



News Release

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Government Spending on Advertising at Record Low: Auditor General

(TORONTO) Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk said today that the provincial government spent \$16.39 million on advertising in the 2018/2019 fiscal year—the lowest amount since her Office began reviewing government advertising in 2005.

“It’s a significant drop,” Lysyk said after her *2019 Annual Report* was tabled in the Legislature. “In comparison, the government spent \$62.60 million on advertising in the previous fiscal year.”

The Report devotes an entire chapter to the Auditor General’s review of government advertising, mandated under the *Government Advertising Act, 2004*, to ensure ads are not partisan.

The Report says the government spent \$12.55 million on 614 ads reviewable by the Auditor General in 2018/19, and another \$3.84 million on digital ads on social media and using search services that are exempt from review, for a total of \$16.39 million.

That compares with 2017/18 spending of \$55.0 million for 2,595 reviewable ads plus another \$7.60 million on non-reviewable digital ads, for a total of \$62.60 million.

The original Act, which took effect in late 2005, required the government to submit ads to the Auditor General for review to ensure that they were not partisan and were a reasonable way to communicate a message. Only ads that passed this review could run, and the Auditor General had discretionary power to determine what was partisan.

However, amendments to the Act in 2015 did away with that discretion and, instead, imposed a narrow definition of what is partisan, making it virtually impossible for an ad to be rejected on grounds of partisanship.

The 2015 amendments to the Act also placed new limits on government advertising during election campaigns, and today’s Annual Report said that the government observed these limits during the June 7, 2018, elections.

In addition, the government-elect announced on June 18, 2018, an expenditure-management strategy that froze discretionary spending by ministries, including on such non-essential communications as advertising.

The Auditor General found a single advertising submission in violation of the revised Act in the past year: preliminary versions of eight Ministry of the Attorney General multilingual television ads failed to include a statement saying the ads were paid for by the Government of Ontario.

The Ministry resubmitted amended versions that included the required statement, and the ads were subsequently found in compliance.

The Report also noted that concerns with three campaigns submitted during the current (2019/20) fiscal year that would not have passed under the pre-2015 version of the Act:

- A \$4-million television, radio and digital campaign about the government’s Environment Plan was deemed to have as a primary objective to foster a negative impression of the federal government and its carbon-pricing policy, and a positive impression of the provincial governing party.
- A \$1.4-million Ministry of Finance video and digital campaign about Ontario’s debt was deemed to have as its primary objective to portray the government in a positive light without providing details about how the government would actually address the debt.
- A Ministry of Education radio campaign initially contained what the Report called unsubstantiated “qualitative value judgments” about preparing students for the future. In a subsequent version of the campaign for multi-ethnic radio ads, the Ministry made changes that addressed the concerns and the ads were approved without qualification.

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Read the report at www.auditor.on.ca

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