



News Release

For Immediate Release

May 12, 2015

Government Ads Could Become Partisan, Auditor General says in Special Report

(TORONTO) Ontarians could see taxpayer-funded partisan advertising if proposed changes to the *Government Advertising Act, 2004* (Act) are passed in the Legislative Assembly, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk warned in a Special Report tabled today.

“Over the past decade, this Act has ensured that government advertising is politically neutral, factual and accurate,” Lysyk said following tabling of the Report. “These proposed changes would do away with almost all the provisions of the Act that aim to prevent publicly funded partisan advertising.”

Lysyk added that if the amendments pass, she will ask the government to relieve her of her duty to review government advertising before it can be run.

At issue is Schedule 14 of Bill 91, the *Budget Measures Act* introduced on April 23, which proposes significant changes to the decade-old Act.

The Act currently requires government ministries to submit most proposed advertising in advance of use to the Auditor General for review to ensure it is not partisan and meets other standards of the Act. In the past decade, the Auditor General’s Office has reviewed more than 7,200 ads, worth more than \$411 million, and rejected fewer than 1% of them.

The most far-reaching of the proposed changes to the Act relate to the definition of what is partisan. As the Act now stands, the Auditor General has the discretionary authority to determine what is partisan, taking into account whatever factors he or she sees as relevant.

The proposed changes eliminate that discretionary authority and replace it with a narrow definition that says an ad is partisan only if it contains:

- the name, voice or image of an elected Member of the Legislative Assembly;
- the name or logo of a recognized party in the Legislature; or
- “to a significant degree,” a colour associated with the governing party.

The current Act contains these and other standards, including that an ad must not have as a “primary objective” to “foster a positive impression of the governing party or a negative impression of a person or entity who is critical of the government.”

Lysyk said that the proposed changes, if enacted, would allow a government to run “self-congratulatory” ads praising its performance and making inflated—and unsubstantiated—claims about the benefits of its actions.

“This would damage the credibility of my Office,” Lysyk said, “with citizens rightly asking how the Auditor General could have approved controversial advertisements as being non-partisan.”

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To view the report, please visit www.auditor.on.ca.