



News Release

For Immediate Release

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Government Spending on Advertising at 10-Year High: Auditor General

(TORONTO) The government spent over \$58 million on advertising in 2016/17—and 30% of that was for ads that appeared intended to make the government look good, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk said in her *2017 Annual Report*, tabled in the Legislative Assembly today.

“That \$58 million is the highest spending by the government on advertising since the 2006/07 fiscal year,” Lysyk said after her Report was tabled. “And it included millions on ads that we would not have cleared under the old Government Advertising Act.”

The *Government Advertising Act, 2004*, which took effect in late 2005, mandated the Auditor General to review most government advertising before it could run to ensure that no public funds were spent on ads to give the government a partisan advantage. Only those ads which passed the review could be aired, printed or displayed on billboards.

However, the Act was amended in 2015 to eliminate the Auditor General’s authority to determine what constitutes a partisan message. Instead, the government legislated a narrow definition of “partisan” that guaranteed that almost all proposed ads could easily pass the review.

In her Report, Lysyk noted several examples of ads that would not have passed her review prior to last year, but which her Office was required to find in compliance with the amended Act, including:

- A \$330,000 radio campaign to promote the 2017 budget that referred to four Ontario communities—all in opposition-held ridings. As the campaign came barely a year before the provincial election scheduled for June 2018, these ads could leave the impression that these communities were specifically targeted for government-friendly advertising.
- The Ministry of Energy spent just over \$1 million in 2016/17, and planned in the first half of 2017/18 to spend another \$2.9 million, on campaigns to promote its 25% electricity discount. The Auditor General was required to approve all the items as compliant despite concerns including the fact that \$1 million in radio ads went to market a couple of months before enabling legislation for the rate cut was even passed in the Legislature.
- The Ministry of Education submitted a \$1.9-million television advertising campaign about the creation of more licensed child-care spaces over the next five years. The ads say: “Over the next five years, we’ll help double the amount of licensed child care for kids, aged 0 to 4.” These ads could be perceived as a political commitment in light of the forthcoming June 2018 election.

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