

# Alberta facts

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## get the facts on the: 1997 PROVINCIAL ELECTION

It is easy to dismiss elections. Lots of talk. Lots of promises.

But elections matter. Elections are your chance to voice your opinion. You choose who will make decisions on your behalf so it is important to elect people who reflect your values.

Government has an important role to play in establishing the values of a society. Some principles to consider for this election:

- 1 Albertans value human dignity and want government policy to respect all Albertans.
- 2 Every Albertan wants a job that allows them to contribute to the community and to provide a decent life for their family.
- 3 In a province as wealthy as Alberta, no person should go without food, clothing or shelter.
- 4 Good health care and quality education should be available to all Albertans.
- 5 Albertans want to participate in the decisions that affect their family and community.
- 6 Albertans recognize we are all dependent on each other. Our interdependence gives us common concerns.

Since 1993, Alberta has changed direction. In the upcoming election, it is your job to determine how the changes of the past four years have affected

Many changes have taken place in Alberta in a short time period, making it hard to keep track of everything. This guide summarizes some of the major changes in Health, Education and Social Services.

Along with information, there are some questions. You can ask these questions of yourself or of the candidates running in your area.

After reading this guide, think about your personal values and principles. Then as you prepare to vote, be sure you know what your candidates think about your concerns. Do they share your beliefs about the shape of Alberta society?

This is your chance to be heard, and you want to make sure your voice is a strong one.

Alberta's economy is changing. Old jobs are being replaced by either low-wage, temporary work or high-skill, stable employment. Some people struggle to find any work at all.

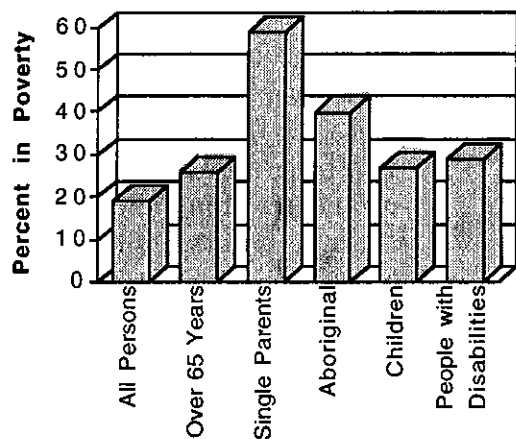
In this climate, more Albertans are at risk of falling between the cracks and sinking into poverty. Who lives in poverty is changing, creating challenges for social policy.

## Changing Face of Poverty

In Alberta since 1993:

- There are more working poor—people who have jobs but live in poverty.
- There are 11,000 more people living in poverty in Edmonton, for a total of 150,000.
- 27 per cent of children in Edmonton live under the poverty line.
- 59 per cent of single parents in Edmonton live in poverty.

Edmonton poverty rates—selected groups



## Welfare Reform

In 1993, the provincial government brought in sweeping reforms to Alberta's Supports for Independence (SFI) program (welfare). Rates were reduced for all recipients. Single men and women now receive \$394 a month. A family of four is eligible for \$1,206.

Other essentials—bus passes, school supplies, diapers and telephones—are no longer covered by welfare. Recipients must pay for these items from their food budget, or go without. Only 54 per cent of welfare recipients have a telephone. (*Two Paycheques Away: Social Policy and Hunger in Edmonton*, 1996)

Government policy is emphasizing greater job training and job placements for those looking for work.

Welfare has become harder to get. People are cut off or denied benefits more frequently. Often the reasons are unclear. A recent study showed that of one sample, 50 per cent of denials had nothing to do with financial need. (*Two Paycheques Away: Social Policy and Hunger in Edmonton*, 1996). An estimated 26,000 cases have been closed with no recorded destination.

## The Growing Number of Working Poor

It is not just welfare recipients who have been affected by cutbacks. There are growing numbers of Albertans who hold jobs but still cannot make ends meet.

Alberta now has the lowest minimum wage in the country, at \$5 an hour. The minimum wage has not been raised in five years, despite a nine per cent increase in the cost of living.

A single person working full time at the minimum wage makes only 62 per cent of the poverty line. For families the situation is even worse.

Low wage jobs force families to go without many other

other educational opportunities are out of reach.

Adequate housing also becomes hard to find. Often the choice is between good housing and adequate food for the month.

Low wages discourage many from leaving welfare to find employment. There is little incentive to work when work means even greater family hardship.

### Stretching Community Agencies

Alberta has hundreds of community-based non-profit agencies delivering services that prevent family crisis and help families in need. Head Start and school lunch programs, family counselling and seniors programs try to prevent social problems before they occur.

Studies have found that for every dollar spent on preventative social services, \$7 are saved down the road.

Since 1993, government policy reduced the funds available to these agencies by 21 per cent. At the same time, less support to low income Albertans forced many families to turn to community agencies for survival, increasing agency workloads and stretching thin budgets even further.

Some of the results of this “downloading of poverty:”

- One in 20 Edmontonians needed the Food Bank in 1996, double the number in 1993.
- Almost 50 per cent of Food Bank recipients were working three years ago.
- Hot lunch programs now serve 1,050 kids a day in Edmonton, with another 24 schools on a waiting list.
- Only one out of seven applicants to the Edmonton Inner City Housing Society finds housing with the society because of the lack of decent, affordable housing.
- Mustard Seed Church (an inner city church) serves hot meals for over 5,000 people a week.

- 1 Alberta is one of Canada's wealthiest provinces and now has a \$2 billion surplus. Do you believe some of the surplus should be directed at improving supports for low-income Albertans?
- 2 Do you think the minimum wage should be raised at this time? Would an annual review of the minimum wage be an effective way of keeping pace with cost of living increases?
- 3 Would you support a Family Benefit program to low income families to offset the costs of raising children?
- 4 How can government policy remove barriers to employment for working families, such as child care and medical expenses?
- 5 What initiatives can be undertaken to improve access to better-paying, more stable employment?
- 6 Is increased demand for community agencies the best way to deliver services to low income Albertans? What is the right level of partnership between government and community agencies?
- 7 What do you think Alberta should do to measure the effects of policy changes and welfare reforms? What is your plan for low income Albertans?

# The Changes in Education

Albertans agree that a strong education system is essential to a healthy community and a healthy economy. Our public education system has proven effective at making sure every child has an equal opportunity to learn. A recent shift in Alberta education policy is changing the face of our schools and universities.

## Financial Changes

Since 1993, the Education budget has been cut by seven per cent, or \$179 million dollars. In 1996, we spent \$5,515 per pupil (down from \$5,981 in 1993). The national average in 1996 was \$5,917.

In 1985, Alberta was third highest in Education spending, now we are seventh, only ahead of three Atlantic provinces (see chart).

The provincial government has promised \$50 million over four years for computer purchases.

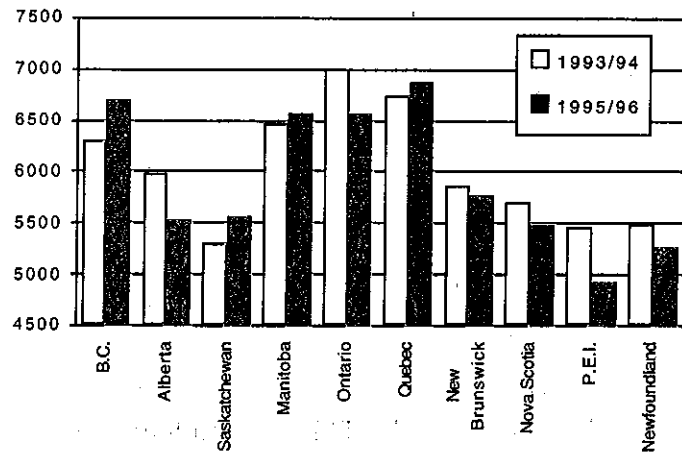
Kindergarten had its funding cut in half, then restored. However, in 1996, Kindergarten received five per cent less per child than it did in 1993. Kindergarten funding is not guaranteed however, as it remains an optional program for school boards.

## Changes to Decision Making

The government reduced the number of school boards in the province from 181 to 66.

In 1991, the province paid over 58 per cent of education costs with the remainder picked up by property taxes. In 1996, the provincial share had dropped to under 47 per cent. The majority of school revenues now come from property tax. Local property taxes are a less fair way to raise money for schools, since they are not based upon ability to pay.

**Provincial per student funding  
(primary and secondary education)**



Source: *Alberta Education Annual Report 1995/96*

## The Consequences of Change

The effectiveness of our schools is just as important as the amount spent on education. Government policy has affected the quality of schools.

## Education Quality

- Class sizes have grown 10 to 15 per cent. From 1989/90 to 1995/96 the number of high school classes with more than 30 students rose from 2 per cent to 21.8 per cent.
- In Edmonton, the number of Public elementary school classes (grades one to six) with more than 30 students rose 647 per cent since 1989 (from 17 to 110 classes).
- 81 per cent of teachers (responding to an ATA survey) feel they have less time to spend with their students; 83 per cent feel the changes have had a negative impact on their students' education. (1996 ATA Report Card on Education)

greater student participation and fewer students held back.

Alberta now has 1,500 fewer teachers (a drop of about five per cent), despite little change in the number of students. In Edmonton there was a 30 per cent jump in the number of teachers taking long-term sick leave compared to a year earlier (this was measured by an independent survey in November 1995.)

### Services Cost More, Fewer Services Available

- Parents are being asked to pay directly for materials and supports that used to be free.
- Some of the first services reduced were for students with special needs (ESL and students with disabilities). Students with moderate disabilities now receive no support at all.
- More schools are turning to corporate sponsorship and donations to fund school operations.
- Schools are being forced to choose between buying computers or hiring teachers.

Pressures have come to privatize and lay off support staff, leaving schools with fewer janitors and with less administrative support.

School Boards have laid off many of their speech therapists, psychologists and reading specialists. Fewer of these special services are available to schools. They must now contract to private companies, at a higher cost, to give students these services.

A rise in user fees and parent fundraising reduces the fairness in our education system. Schools in wealthier neighborhoods have an advantage in fund raising, giving them access to more educational tools and supports. Children from poorer families miss out on educational opportunities because they cannot afford the fees.

by 15 per cent. The shortfall has been made up by higher tuition and private fundraising.

Tuition for university students has almost doubled since 1993. Tuition has been raised every year for the past seven years. Universities are spending more energy finding private funding from corporations and the community.

### Questions

- 1 Given that Alberta has a \$2 billion surplus and is one of Canada's richest provinces, do you feel Alberta should place a cap on the number of students per classroom, and guarantee that adequate resources will be provided to those students?
- 2 Do you believe user fees and other charges related to instruction and class activities should be eliminated in all Alberta schools?
- 3 Do you feel it is important to fund services for students with special needs at a level which will ensure they can participate in the classroom on an equal footing with other students?
- 4 In your opinion, is contracting out a good practice?
- 5 How would you make sure post-secondary tuition and debt loads do not become unaffordable for average Albertans?
- 6 What do you think Alberta should do to measure the effects of its changes to education policy? What is your plan for education policy?

# The Changes in Health

Albertans are proud of our health care system. Through Medicare, every person in Canada can get the health care they need, regardless of who they are or how much money they make. Medicare isn't perfect, but it is a system that works well for Albertans.

Health care in Alberta is in the midst of an overhaul. The reforms made since 1993 have changed the way health care is delivered in Alberta.

## Reducing the Budget

Between 1993 and 1996, the Health budget was reduced by \$570 million (14 per cent). In 1996, some of the cuts were reversed, putting \$145 million back into certain problem areas.

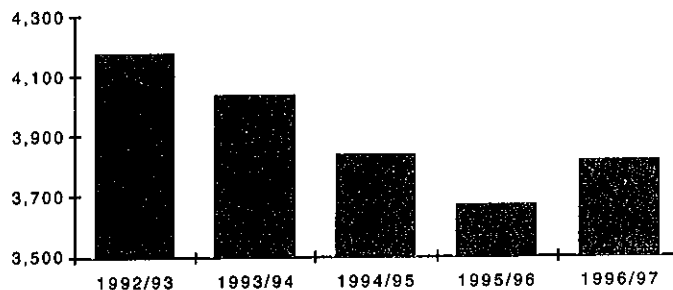
As we enter 1997, the health care budget is nine per cent less than it was in 1993/94. Per capita, Alberta moved from the highest health spending in Canada (at \$1,800 per person) in 1989 to the lowest in 1996 (\$1,250).

In particular, hospitals were a focus of cuts. Thirty per cent of hospital beds in Edmonton were closed between 1993 and 1996. The General Hospital was closed and two other hospitals (Grey Nuns and Misericordia) were downgraded to health centres (they now handle only less serious problems).

Forty per cent of health care workers are no longer registered in Alberta, including 43 per cent of registered nurses.

The money returned to health care was enough to rehire one registered nurse for every 24 laid off due to the cuts. Seven per cent of the beds closed can be reopened.

**Alberta Health Budget**



## Shifting Health Priorities

Government policy moving from hospital-based services to community-based services. This means keeping people out of hospital as much as possible and caring for them in their homes.

To meet this goal, patients are released from hospital earlier and more surgeries are performed without admitting the patient.

To handle this shift, funding for homecare (care provided in patient's home) was increased. However, demands on homecare have outstripped the increase. As a result, access to homecare has been restricted. In 1993, patients in Edmonton had no cap on how much homecare they received. People with disabilities or long term illness could get help 24 hours a day, if needed. Now, a patient is allowed only \$2,000 a month in homecare. This is about five hours a day, regardless of how serious the need is.

## Increasing Private Opportunities

Government policies removed some services out of Medicare, meaning Albertans must now pay for them directly. Eye examinations, anaesthetic for some dental

The government has also expanded the role of for-profit companies in health care. Some of the examples:

- Hiring of private companies to provide laundry and food services in hospitals.
- Contracting procedures (eye surgery, some heart surgery) to private health clinics.
- Allowing the creation of private dialysis (kidney cleaning) clinics which charge patients.
- Paying the extra fees charged by private eye clinics.
- Supporting bids to set up private hospitals, such as Hotel de Health (a private group which wanted to buy part of the Leduc Hospital).

### Consequences of Change

Albertans have not yet felt all the effects of the changes. Some of impacts have been :

- More frequent cancellation of non-life threatening surgeries.
- More backlogs at emergency wards, with longer waits for hospital beds.
- More family members providing direct care in the home.
- Longer waits for test results; in 1993 a biopsy test result took two days, now they often take over a week.
- More money is paid by patients and their families in homecare expenses, medications and eye exams.
- Higher rates of infection due to poorer cleaning practices.

Albertans are more likely to wait in a hospital hallway for 24 to 36 hours until a bed becomes free. "Code Reds," the name for when no beds are available anywhere in the city, have been a regular problem in both Edmonton and Calgary, most recently in January 1997.

Our health care system was good to excellent. In 1996, this was down to 57 per cent.

### Questions

- 1 With a \$2 billion budget surplus, do you feel some of the surplus should put to use improving health care for Albertans?
- 2 Where do you stand on private, for-profit health companies, like Hotel de Health? Do you think private clinics should be permitted in Alberta?
- 3 Should Alberta expand Medicare coverage to include services and devices (needles, bandages, medication) given to patients through homecare, so that the government, rather than the patient, picks up the cost?
- 4 Do you think there is a medical need to reopen the beds closed since 1993?
- 5 Do you feel it would be beneficial to look at other ways to reduce costs, such as using cheaper, generic drugs or paying doctors differently?
- 6 What do you think Alberta should do to measure the effects of health policy changes? What is your plan for health care in Alberta?

In this election, you will be electing candidates who will be responsible for issues such as education, social services, health care, highways and job training.

Later in the year we can expect a federal election to elect the government responsible for unemployment insurance, pensions, and immigration.

In about a year and a half, Edmonton will have a municipal election. The municipal (city) government is responsible for roads and sewers, police and fire services and public transit.

Knowing what each level of government does will help you know which questions to ask your candidates.

### **Elections in Alberta**

Alberta is divided into 83 constituencies, 19 in Edmonton, each electing one person to the provincial government.

There are 10 officially registered political parties in Alberta. Independent candidates are also allowed to run. You will likely have four or five candidates running in your constituency.

If you wish to know which constituency you live in, call Elections Alberta (427-7191).

### **Who Can Vote**

Voting is not mandatory in Alberta. You have the choice to vote or not. You have the right to vote if you:

- are a Canadian citizen; and
- over 18 years old; and
- have lived in Alberta for six months before election day.

### **Where and When To Vote**

March 11th is the day you can vote. Polls will be open between 9 am and 8 pm. Your employer must give you

At the poll, the clerks will check for your name on the voters' list. If you are not on the voters' list, do not worry. You can take an oath at the time you vote. To do so, you will need two pieces of identification (for example, a driver's licence and Alberta Health Care Card). All polls are supposed to be accessible for people with disabilities.

If you will be out of town on election day, there will be advance voting days. Look for advertisements or call Elections Alberta to find out where and when. Your other option is to get a "special ballot." More information is at Elections Alberta.

### **Why Vote**

Albertans only get one chance every four years to select the provincial government. Even if your chosen candidate does not win, your voice will send a message to who does win. And by making an informed vote, you make your voice stronger.

For more information on voting in the upcoming provincial election call: Elections Alberta at 427-7191.

### **This Fact Sheet was prepared by:**

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