



News Release

For Immediate Release

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Government Using Public Funds to Do More Self-Promotion: Auditor General

(TORONTO) After significantly weakening a law designed to stop the government from using taxpayer funds to pay for partisan advertising last year, the Government subsequently spent millions in 2015/16 on ads whose primary objective was to make it look good, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk says in her *2016 Annual Report*.

“We cautioned when the Government changed the law in 2015 that it was opening the door to this sort of thing,” Lysyk said today after her Report was tabled in the Legislative Assembly. “Sure enough, the government walked right through that open door.”

At issue is the *Government Advertising Act, 2004* (Act), enacted over a decade ago with the support of the Office of the Auditor General. The Act required the Auditor General to review most government advertising and, in cases where it was deemed not partisan, to issue a formal approval before the item could be used. The Act set out standards to guide this work, and gave the Auditor General discretionary authority to determine what is partisan.

The Act worked effectively until 2015, when the government amended the Act by removing the Auditor General’s discretionary authority, and by providing a narrow and specific definition of partisan advertising. The amended Act still requires a formal approval from the Auditor General before an ad can run, but under the narrow definition of what is partisan, this approval is little more than a rubber stamp.

For the year ending March 31, 2016, the government spent \$49.9 million on advertising, as compared to \$30 million the previous year. Examples of problematic advertising include:

- a campaign to promote “Ontario’s nearly \$160-billion investment in infrastructure,” which omitted to say that the spending would be spread out over the next 12 years;
- ads telling Ontarians that the government is increasing health-care spending by \$1 billion, with few specifics, that led the Auditor General to conclude the ads appeared to be self-congratulatory and aimed at ensuring that the government gets credit for its planned health-care spending; and
- a series of ad campaigns on the environment that could be seen as self-congratulatory and, in some cases, misleading, with one promoting the government’s cap-and-trade program that conveyed the sense the program was already in place when, in fact, it was tentatively to be launched in 2017.

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