The Advocate

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

Who We Are

Public Interest Alberta is a province-wide organization focused on advocacy and education on public interest issues. Founded in 2004, the organization 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 Voice!
Submit letters, articles, and contributions, for the next issue of The Advocate. Send all correspondence to:

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We've got a new website!
visit us at www.pialberta.org
The current work of Alberta’s Electoral Boundaries Commission offers significant opportunities to not only solve problems related to representation by population, but also to further strengthen important elements of democracy in our province.

The problem with our current boundaries are serious and in need of attention. In a recent submission to the commission, Public Interest Alberta’s Democracy Task Force concluded that Alberta has allowed substantial, unwarranted, and unnecessary departures from representation by population and that our current system is one of unfair variance by design.

In the process, we have sacrificed important aspects of political equality and have unfairly advantaged some groups of voters and disadvantaged others. The departures from representation by population are dramatic and troubling. For example, in the 2015 provincial election, Calgary-South East had approximately 46,000 eligible voters, while Fort McMurray-Conklin had just over 15,000.

This means that voters in Fort McMurray-Conklin had three times the ‘voting power’ of voters in Calgary-South East. When one MLA speaks for three times the number of voters represented by another MLA, we have clearly abandoned the fundamental democratic principle of political equality.

The problems have stemmed mainly from two factors. First, current Alberta legislation allows far too much initial variance in setting up constituency boundaries. This means that differences in population can vary as much as 25 per cent above or below the provincial average between constituencies.

If the average population per constituency were 48,000, there could then be constituencies with as few as 36,000 and as many as 60,000 people — which in effect means that some constituencies might begin by already being 67 per cent larger than others.

The problem is then made much worse over time by subsequent population shifts, which nearly always involve substantial increases in urban and suburban areas and declines in rural areas.

In part, the practice of allowing wide variances has carried over from a previous era. When it was more difficult for MLAs to effectively represent voters in constituencies with large areas and more sparse populations, those MLAs were given smaller numbers of constituents. But those were earlier times, when there were fewer telephones, fewer paved roads, no television, and most importantly, no Internet.

Today, the improvements in communications mean that we have far better options to support MLAs in providing effective representation to their constituents — and we can do this without having to undermine the principle of political equality.

Specifically, the commission should pursue two strategies in ensuring both representation by population and effective representation.

First, although legislation allows the commission to go to a maximum of 25 per cent above or below the average population, in the interests of ensuring political equality they should aim for a maximum of 5 per cent variance. Saskatchewan’s current legislation imposes a 5 per cent limit, and four other provinces use a figure of 10 per cent. The figure of 5 per cent is both workable and necessary.

Second, although the commission does not have the power to determine provincial budgets, they should urge the legislature to provide increased support to MLAs to ensure that they have the necessary staff and technical support to assist them in effectively representing their constituents and addressing their varying needs. Improvements in communications and information technology have made it much easier to reach and engage with constituents, and additional staffing will allow for more constituency offices in larger areas.

It is not only MLAs in rural areas that need this assistance. MLAs in densely populated urban and suburban constituencies with larger numbers of voters face serious challenges in representing populations with higher poverty rates and more diverse language groups. We need to ensure that all MLAs have the resources to meet the varied needs in representing their diverse constituencies.

In the end, Alberta’s Electoral Boundaries Commission should focus on enhancing political equality and fairness through representation by population, and should deal with the question of effective representation by strongly recommending more supports for MLAs in their important work. In doing so, they will play an important role in strengthening Alberta’s democracy.

To read Public Interest Alberta’s written submission and to learn more about our work on electoral boundaries and democracy, visit pialberta.org/ebcsubmission

This article originally appeared in the Edmonton Journal on January 28, 2017.
Provincial budget should focus on revenue, not cuts

By Joel French
Public Interest Alberta Executive Director

In our Summer 2016 issue of The Advocate, I wrote about the Government of Alberta’s revenue shortage and why we need to greatly increase Alberta’s total tax revenue with the goal of protecting and expanding our public services. I laid out two main options for raising that revenue: introducing a sales tax or significantly changing our personal income tax system.

This February, I attended a consultation hosted by Alberta’s Minister of Finance Joe Ceci regarding the upcoming provincial budget. I was invited to share input for the government on behalf of Public Interest Alberta and used the opportunity to advocate for three main priorities:

1. Do not approach the budget with the goal of making piecemeal cuts,
2. Address the long-term, chronic underfunding by enhancing government revenue through fair taxation,
3. Stop the public funding of private schools, and reallocate that funding to strengthening public education.

The first priority revolves around the short-term question of how to deal with the shortage of revenue resulting from the global drop in the price of oil. So far, the provincial government has done the right thing by running short-term deficits to protect public services.

We saw what the alternative was in the PC government’s spring 2015 budget, which was introduced but never passed. It proposed to cut $1.1 billion from frontline health care and refused to fund growth in the education system, despite 12,000 additional students that were slated to enter the system later that year. The current NDP government campaigned on reversing these cuts and immediately followed through on that promise, protecting our health care and education systems from further deterioration.

In the short-term, the NDP government must continue to protect public services from cuts, including increases in spending that fail to account for inflation and population growth, which would result in less health care and education per Albertan. Cutting in this way would make only a small difference in the overall budget situation; the impact, however, will be widely felt on public services like quality of health care and education for Albertans.

The second priority - a need for significantly more tax revenue - is a recognition that the short-term fiscal problems require a long-term solution. We cannot hope indefinitely for high oil prices to fund our public services. Non-renewable resource revenue, when it is coming in, should be saved for future generations.

Without non-renewable resource revenue, Alberta’s operational budget requires approximately an additional $10 billion per year. When the tax system of every other province is applied to Alberta, the minimum amount of additional revenue is $7.5 billion. Clearly there is plenty of room to raise more tax revenue. We need our government to lead an open discussion with Albertans to ensure everyone understands the problem and the possible solutions.

The final priority that I presented the Finance Minister with was a specific solution to strengthen our public education systems. The provincial government currently spends more than $100 million every year to subsidize private schools. Five other provinces in Canada do not provide a single dollar to private schools, yet parents who choose those schools still enroll their children in them at similar, or in some cases even higher, rates.

That money should be reallocated to fulfilling the NDP government’s election promises to reduce classroom sizes, introduce a school lunch program, increase classroom supports, and reduce mandatory school fees. Those changes would remove public funding from private, exclusive schools and shift it to Alberta families and students in classrooms that are open to every student.

Every year, the provincial budget is a chance for the government to set the overall direction of the province for the coming year. Building on the strong leadership the NDP government has shown on issues like the adoption of a $15 per hour minimum wage and the introduction of a price on carbon, the time is now to change Alberta’s approach to budgeting. The old way guarantees instability, while a new approach of creating stable government revenues will allow us to protect and strengthen our public services far into the future.
Connecting diverse players in Alberta’s green economy

By Joan Cannon
Coordinator for the Alberta Green Economy Network

The Alberta Green Economy Network (AGEN) is a network of approximately 50 labour, non-profit, green business, and First Nations partners that works to support Alberta’s transition to a low-carbon economy.

AGEN coordinates the joint efforts of its diverse network of members and allies to run public education and advocacy programs, submit policy recommendations to municipal and provincial governments, and foster relationships between diverse stakeholders within the green economy. Since its founding in July 2015, AGEN has led several successful collaborative programs.

In September 2015, AGEN submitted a report to the Government of Alberta’s Climate Change Advisory Panel. The report outlined how Alberta could create more than 54,000 jobs per year through carbon reducing actions, such as science-based emission reduction targets in line with other provincial jurisdictions, a target of 100% renewable energy by 2050, an energy efficiency strategy that would employ tens of thousands of Albertans, and a carbon price starting in 2016 to help fund green jobs, retrofits, and transit.

In April 2016, we released a report called 100,000+ Jobs: Getting Albertans Back to Work Building the Green Economy. This report outlined how Alberta has the potential to create over 145,000 new jobs in the green economy with the right policies and investments, which would put Albertans to work right away, diversify the economy, reduce pollution and health care costs, and build stronger and more resilient communities.

From June to September 2016, AGEN ran a public engagement and education campaign called Solar4All. We connected with thousands of Albertans across over 20 constituencies to engage them about solar-friendly government policies as well as individual and community-owned solar energy.

Over 9,000 Albertans signed our petition and over 3,000 Albertans signed our postcards to their MLAs, urging the government to prioritize communities and small-scale community solar energy projects in its move to renewables. We met with over two dozen MLAs, including many cabinet members, to hand deliver postcards from their constituents and discuss our policy positions.

In September 2016, AGEN submitted a proposal to Alberta’s Energy Efficiency Advisory Panel. In this proposal, AGEN strongly urged the Alberta government to prioritize solar energy in the form of micro-generation and small-scale community solar energy projects. The proposal outlined how these individually- and community-owned renewable energy systems can play an important role in Alberta’s energy future.

Now, AGEN is launching two new programs for 2017 with its member organizations and allies: the Alberta Green Jobs Initiative and the Neighbourhood Green Economy Series.

The Alberta Green Jobs Initiative will be an online resource to provide Albertans with information and opportunities related to local jobs in Alberta’s growing green sector.

It will provide (1) concrete examples and descriptions of green jobs, (2) a job board of current green job openings in Alberta, (3) information on available re-training programs in Alberta, (4) up-to-date info, statistics, and research on projected future job growth in Alberta’s green sector, (5) video and written testimonials of Albertan green workers and their transition into the green sector, and (6) profiles on green businesses, NGOs, and other associated groups in Alberta.

The Neighbourhood Green Economy Series is a community event series to inform Albertans about the green economy, renewable energy, green jobs, the carbon levy, energy efficiency in their homes, and air quality benefits of a low carbon economy. The event series will include participation from community groups, green sector businesses, non-profit groups, government associations, academic/vocational institutions, First Nations groups, and research groups in Alberta.

To learn more about AGEN, visit www.albertagen.ca or contact Joan at joancannon94@gmail.com.

Public Interest Alberta is a founding member of AGEN.
Early learning and child care: what role do our cities play?

By Sarelle Azuelos, Women’s Centre of Calgary
Member of Public Interest Alberta’s Human Services and Poverty task force

The need for improving child care in Alberta is often boiled down to three key points: quality, accessibility, and affordability. Each element is important in ensuring that children have equal opportunity to experience a high quality early learning environment and that their families are able to fully participate in their communities and the economy.

At the Women’s Centre of Calgary, we work to make women’s voices and women’s issues heard at decision making tables. Since opening our doors twenty years ago, we have heard time and again from women in our community that early learning and child care is a major issue for them. Women are responsible for the majority of unpaid labour in the home, including care for young children. In dual-earner households, women are more likely to have lower wages and therefore take more time off when faced with unavailable or expensive child care services.

According to survey results released by Public Interest Alberta just last year, many low-income families are still required to pay more than $300 per month for child care even after provincial subsidies are taken into account. The 2016 report on child poverty, *The Path Forward*, found that single parent low-income households (80% of which are women-led), find themselves on average about $13,000 below the poverty line in Alberta.

On the other hand, according to the Government of Alberta occupational profile, women make up 96.5% of early childhood educators and assistants with a median wage of $15/hour in Alberta. *Rethink Child Care* suggests that early childhood educators in Canada earn 55% of the wages of women with an equivalent level of education. Many of the women who provide care for children are unable to afford the fees themselves.

Clearly, the market model is not working for low-income women.

This past year, the Women’s Centre collaborated with Vibrant Communities Calgary (stewards of the city’s poverty reduction strategy) and the First 2000 Days Network (a collective of community members, providers, and researchers) to work on a municipal strategy to improve access to affordable, quality child care in Calgary. A system-wide approach will require support from the province and a national framework, but what role can a municipality play?

Over the course of several meetings with stakeholders – including providers, childhood development researchers, City of Calgary zoning representatives, curriculum development bodies, Government of Alberta accreditation staff, representatives from Alberta Status of Women, Calgary Family Dayhomes, and many others – a map started to materialize of strengths and weaknesses.

Working under the umbrella of poverty reduction was new for many stakeholders, and the municipal scope was challenged by provincial mandates. That said, we were encouraged to hear that Edmonton’s poverty-reduction work on early learning and child care recently received significant support from the City of Edmonton, and we are excited about the possibility for Calgary to play a bigger role in the future.

We have already seen small successes – after two Calgary City Councillors supported a push for more child care spaces in municipally-owned buildings in the city, a request for proposals from child care providers was announced. The original space was not viable for the proposed function but a child care provider met with city officials to renegotiate the terms. Now, 88 new spaces are in the works. Both parties felt this was the time to get it right, especially with the potential to make these spaces available for $25/day with the help of provincial funding announced late last year.

Phase one of the Calgary municipal strategy project is wrapping up, but there is still much work to do. Questions of mandate need to be answered, discretionary roles and funding need to be debated, and strategies for further action need to be crafted and carried out. Child care is essential to improving the quality of life for women throughout Alberta. To fulfill their obligations to women and children, governments – at all levels – must prioritize quality early learning and child care programs.
This year marks Public Interest Alberta’s 11th annual advocacy conference. For the past decade, we have brought speakers in from around the country and the globe to tackle important issues like public health care, progressive taxation, creative campaigning, and meaningful advocacy.

With the next election only two years away, our conference planning committee asked how we can be the most effective between now and then. Their answer? Bold and effective advocacy from a broad base of Albertans. The aim of this year’s conference is to imagine what is possible, what we want to achieve, and mapping how to get there.

With this in mind, we are thrilled to announce that our keynote speaker will be Erika Shaker, Director of Education and Outreach at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA). With nearly 25 years of experience in research and advocacy on education, corporatization, privatization, and social justice, Erika will surely have a wealth of knowledge and experience to share with us. She is the editor of Our Schools / Our Selves, a quarterly journal that focuses education. She also contributes to and authors reports for CCPA.

In the spirit of bold advocacy, this year’s conference will feature a pre-conference training session on March 30 on how to advocate to your MLA about issues that matter to you. The session will focus on skills-building for effective advocacy and will include tools, resources, and other useful materials.

For those attending the full conference, Friday’s schedule is packed with panels, workshops, and speakers. Friday will include an armchair discussion on the current state of the media with David Climenhaga and Mariam Ibrahim, moderated by Edmonton’s Historian Laureate, Chris Chang-Yen Phillips.

Another panel will feature elected officials from municipal levels in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Chicago, sharing their experiences and insights into bold advocacy at the local level, a particularly timely topic with upcoming municipal elections across Alberta later this year.

The Parkland Institute’s Ian Hussey and Canadian Health Coalition Executive Director Adrienne Silnicki will speak about health care and the potential for pharmacare in Canada. We will also be joined by Claire Edwards and others who will share their experiences with successful community organizing.

On Friday afternoon, participants will break out into workshops around each of Public Interest Alberta’s action areas: education, seniors, human services and poverty, post-secondary education, democracy, child care and early learning, and environment.

Join us for our 11th annual conference, BOLD Advocacy for BIG changes. You can register online at www.pialberta.org/conference2017 or fill out and mail in the form on the back of this newsletter. You can also contact our office at 780-420-0471 for more information or to register over the phone.

Can’t make it to the full conference? Join us on Thursday afternoon and evening for the pre-conference training session and keynote presentation for $30. You also have the option of attending the pre-conference training session for $10 or the keynote presentation and reception for $20.

JOIN OR RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP IN 2017

As a member of Public Interest Alberta, you help fund our core operations, enable our dedicated team of staff to sustain our work, and build our capacity to connect with people in communities around Alberta.

Individual Membership
$50 regular
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BOLD ADVOCACY FOR BIG CHANGES

Public Interest Alberta’s 11th annual conference

MARCH 30-31 2017
EDMONTON, AB

KEYNOTE BY ERIKA SHAKER
Director of Education and Outreach
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

SPEAKERS
Sue Sadowkis Garza, Adrienne Silnicki, Ian Hussey, Mariam Ibrahim, David Climenhaga, Claire Edwards, and more!

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Education
Democracy
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Human services and poverty

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BOLD ADVOCACY FOR BIG CHANGES
REGISTRATION FORM

Name _________________________________   Email _______________________________________
Phone __________________________ Dietary preferences ________________________________________

☐ March 30 keynote and keynote reception $20/ person _____ # of tickets
☐ March 30 pre-conference advocacy training $10/ person _____ # of tickets
☐ Full conference (includes advocacy training, keynote + lunch and coffee breaks on March 31)

Members $105/ person _____ # of tickets Non-members $140/ person _____ # of tickets
☐ I will be attending the pre-conference advocacy training
☐ I will be attending the keynote presentation and reception

Workshop selection (please select one)
☐ Education    ☐ Seniors    ☐ Human services and poverty    ☐ Democracy
☐ Post-secondary education    ☐ Environment    ☐ Child care and early learning

Mail this form and a cheque by March 15 to:
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