



THE ADVOCATE



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THE ADVOCATE

We hope you enjoy this issue of our newsletter. It is intended to be a space to share stories and ideas for advocacy. The Advocate is published three times a year.

WHO WE ARE

Public Interest Alberta is a province-wide organization focused on providing 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 the primary responsibility of government is to advance the collective interest 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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Thomas: Why Shandro Was Spared

Ministers should be held responsible — but increasingly aren't.

On Thursday, nearly two weeks after many called for [Alberta's Minister of Health to resign](#) because he [threatened Albertans](#) for asking questions related to his portfolio, Tyler Shandro was back in public, leading the province's [COVID-19 briefing](#).

The rationale for keeping the minister? He wants to protect [his spouse](#).

And the [ethics commissioner](#) thinks it's OK if Shandro holds shares in a private health insurance brokerage in a blind trust while he's got the power to delist public health services, so that Albertans who want to access those services would need... [private health insurance](#).

Many may be left wondering, "What gives? Where's the accountability?" The problem isn't that accountability mechanisms don't exist, but rather that they require political leaders who are willing to enforce them.

I've long had [concerns](#) about the weakness of Alberta's democracy. Everything I've seen over the past two weeks (and months, to be honest) has exacerbated, rather than alleviated, those concerns.

Which brings me to tuna.

Accountability mechanisms require political leaders who are willing to enforce them.

The tainted tuna controversy of 1985

This is admittedly an odd connection. But folks with long memories might remember how back in 1985, the federal Minister for Fisheries and Oceans knowingly [allowed tainted tuna](#) be sold to Canadians. The minister's rationale for not stopping the tuna from hitting the market rested shakily on grounds of protecting jobs.

Canadians got sick from the foul fish and the minister, unsurprisingly, resigned from their post as a result of their misconduct.

For political scientists, the tainted tuna scandal is the hallmark of a [constitutional convention](#) called individual ministerial responsibility. This is an unwritten rule that governs accountability in our system of parliamentary democracy.

Back when government operations were very small, individual ministerial responsibility meant that ministers were responsible publicly for everything that happened in their portfolios, good and bad.

If a civil servant erred, the minister would still take the public fall to ensure democratic accountability, and to ensure stable, non-partisan, professional advice regardless of who wins an election.

With the expansion of the welfare state, this form of individual ministerial responsibility is no longer possible.

Instead, the convention now demands a minister resign in two contexts: If they knowingly erred in their own conduct—as was the case with the tainted tuna—or if their personal conduct damaged their credibility sufficiently to lead a reasonable person, including their prime minister or premier, to lose confidence in their ability to competently manage their appointed portfolio.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, ministers are far more likely to be asked to resign because they embarrassed their government with their shoddy behaviour. Critical scholars [observe](#) that this makes ministerial responsibility less about competence and more about partisan gain, electioneering, and saving face for heads of government.

Examples of this include a federal minister who [resigned](#) after being overheard talking too freely on a flight about a sensitive issue, and a provincial minister whose party [remained confident](#) in him despite allegations of domestic abuse that were ultimately [dismissed](#).

So, what gives?

Given all that, when political scientists heard that Alberta's Minister of Health threatened Albertans for asking questions about his choices as minister, it was obvious to many of us that the ministerial responsibility convention would be triggered, and the minister would be required to resign.

So why wasn't he?

Because ministerial responsibility is an unwritten constitutional convention, it's both impossible to enforce and also corrosive to our democracy, particularly with respect to accountability, when it's ignored.

There is, of course, precedent for premiers and prime ministers to ignore ministerial responsibility when it suits them. For me, the most explosive case deals with war crimes.

When premiers enforce ministerial responsibility and ask for a minister's resignation depends on embarrassment.

In November 2009, allegations that Canadian soldiers were knowingly turning over innocent Afghans to local authorities to be tortured [hit the news](#). Peter MacKay, then Minister of Defense, faced a chorus of calls to resign. He never did. Instead, he [claimed](#) that no one knew about the torture.

That was a backpedal, as initially MacKay claimed that there was no credible evidence of torture to act on.

Watching this case at the time, I remember the importance of this shift. By claiming he didn't know about the potential war crimes, MacKay made a point of saying precisely what he needed to technically meet the requirements of ministerial responsibility.

When partisanship matters more

Ultimately, I think when premiers and prime ministers choose to enforce ministerial responsibility and ask for a minister's resignation depends on embarrassment. Is owning up to the problem more embarrassing than the minister's behaviour? If yes, then the minister stays.

This is arguably the case for Jason Kenney and Tyler Shandro. If Kenney asked for Shandro's resignation, he would have to admit that his minister's behaviour was inappropriate and that concerns about his choices were legitimate.

Being in the 'right' party is more important than good conduct or competent governance.

This is where accountability clashes with other political norms. In Canada we have some of the strongest party discipline in the world. Elected officials are expected to toe the party line in public, even if they have serious reservations about doing so.

Any politician who speaks against that party line typically gets turfed.

The norm is so strong that this holds for small parties in opposition as much as it does for parties in government.

There are lots of cons associated with this strong form of party discipline.

The big benefit is that parties and governments remain cohesive and united. This helps the public clearly understand their positions, and have confidence in a party's ability to be cohesive and united under pressure.

When parties and their leaders prize partisan loyalty over accountability, they communicate that being in the "right" party is more important than good conduct or competent governance.

In the long term, this lack of accountability undermines our democracy. If people don't trust that their leaders will follow unwritten constitutional conventions (like ministerial responsibility), they can quickly lose faith that democratic accountability is at all possible.

A lack of accountability was certainly evident with MacKay on war crimes back in 2009. It's worth noting Kenney was at that same cabinet table, so it's not surprising this may be his approach now.

The kamikaze campaign, designed to help Kenney and his government's approach to the elections commissioner, suggests that admitting wrongdoing is not on the agenda if partisan loyalty can be used as a shield to avoid accountability.

If "but jobs!" wasn't enough to save a minister for letting Canadians eat bad tuna back in 1985, and if "but security!" wasn't enough to save a chatty minister back in 1997, then surely none of the rationales we're being offered are enough to save Shandro from a fit of extreme pique in response to reasonable questions in 2020.

*This article has been reprinted from **The Sprawl**, award-winning, independent local journalism in Alberta.*

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Melanee Thomas

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Everything is changing — our taxation system must adapt as well

The world price of oil hitting rock bottom has understandably generated a flurry of discussion and concern in Alberta. It has had devastating impacts on our economy and our provincial government's revenue, both of which were already problematic prior to the COVID-19 crisis. On the economic side, workers had already been laid off by the thousands, often while the large corporations they worked for continued to make massive profits. At the same time, successive Alberta governments have counted on oil and gas revenue to pay for substantial portions of our public services. The current government's recent budget was based on oil projections that looked unrealistic even at the time, and now simply look laughable.

Our government has little to no control over the global price and demand for oil; however, there are other levers related to both our province's economy and revenue they do control. Thus far, the UCP government has failed in nearly every way to put those levers to work in solving either problem, and has in fact taken us even further away from the most effective solutions.

Instead of stabilizing and diversifying our economy, the government has doubled down on our over-reliance on oil and gas industries.

And instead of fixing the massive structural revenue shortage to pay for our valuable public services, they are making significant cuts across all areas of public services, including K-12 education, post-secondary education, child care, supports for our most vulnerable, and, most critically, health care.

When it comes to the economy, governments of all political stripes love to take credit for success and blame others for failures. The reality is that most of the levers controlling a largely capitalist economy are in the hands of the private sector. While the government has some influence on some factors affecting the private sector, it is quite limited.



The areas of the economy where the government has the most control are our public services that it provides either directly or through local levels of government at the municipal and school board levels. And those areas are precisely where the UCP government has implemented significant cuts, leading to tens of thousands of job losses in our schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, seniors' care homes, and other public services, such as fire protection and social supports.

While Premier Kenney said little during the last election about the need to diversify our economy, he has now become a reluctant convert to the idea, at least in word. However, he continues to undermine diversification efforts by pouring massive subsidies into the oil industry — money that is at high risk of being wasted due to global market conditions.

At the same time, his massive cuts are shrinking sectors that should be a bigger part of our economic future. The current crisis is showing both how important our public services and how stable and protected public sector jobs are from outside factors. The money being sunk into oil industry subsidies could easily have been invested in things like properly staffing our seniors' care homes and educating a child care workforce to serve every Alberta family who needs it with quality care.

That brings us to Alberta's revenue shortage. The UCP government still fails to admit how poorly our tax system performs when it comes to raising revenue. Their last budget documents show that having the tax system of any other province in the country would raise Alberta a minimum of \$14.4 billion more per year, which would eliminate its structural deficit and give it the fiscal capacity to invest in a massive economic boost through expanding public services.

Alberta has obscene levels of wealth inequality compared to the rest of our country; those hoarding wealth at the top can certainly afford to pay more.

At the same time, fixing our revenue shortage will require raising more revenue from a broad base. A mix of tax solutions must be found, with the new dollars used to protect and expand the public services all of us will benefit from.

Taxes are the way we invest together in our economic and social future, and the COVID-19 pandemic is teaching us how valuable and powerful that can be. There is no better example right now than the health care system we are all relying on to keep us safe and healthy. And government provision of K-12 and post-secondary education has allowed those sectors to quickly adapt to the new context, ensuring our societal needs are met as effectively as possible.

The UCP government must concede that our context has changed significantly, and Albertans are expecting more, not less, from our public services. We need our elected officials to educate Albertans about our shortage of revenue and engage Albertans in a conversation about how our tax system can be changed to fund the services we want and need.



A version of this article was printed in the [Edmonton Journal](#) on May 19, 2020



Joel French
Executive Director
Public Interest Alberta

Organizing for the Climate in a Pandemic

It feels like everything is up for grabs.

My work as an activist started less than a year ago when, soon after Jason Kenney's election, I quit my job at the provincial government to join the climate movement. At the time, I didn't really know what being an organizer meant. I just knew I couldn't stand on the sidelines anymore. Our world was barreling towards ecological catastrophe and Alberta had just elected a leader who was on record calling concerns about climate risk the "flavour of the month." I knew I had to get actively involved in working to stop this disaster.

The United Conservative Party government, like rightwing governments around the world, is [using this crisis](#) to further their agenda of austerity, privatization, and climate delay. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers sent a 13-page [wishlist to Ottawa](#), lobbying for suspended environmental rules and a delay in implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), among other ostensibly COVID-19-related demands. It's vital that we continue our work too, and that we seize the opportunities this crisis presents to grow our movements and build power.

My first six months of organizing coincided with climate emergency declarations from both the Canadian government and Edmonton city council, a federal election campaign that saw [unprecedented youth movement](#) pressure on climate policy, and mass mobilization around a series of Global Climate Strike marches. In Edmonton, the last of these marches featured Greta Thunberg and drew a crowd of 10,000 people. It felt like one of the "moments of the whirlwind" that Mark and Paul Engler describe in their 2016 book *This is an Uprising*. The Englers write that these moments are marked by, "a dramatic public event or series of events that sets off a flurry of activity, and that this activity quickly spreads beyond the institutional control of any one organization. It inspires a rash of decentralized action, drawing in people previously unconnected to established movement groups."

I was one of those people drawn into the movement by the whirlwind and the two groups I joined — Climate Justice Edmonton (CJE) and Extinction Rebellion Edmonton — both saw their core memberships and attendance at actions expand during this time. Throughout the summer and fall, CJE acted as a local hub for Our Time, a national campaign focused on making the climate crisis an unignorable election issue and building power behind the vision of a [Green New Deal for Canada](#).

Extinction Rebellion worked on pressuring the City of Edmonton to declare a climate emergency and raise the ambition of its energy transition plan while building internal capacity for nonviolent direct action. Both groups were involved in supporting the youth-driven marches that fell under the climate strike banner.

Learning to be an organizer during a moment of mass mobilization

With so much going on, I got to experience a wide range of organizing tactics in a relatively short time. I learned to think about our strategy as following an act-recruit-train cycle, built around the peaks and valleys in the momentum of a campaign. Every big, high-energy action, like a march or rally, helps recruit new people to attend training sessions and events during the post-action ebb in momentum.

Before COVID-19, I spent most of my time and energy on the "act" part of the cycle, attending and eventually helping to organize marches, rallies, and other forms of protest. During actions, or at big events like Fringe Festival, we would gather petition signatures and talk to people about upcoming events and training sessions. Until the pandemic I don't think we ever held an online-only meeting or workshop. The pandemic makes some go-to tactics impossible, like public protest and in-person canvassing, but a lot of our work has transitioned to social distancing quite easily, and it has given us an opportunity to put more focus on the "train" part of act-recruit-train.

Keeping the momentum going when everything seems to stop

At the beginning of 2020, we seemed on track to maintain the frenetic pace of the fall. It still seemed likely that the federal government would approve the Teck Frontier oil sands mine, and various groups in Edmonton were mobilizing against it. In February, after the RCMP incursion into unceded Wet'suwet'en territory, people across Canada and beyond participated in blockades and disruptive protest actions in solidarity with the hereditary chiefs and land defenders calling for supporters to shut down Canada.

The Kenney government started their legislative session by tabling Bill 1, The Critical Infrastructure Defence Act, a draconian and likely unconstitutional law that was already putting a chill on protest before it was passed. Then, in March, COVID-19 shut down everything.

Except that it didn't. As we learned later, by way of a leaked [memo to federal cabinet ministers](#), the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) seized the opportunity to put forward a wish list that included suspension of environmental regulations, allowing the oil industry to lobby government in secret and, outrageously, delaying the implementation of federal legislation on UNDRIP. The Kenney government, setting Bill 1 aside for the moment, wasted no time in laying off thousands of education workers and carrying out their public sector cuts. Now, with an "Economic Recovery Council" headed by conservative economist Jack Mintz, the UCP are clearly setting the stage for post-pandemic austerity.

The battle over what the recovery will look like is already well underway. Neoliberal politicians and economists are trying to frame cuts and deregulation as the necessary cure for today's emergency spending. But a lot of people remember the austerity that followed the 2008 crash and they aren't buying that logic anymore. The current crisis is revealing to more people just how vulnerable austerity has made our society. It's exposing the cruelty of a system that literally prioritizes saving stock portfolios over saving human lives. Social movements have been building a compelling anti-austerity vision for years and are responding to the current crisis by articulating clear demands for a recovery that is bold, green and just. This is a moment of real possibility, but it's going to be a fight. We need as many people involved as possible.

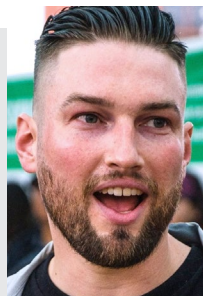
Judging from the turnout at the online events we've hosted since the shutdown began, a lot of new people are eager to get involved. We've been focusing a lot on the "train" part of the act-recruit-train cycle, with CJE hosting a [webinar series](#) of the Green New Deal and taking a Free Transit Edmonton [town hall online](#).

Many of the organizers I know are also using this as a time to learn. I joined several other CJE members in taking a four-part online course taught by labour organizer and scholar Jane McAlevey. We hope to apply those lessons to our work in the climate movement. Other organizers I know are taking a much-needed rest and focusing on things like learning to grow food.

Without being able to protest in the usual ways, we have still found ways to draw attention to our vision and draw more people into the movement. For example, we quickly put out a [response](#) and followed up with an [op-ed](#) after a reporter got under Kenney's skin with a question about a Green New Deal.

We certainly haven't mastered the art of organizing during a pandemic; I don't think anyone has. It's new for all of us and, while we're trying our best to keep the organizing work going, we're all coping with the strangeness, uncertainty, and bleakness of this moment. Longstanding institutions and systems are buckling under unprecedented strain and our opponents are consolidating power. But it also feels like everything is up for grabs. The government is making the kinds of sweeping changes those in power told us were impossible just a few months ago. Cities across Canada have implemented fare-free public transit to slow the spread of the virus. The idea of a Universal Basic Income is being normalized. Political and civil society leaders are openly calling for us to stop bailing out the oil industry and to prioritize a [People's Bailout](#) instead.

Let's work together, even through simple actions like online one-on-ones with friends and family, to make sure our side doesn't let this crisis go to waste.



Chris Gusen

Organizer with Climate Justice Edmonton and Extinction Rebellion

Recent developments:

Insights gained, lessons learned

To refer to the happenings of the past two months as “head-spinning” or “disorienting” is to seriously underestimate the dizzying and worrying impact of the coronavirus events, especially when combined with volatility and upheaval in so many other aspects of local, national, and global conditions and institutions.

As we deal with rising death tolls, lineups for scarce necessities, states of emergency and national lockdowns; relentless round-the-clock media coverage; we are experiencing an unnerving sense of uncertainty about how and when we might move forward to a ‘new normal’ and what that means.

As Canadians and as Albertans, we have not experienced the worst-case scenarios that modelling had proposed, but we have witnessed some outcomes with certain pockets of society, such as seniors’ care homes, that provide an horrific view of chasms in our society.

While most of the emotional reactions are connected to coronavirus issues, they are reinforced by tremors in other important aspects of our interconnected and globalized world including:

- The dramatic upheaval in the world oil situation with prices dropping to levels not seen since 1999,
- Major interventions by national and international financial institutions attempting to avert the growing potential for economic recession resulting from cascading economic effects, including stock market crashes around the globe and rapidly growing job losses from suspensions and closures,
- The overwhelming failure of the Trump administration to competently and quickly deal with the mounting health and economic threats.

The situation in Alberta is made even worse by the impact of the oil price collapse to the point that it is essentially worthless, which has exacerbated existing problems and points to bigger difficulties ahead.

In the short term, we need to work together to do what we can to “flatten the curve” and prevent the further spread of the disease; however, we must also be thinking hard about what courses of action will be needed after this crisis has subsided. There are important insights to be gained and lessons to be learned - not just in regard to managing future health care threats, but also in regard to the larger problem of the overall paths and policies our governments have been pursuing.

Large corporations are already looking to the future, beyond this crisis, and planning for the threats and opportunities that future holds.

There is a growing consensus that a global recession is all but inevitable. Business writer Rob Carrick, in his column, [“The realist’s guide to the recession ahead.”](#) bluntly stated, “It’s time to start preparing for the recession that will follow the coronavirus outbreak.”

Insights, lessons and necessary changes

In the short term, progressive individuals and organizations will be doing their part in helping to deal with the difficult current situation. We, too, must focus on strategic decisions regarding future actions, policies, and advocacy.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the basic tenet of neoliberalism and market fundamentalism — that is, putting profit over people — has been further revealed as a disastrous failure. Markets have never been designed to deliver services to everyone; they are, instead, giant sorting mechanisms that separate those who get the goods and services from those who don’t - entirely based on the ability to pay. Simply said, “If you can’t pay, you don’t get.”

That’s why market approaches have always been inappropriate for services such as health care, education and other important public services, which should be universally accessible to every individual. The United States’ inadequate response to the COVID-19 crisis demonstrates the dangers of its largely private health care system, which is inaccessible to perhaps forty million people lacking any health care insurance coverage.

So much for “the magic of the market” as panacea.

The COVID-19 crisis has also led Spain to nationalize its hospitals. Across the globe, public services are increasingly being seen as far more essential to the health and well-being of individuals, families, and the whole of society. And it’s about time.

Market fundamentalist ‘think tanks’ and ideologues, lavishly funded by wealthy right wing and corporate interests, have for decades incessantly pushed the view that government itself is basically a bad thing, that the smallest possible role for government is the ideal, that regulations are “red tape,” and that people are more free when government plays almost no role in their lives (to the point where in the United States even prisons are largely privatized).

The COVID-19 crisis has made it clear just how important it is to have strong governments committed to the public interest and having the necessary resources, infrastructure, and personnel to act effectively. Not only government intervention, but government itself has been shown to be far more important than many thought.

In this regard, we need to think more deeply about our government's capacity and commitment to respond to another looming and potentially devastating crisis - that of climate change. Surely the lesson here is that we need to take it much more seriously, and that governments need to lead the way in terms of preparedness, resources, coordination, and commitments.

Alberta's situation

The combination of the coronavirus crisis, the oil price collapse, and the economic consequences of both have dramatically revealed just how misguided and counterproductive the policies of Alberta's UCP government and its predecessors have been:

- The UCP budget of February 27 was revealed to be utterly inappropriate within days of being tabled in the legislature. The cutbacks to public services it incorporates will put many more people out of work and will make the situation much worse instead of better.
- The massive cuts to corporate tax rates as a tool to stimulate the economy has clearly failed and was doomed to do so from the beginning, given the evidence of the widespread failure of previous "trickle down" approaches.
- The optimistic budget estimates for revenue from higher oil prices (projected to be \$58) now look absurd.
- Mr. Kenney's propensity to lay blame for all of Alberta's economic problems on the province's previous NDP government and the current federal Liberal government has been revealed as a blatant and unwarranted attempt to deflect any responsibility for the failure of his own approach.
- We will never get more compelling evidence that Alberta's current and recent problems in government finance are largely due to international factors beyond our control (volatile oil prices combined with falling demand for fossil fuels, particularly bitumen), combined with policies that now look foolhardy.
- The government's stubborn refusal to consider alternatives to its misguided approach of betting everything on a combination of higher oil prices and corporate tax cuts was summed up in a recent column entitled, "[Alberta, a crisis is a horrible thing to waste.](#)" by writer Gary Mason:

"Unfortunately, governments in Alberta have rarely learned from these events in the past. Instead, they have plodded along the same path afterward, plundering their oil riches until the next great fall. Sadly, they are likely to do the same thing again this time..."

- The UCP has ignored opportunities in sustainability and cleaner energy which would help to diversify the economy, deciding instead to pursue all possible avenues for increased oil production. This misguided effort absolutely must be replaced by a far more balanced approach that is grounded in a just transition to a future based on far lower carbon emissions and a comprehensive commitment to dealing effectively with climate change.

- Mr. Kenney's ongoing focus on cutbacks, his continuing denial that Alberta has a revenue problem, and his refusal to consider revenue reform, including a sales tax and higher taxes on the wealthy, is also at the heart of the problem. This is despite the fact that his own recent budget showed that Alberta has an enormous amount of room to move in raising revenues, since Alberta would collect more than \$14 billion annually in additional revenue if it instituted the tax regime of the next-lowest province.

Alberta needs revenue reform, and it needs it now.

Public services and the public interest

In some ways, the most important lesson from this confluence of a pandemic crisis and economic threats has to do with the importance of not only preserving but enhancing our public services, which are now particularly under attack in Alberta.

These recent developments have helped to make clear that not only do we need strong public services in times of crisis, but at all times. Rather than leaving people to the vagaries of unconstrained markets, which have in recent years dramatically increased inequality and insecurity around the globe, our public services foster more equality, equity, and security for all individuals and families, and for our society as a whole.

A slight sense of the necessity of this enlightened approach might even have reached Mr. Kenney in recent days. While continuing to pick a fight with doctors and cutting other services in the midst of this astonishing crisis, Mr. Kenney begrudgingly acknowledged that it might be necessary to put a hold on some of the cutbacks planned for public health care.

But what all of us need to impress on Mr. Kenney and his government is that it is never a good time to underfund, diminish, and undermine health care in particular, and public services in general.

More than ever, now is the right time to support, strengthen, and fully fund public health care, public education, and the full range of our vital public services that are so obviously essential to the well-being of Alberta's individuals, families and society.



Terry Price
President
Public Interest Alberta

Chair
Seniors' Task Force