

NOT FOR SALE: PROMOTING PUBLIC SOLUTIONS IN TODAY'S ALBERTA



FINAL REPORT
PUBLIC INTEREST ALBERTA'S
SECOND ANNUAL CONFERENCE
ON ADVOCACY
APRIL 2008

FOREWORD

Public Interest Alberta's core function is to focus relentlessly on bringing about needed changes on important public interest issues, and to assist individuals and groups to both better understand the issues and develop effective programs of advocacy.

By those standards, I am pleased to say that this year's PIA conference on privatization was an unqualified success.

The complex, multifaceted and pervasive issues related to privatization are among the most important and pressing public interest topics facing Albertans today. The conference offered a first-rate opportunity to bring together individuals and organizations to do more than simply analyze the problems. The focus on "public solutions" provided a much-needed emphasis on addressing the underlying issues in ways that will preserve and enhance the public interest and public good.

The conference featured five top keynote speakers, who helped us to focus on common threads, underlying themes and emerging opportunities for advocacy and action. In addition, the breakout sessions involved a wide range of

speakers with expertise in the specific areas affected by privatization. It was extremely instructive to see similar patterns emerging across areas such as seniors care, education, childcare, environment and infrastructure, and to examine the courses of action that have made a difference across a range of issues.

The conference also offered the important opportunity to learn from each other, by taking advantage of the insights of the broad range of individuals and groups in attendance, all of whom share a strong commitment to more effectively promote the public interest in a province that badly needs such advocacy.

I want to thank PIA's member organizations and individual members for the financial support that made this important initiative possible, and to the many volunteers who contributed so much to the success of the conference. As a result of their efforts, we are able to move ahead with new insights and energy in promoting public solutions in today's Alberta.

*Larry Booi, Chairperson
Public Interest Alberta*



NOT FOR SALE: PROMOTING PUBLIC SOLUTIONS IN TODAY'S ALBERTA

CONFERENCE MANDATE

Not for Sale: Promoting Public Solutions in Today's Alberta represented a valuable opportunity for Public Interest Alberta to address several goals:

1. Through the combined experience and expertise of conference participants, to generate ideas, strategies and priorities for advocacy on privatization issues over the next year.
2. To provide a venue for disseminating information about privatization and related issues to the advocacy community.
3. To build a base of knowledge in the advocacy community about the nature of cooperation required on issues related to privatization.

4. To provide an opportunity for like-minded advocates and organizations to network and develop connections.
5. To inspire individuals and organizations to increase their advocacy efforts and to take a greater interest in privatization.



CONFERENCE FORMAT

Not for Sale featured a keynote presentation on Friday, April 4 by celebrated journalist, activist and filmmaker Avi Lewis. Lewis discussed the pervasiveness of privatization, drawing connections between disparate faces of private sector encroachment into public enterprise, and closed by encouraging activists to redouble their efforts at the very most local levels.

On Saturday, April 5 the conference began with a plenary presentation by Allyson Pollock, a leading British researcher who outlined issues of accountability, cost and efficiency surrounding the development of P3s, with an emphasis on

healthcare. This plenary was followed by breakout sessions that addressed key public interest issues that are the basis for many of Public Interest Alberta's Task Forces:

- ◆ **Childcare**
- ◆ **Democracy**
- ◆ **K-12 Education**
- ◆ **Post-Secondary Education**
- ◆ **Healthcare**
- ◆ **Seniors**
- ◆ **Environment**
- ◆ **Living Wage**
- ◆ **Cities**



The Saturday afternoon plenary speaker was Deborah Brennan, an Australian researcher who spoke to her country's experience with the proliferation of corporate childcare at the expense of public and not-for-profit service.

The Sunday morning plenary speaker, Heather-jane Robertson, Vice President of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, outlined several different modes of privatization in education. Her presentation was followed by six breakout sessions intended to build upon Saturday's information to generate priorities and strategies for advocacy in the coming year:

Saving Money? Debating Public vs. Private Efficiency

To promote public enterprise, advocates must counter the assumption that the private sector is inherently more efficient. An abundance of Canadian evidence shows that this assumption is false. How should advocates dictate the terms of the debate, and respond to the claims of the private sector?

Public Participation in the Process: Engaging Citizens to Take Action on P3s

Much of the population is opposed to privatization, but P3s are still not well understood by the public. Are P3s equivalent to privatization, or do they present unique challenges? How can the dangers of P3s be communicated to the public in a way that will engage citizens to take action?

Framing Privatization: Effective Media Strategies

Engaging the media is central to promoting public solutions and opposing privatization. Media advocacy can counter misconceptions about private sector efficiency, expose the loss of

"P3s are a frightening new wave. I will certainly spread the word and keep updated by visiting PIA's website!"

accountability that accompanies privatization, and be a useful tool for education. How can advocates influence media messages and frame the privatization debate?

Know the Difference: Integrating Research and Public Advocacy

It is absolutely essential that advocates of public solutions are well-informed on all points, and actively support relevant research. Which research questions are the most valuable? How can the results of research be used in advocacy? What are the best ways to support research on public enterprise?

The Politics of Privatization: Influencing Elected Officials

Advocating to political decision-makers requires a unique approach and a particular level of argument and detail. Building the tools to influence elected officials maximizes the impact of media and public advocacy. How do we best influence officials? Which issues require different kinds of arguments? Are current strategies effective?

Taking Action Together – Building an Effective Provincial Network

Privatization in Alberta has many faces, and has an impact on every sector of public service. To be effective as advocates, we must see the links between different sectors and come together to speak out on shared concerns. How do we work together to form coalitions and minimize conflict? Are existing organizations cooperating effectively? What concerns do we all have in common?

Sunday keynote speaker Maude Barlow, National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians and a long-time advocate against the global trade system, closed the conference with an inspirational lecture on local, national and international water issues, as well as on the importance of enduring hope.



GUEST SPEAKERS

Avi Lewis

“Privatization – The Fundamental Struggle of Our Time”

Avi Lewis is one of Canada’s most articulate and insightful political observers. He is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and television journalist. He has traveled extensively throughout the world as a producer and host of various TV shows, including: CBC’s *On the Map*; *The Big Picture*; *Counterspin*; and as a news host on City TV’s *Muchmusic*. He is also the co-producer and director, along with wife Naomi Klein, of the feature-length documentary *The Take* (2004), which explores the story of how people in Argentina organized worker co-ops in response to economic collapse. Avi is currently



the host of a new half-hour weekly program, *Frontline USA*, that is broadcast to millions worldwide on the Al Jazeera English network.

Allyson Pollock

“Selling the P3 Myth – The British Experience”

Professor Pollock is Head of the Centre for International Public Health Policy at the University of Edinburgh. She trained in medicine and public health. A leading authority on the private finance initiative (PFI or P3) and the implications of market mechanisms and privatization for public services, she has an international profile in public health and has made numerous interventions into the policy debate. In her new role as Assistant Principal, she is working to establish new collaborations and debates in international health research and public health policy at the EU and international level. Among her many other activities, Professor Pollock is chair of the NHS Consultants’ Association.

(The complete powerpoint presentation can be viewed at www.pialberta.org/events)



Deborah Brennan
“The Corporatization of Child Care in Australia: Not as Easy as ABC”



Professor Deborah Brennan is one of Australia’s leading researchers in comparative welfare, children’s services and family policy. She is the author of *The Politics of Australian Child Care: From Philanthropy to Feminism* (1998), and is co-editor (with Louise Chappell) of *‘No Fit Place for Women?’: Women in New South Wales Politics, 1856-2006*. Deborah was the inaugural Convenor of the National Association of Community-Based Child Care. She has held visiting positions at the London School of Economics, Trinity College Dublin and Oxford University. She is Professor of Social Policy in the Social Policy Research Centre at the

University of New South Wales.

(The complete powerpoint presentation can be viewed at www.pialberta.org/events)

Heather-jane Robertson
“The Many Faces of Privatization in Education”

Heather-jane Robertson is an author, educator and activist who has been at the forefront of public education debates for three decades. She has contributed to many scholarly and popular publications dealing with education and society, and addressed audiences around the world on the vulnerability and resiliency of public education. She is the co-author (with Maude Barlow) of 1994’s best-selling *Class Warfare: The Assault on Canada’s Schools*, and is the author of *No More Teachers, No More Books* (1998) and *Great Expectations: Essays on School and Society* (2007).



“I will be writing to Premier Stelmach (my MLA), the Edmonton Journal and the federal Health Minister and anyone else I can think of.”



Maude Barlow
“Making a Difference – Lessons from the Struggle Over Water”

Maude Barlow is the National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians, Canada’s largest public advocacy organization, and the founder of the Blue Planet Project working internationally for the right to water. She serves on the boards of the International Forum on Globalization and Food and Water Watch, and is a Councillor with the Hamburg-based World Future Council. Maude is the recipient of six honorary doctorates, as well as the 2005 Right Livelihood Award (known as the “Alternative Nobel”), and is the best-selling author or co-author of 16 books. Her latest are *Too Close for*



Comfort: Canada’s Future within Fortress North America and Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water.



“Good facts to use. Small ‘action groups’ and coalitions of like-minded groups encouraged. We must keep on keeping on, as always.”



BREAKOUT SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

Childcare

Issues:

- ◆ Encroachment of multinational for-profit corporations into the provision of childcare in Alberta.
- ◆ Lack of a mechanism to start new non-profit childcare centres.

Key challenges include:

- ◆ The difficulty of accessing research data on corporate childcare.
- ◆ The lack of capacity of parents to become meaningfully active on these issues.

Important strategies:

- ◆ Coalition building will amplify the common, community-driven voice for public enterprise.
- ◆ Greater organized lobbying of individual MLAs is necessary to increase the profile of childcare issues in caucus.
- ◆ Emphasize that the government has an economic interest in investing in childcare to improve the performance of the future workforce and to expand current labour force participation.
- ◆ Maintain a focus on wage issues - low wages for childcare providers are undermining the future capacity of the system.

Democracy

Issues:

- ◆ Privatization leads to a loss of public responsiveness of services, and accountability and responsibility for services is undermined.
- ◆ Privatization can limit the accessibility of public services, and a lack of access can exacerbate existing social inequality.

Key challenges include:

- ◆ The need to tie anti-privatization work to positive advocacy about democracy and the public interest in order to move beyond an ineffective anti-corporate message.
- ◆ The language of privatization-related issues favours the private sector.

- ◆ The devolution of governance authority from elected officials has limited points of democratic access.

Important strategies:

- ◆ There is a need to unify advocates' messaging on privatization, and to incorporate both economic and values-based language.
- ◆ Alternative media should increasingly be supported in order to maximize our modes of communication.
- ◆ Academic analysis should be supported, and can operate as a kind of "force multiplier" for advocates articulating the effectiveness of public enterprise.

K-12 Education

Issues:

- ◆ Approval of 32 P3 schools.

Key challenges include:

- ◆ The public is more interested in the immediate delivery of schools than in detailed information about costs or accountability.
- ◆ Information concerning P3s is intentionally made complex or inaccessible by government and the private sector.
- ◆ Trustees cannot openly oppose the P3 agenda without the risk of funding being withheld.

Important strategies:

- ◆ Simplify public information about P3s.
- ◆ Exploit the public's emotional connection with education by emphasizing the lack of community input in P3 school design and the relationship between private control of design and curriculum.
- ◆ Provide alternatives to counter the perception that to oppose P3 school construction is to oppose new school construction per se.



Post-Secondary Education

Issues:

- ◆ The role of post-secondary institutions is increasingly tied to economic development, with consequences for the independence of research, the privatization of support services, and a proliferation of private, for-profit providers.

Key challenges include:

- ◆ Government views post-secondary education and economic development as intrinsically linked, and seeks to direct research agendas toward targeted development-related goals.
- ◆ Reductions in overall government support for institutional operations have severely limited the affordability and accessibility of education.

- ◆ A lack of student spaces in professional fields has distorted entrance qualifications, with possible negative effects on the quality of professional services.

Important strategies:

- ◆ Post-secondary education should be discussed in the context of its relationship with other high-profile issues, such as health care.
- ◆ The role of students' unions and associations in advocacy is highly important.
- ◆ The relationship between private sector influence over post-secondary education and the expansion of free trade should be highlighted.

Health Care

Issues:

- ◆ Privatization in health care has many faces, including: P3 hospitals; the de-listing of services; the contracting-out of hospital support services; etc.

Key challenges include:

- ◆ A mythology surrounding the unsustainability of health care costs is difficult to overcome.
- ◆ Access to information concerning private health care providers is both limited and

costly, rendering it difficult to engage in informed advocacy.

- ◆ The complexity of issues of debt and financing in private service provision lead to obfuscation by government and private sector bodies, and present a major challenge to public messaging.

Important strategies:

- ◆ An emphasis by advocates on the lack of access to relevant information could help to improve future advocacy capacity.
 - ◆ Messaging on P3s and related issues should be as simple as possible.
 - ◆ Advocacy should be individually focused: advocates should emphasize personally approaching MLAs, bureaucrats and senior leaders, including Premier Stelmach. The development of an effective network of constituency-based advocate teams across the province could be a major key to success.



Seniors

Issues:

- ◆ Government support has shifted from Long Term Care to Assisted Living facilities, which are expensive, mostly unregulated, and often for-profit.
- ◆ Costs and services are being increasingly downloaded onto individual seniors and their families

Key challenges:

- ◆ Some issues, particularly around LTC centres downgrading to Assisted Living, are complex

and difficult to communicate simply.

- ◆ It is difficult to engage the non-seniors community in advocacy.

Important strategies:

- ◆ Fund our own research to publicize evidence of the costs and effects of downloading public service onto seniors.
- ◆ Push the Auditor General to develop and enforce clear standards across the province.
- ◆ Explore tools like documentary filmmaking to highlight the plight of seniors in care.

Environment

Issues:

- ◆ While government has not privatized environmental issues, the choice to neglect its responsibilities in this area constitute a delegation of public authority to the private sector.

Key challenges:

- ◆ Pervasiveness of privatization in fields like the provision of water.
- ◆ Government consistently places the tar sands in a context of conversation in which there is no alternative but unbridled economic development.
- ◆ Should environmental issues be framed in a global, local or personal context?

Important strategies:

- ◆ PIA should focus these issues in a way that addresses citizens at the level of their daily lives.

- ◆ Undercut the government's argument about the negative economic effects of stronger environmental regulation.
- ◆ Change the focus of advocacy from environmental threats to hope.
- ◆ Focus on corporations, not individuals, as the key drivers of the problem.



Living Wage

Issues:

- ◆ Poverty is an issue in Alberta; 70,000 Calgarians earn less than \$12/hour.
- ◆ Human services contract agencies in Alberta are in crisis due to inadequate funding for staff wages, resulting in major service shortfalls to the most vulnerable Albertans.

Key challenges:

- ◆ Living wage is a concept (the wage required for a full-time worker to meet his/her basic needs) more than a specific number, and so is difficult to communicate.
- ◆ The clients of human services are largely invisible and have only limited political influence.

- ◆ The most important people on these issues (provincial associations, small contractors, clients, low wage earners) are not easily united around a single set of messages.

Important strategies:

- ◆ Tenacious efforts by individual activists have potential on the living wage issue, particularly at the municipal level.
- ◆ Communicate the toll vulnerable populations place on the health system when appropriate services are not adequately funded.
- ◆ Uniting around a shared set of concerns and messages is crucially important.

Cities

Issues:

- ◆ P3s are an emerging issue on the municipal scene (waste, water, recreation, transportation infrastructure).

Key challenges:

- ◆ Provincial and federal control over major sources of municipal funding allows them to impose pressure on municipalities to consider P3s.
- ◆ With limited sources of revenue, municipal governments feel they have few choices in infrastructure provision.

- ◆ Advocacy on P3s is too often confined to unions.

Important strategies:

- ◆ Re-define municipal services as social goods, not commodities.
- ◆ Coalition building, including unions and other partners, is essential.
- ◆ Provide resources to decision makers in advance, as they often receive little lead-time on P3 projects.



Saving Money? Debating Public vs. Private Efficiency

Issues:

- ◆ There is a general conception that the private sector is inherently more efficient than public enterprise. What evidence can advocates bring to enter this debate?

Key challenges:

- ◆ In many cases, information concerning the performance of the private sector is difficult to access.
- ◆ The speed with which privatization projects move makes it difficult to pull together

research or to pilot public-private comparisons in a timely fashion.

Important strategies:

- ◆ CUPE 474's pilot comparison of public and private providers of custodial services proved the efficiency and quality of the public sector, and can be used as a model for future efforts.
- ◆ Address issues in economic terms, and engage fully in the efficiency debate.
- ◆ Emphasize the "loss of voluntary effort," i.e. work that is not contractually specified, that occurs through privatization.

Public Participation in the Process: Engaging the Public to Take Action on P3s

Issues:

- ◆ It is consistently difficult to engage the public at-large, i.e. to move beyond a committed core of like-minded advocates.

Key challenges:

- ◆ Organizations are often hesitant to commit fully to coalitions, for example by relinquishing control over messaging or communication strategies.
- ◆ There is a perception that there are too many interest groups attempting a number of uncoordinated engagement strategies. People would feel more connected if these efforts were better connected.

Important strategies:

- ◆ It is crucially important to engage at the constituent level, including by providing resources for individuals to use in communicating individually and informally with candidates and officials.
- ◆ Existing groups and initiatives should combine to stage fewer, more effective outreach events. The focus of these events should be on creative engagement.
- ◆ Advocacy work should exploit existing public gathering places, such as church groups.
- ◆ It is also important to take advantage of existing venues for public participation in political decision-making. For example, the advocacy community should be as active as possible in Council meetings, public hearings, and consultation sessions in general.

"There were people in attendance who are willing to stand up for what they think is right. It is heartening that there are so many that care."



Framing Privatization: Effective Media Strategies

Issues:

- ◆ Framing involves presenting issues in a way that reflects commonly held fundamental values.

Key challenges:

- ◆ Media accepts the conservative economic frame for issues more often than not.
- ◆ Limited resources make it difficult to counter the general perception that the private sector is inherently more efficient than the public.

Important strategies:

- ◆ We need substantial evidence on which messages work. For example, messaging on the effectiveness of public education has been very successful.
- ◆ Messaging should emphasize the public desire to be involved in decision making.
- ◆ It is important to present a complete vision in order to re-brand our concerns as emerging from the public interest, and not a special interest.

The Politics of Privatization: Influencing Elected Officials

Issues:

- ◆ The issues of privatization facing elected officials include outright service privatization, P3s, and also structures of board governance that take areas of operation out of direct accountability to elected representatives.

Key challenges:

- ◆ There is a general political mindset that it is best to keep taxes low.
- ◆ Representatives face a lack of objective sources of information on privatization and related issues.

- ◆ Public understanding of the consequences of privatization remains limited.

Important strategies:

- ◆ Getting media exposure remains among the best ways to influence elected officials.
- ◆ Build personal relationships with elected officials, including outside the capacity of a special interest advocate.
- ◆ We should use internal organizational publications and investigative resources to counter-act the lack of progressive coverage in more traditional mainstream media.



Know the Difference: Integrating Research and Advocacy

Issues:

- ◆ Organizations struggling to maintain operating capacity must develop ongoing strategies to perform and disseminate meaningful research to counter the resources of the private sector.

Key challenges:

- ◆ Accessing sufficient resources to do research is a challenge.
- ◆ Some of the more effective dissemination methods also require greater capacity than most of the sector possesses.

Important strategies:

- ◆ Electronic means of dissemination must be exploited (videos, Mercury Grove, web resources).
- ◆ Participatory research, i.e. training practitioners from various fields in research skills and methods, can amplify capacity.
- ◆ New research is not always required - organizations must access existing information to keep existing or past issues on the public agenda.

Taking Action Together: Building an Effective Provincial Network

Issues:

- ◆ The scope of the central issues related to privatization, combined with the staying power of pro-private sector governments and other significant private interests, make it essential that advocates develop a sustainable network of organizations and individuals that can be continuously mobilized.

Key challenges:

- ◆ It is difficult to retain momentum and mobilize advocates between sentinel events and campaigns.

- ◆ The political and strategic skill set in government is often superior to that of the advocate community.
- ◆ A focus on similarities between a broader range of advocacy communities, including faith-based groups, hasn't been exploited consistently.

Important strategies:

- ◆ Connecting with suburbanites and those benefiting economically from the boom is essential to mainstream political viability.
- ◆ A dialogue based on values, rather than issues, might engage non-voters and professional associations more effectively.
- ◆ New forms of information exchange, including podcasts, RSS feeds, Facebook, blogging, and others should be developed as advocacy tools.



COMMON THEMES

Coalition-building:

Numerous sessions emphasized the need to build broader and more effective coalitions, whether to engage unions (eg. childcare), to spread advocacy beyond unions (eg. cities), or to amplify community voices by including as many partners as possible. Taking advantage of existing organizational capacities is central to future advocacy efforts in Alberta.

Local-level advocacy:

Several sessions, including one facilitated by two Edmonton City Councillors, picked up on a central theme of Avi Lewis' keynote presentation and emphasized the need for advocacy to sustain a one-on-one, constituency-based dimension. It is imperative for citizens to access their local elected officials, either in person or with letters, and to do so as citizens and constituents, not as special interests.

Research resources:

Both advocates and elected officials expressed that they are frequently without sufficient information to challenge private sector claims, generally because of a lack of lead time on emerging issues rather than a

lack of existing research. We require better coordination and dissemination of common information resources, and more regular communication between organizations and elected officials.

Public messaging:

One of the key themes of the conference as a whole was the importance of developing effective means of communicating the complexity and consequences of privatization to the public. Sessions emphasized that as advocates, our messages must be both informed and simple, and should be heavily values-based. The onus is on the advocacy community to draw linkages between disparate privatization issues and to tie them together in the public consciousness.



PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Summary

Participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Several participants appreciated the ability of conference presenters to draw strong connections between the values underpinning outright privatization and other subtler examples of the undermining of public investment. Other common feedback themes include:

- ◆ An appreciation for the need for simple messages on privatization

- ◆ Increased consciousness of the existing community of activists
- ◆ Informed plenary speakers
- ◆ Improved understanding of P3s/PFIs
- ◆ Emphasis on means for disseminating information
- ◆ The need to form coalitions with non-traditional allies
- ◆ Importance of individual advocacy

"Inspired. Such terrific speakers - and impassioned attendees."



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