poverty-reduction strategy, as we remain one of the very few provinces in the country without one.

These kinds of actions focusing on a positive vision for the future need to become the new normal in progressive advocacy in Alberta and across the country. It doesn’t mean the defensive work disappears, but the pro-public work will actually make our defensive work even more effective. Getting Albertans to understand why our province and country needs universal pharmacare for everyone will make any future campaign we need to do to protect universal drug coverage for seniors that much more effective.

So, we should be unapologetic about advocating for a bold, progressive agenda focused on stronger public services, a cleaner environment, and a more vibrant democracy. Let’s push for the ambitious things our government should be doing and never be satisfied with cautious half-measures. That is how we will inspire people, and that is how we will win.

Originally published July 8, 2018 online by Ricochet.Media.
Annual General Meeting

Public Interest Alberta reflects on another successful year in advocacy work

This year’s Annual General Meeting was held on June 19, 2018 at the Hellenic-Canadian Community Centre in Edmonton.

Our AGM is an important part of the democratic life of our organization, with the election of our 2018-19 Board of Directors and bylaw amendments. It also provides a great opportunity for our members to hear about the vital and diverse work that has been carried out by Public Interest Alberta.

Executive Director Joel French and Board Chair Larry Booi were joined by representatives of our task forces -- Child Care and Early Learning, Democracy, Education, Environment, Human Services and Poverty, Post-Secondary Education, and Seniors -- to report on the efforts and achievements of the organization.

The accomplishments highlighted included the campaigns Revenue Reno, From Poverty to Progress, Public Funds for Public Schools, A Progressive Guide to Alberta’s Municipal Elections, Progress Report on LGBTQ Policies of Four Alberta School Boards, Low Wage Report, and the release of our new publication, Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest, which gives an overview of what the government’s priorities should be going forward to make our province a more just and fair place.

The release of our 2017-2018 Annual Report also coincided with the AGM and is available online at www.pialberta.org/annualreports.

Thank you to all who attended!
Looking Backward, Looking Forward
by Noel Somerville
Seniors Task Force Chair

Recently, I attended Public Interest Alberta’s Annual General Meeting for the last time as a member of the Board of Directors. To my delight, the Board at its last meeting appointed Ms. Terry Price to chair the Seniors Task Force effective July 1, 2018.

No, I am not going away; I will continue as vice-chair. But, after 13 years as chair and feeling the effects of advancing age, I have been convinced for a while that it is time for someone new, younger, and more energetic to take the lead and speak up for Alberta’s seniors.

My first 10 years as chair were under five separate PC administrations (Klein, Stelmach, Redford, Hancock, and Prentice). All of them paid tribute to Peter Lougheed, but none seemed willing to follow up on his concern for seniors in particular and health care in general.

Premier Lougheed initiated the system of seniors’ lodges throughout the province and invested heavily in small rural hospitals.

All of that type of thinking came to a screeching halt with Premier Klein’s preoccupation with debt elimination and privatization. That neo-liberal approach started and continued contributing to a serious decline in seniors’ care in Alberta. As the proportion of seniors in Alberta increased, the number of long-term care beds remained static. Services in care facilities were un-bundled so that seniors in care found themselves paying more and more while care standards declined.

There were three separate attempts by PC governments to convert the universal senior’s drug plan to an income-based plan. Strong opposition from Public Interest Alberta and other organizations beat back all three, the last shortly after members of the Seniors Task Force held a sit-in in the constituency office of the Minister of Health.

Following the election of an NDP government in 2015, things did improve, but not as much as we had hoped. The drop in oil prices since 2014 has left the government without the financial resources to do the things it knows need to be done.

We have urged and I am sure will continue to urge the government to address Alberta’s massive revenue shortfall. There is no prospect that $100/barrel oil will return and we need to face the fact that we cannot continue to be the lowest taxed province in Confederation. The government’s current budget shows that if we were to adopt the same taxation regime of the next lowest taxed province, our revenue would increase by $11 billion per year.

Without a substantial increase in revenue, Alberta’s seniors will not get the care they need and Alberta’s children, our grandchildren, will not get the education they deserve.

Terry Price joins the Public Interest Alberta Board

Public Interest Alberta is pleased to introduce Terry Price, who was recently elected to Public Interest Alberta’s 2018-19 Board of Directors and was also appointed as the new Seniors Task Force Chair, replacing Noel Somerville in both of these positions (see Noel’s above article for his reflections).

A retired teacher and activist, Terry has served in various elected and staff positions with territorial, provincial, and national teachers’ organizations for the past 28 years. She was first elected as president of the Yukon Teachers’ Association in 1993 and went on to serve on the Board of Directors, Board of Trustees, Executive Committee, and as president of the Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF) until 2005.

Following her service with the CTF, Terry served as staff officer of the Manitoba Teachers’ Society. Her portfolio focused on various equity and social justice issues affecting public education and the broader public interest including poverty, Indigenous issues, refugee and immigrant inclusion, LGBTQ issues, and the important role of public education and public services. She retired from the position and moved to Edmonton in November 2017 to be closer to family.

Having resided in several provinces and territories in Canada, Terry brings a well-developed understanding of the role of various levels of government in the delivery of public services. She also brings extensive experience in grassroots advocacy in promoting and protecting the broad spectrum of public services.

At Public Interest Alberta’s 12th annual advocacy conference, Terry Price introduced our panel on reconciliation with Canada’s Indigenous peoples and provided an overview of the Truth & Reconciliation: Calls to Action booklets published by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation located at the University of Manitoba.

Public Interest Alberta extends a warm welcome to Terry!