

Why Premier Jason Kenney's Skilled Trades Plan is the Right One

A competitive economy relies on far more than a post-secondary education system that turns out doctors, accountants and people who write code. It needs skilled trades men and women, including highly trained construction workers who literally help build our nation.

Canada is facing a growing crisis in its construction sector. One of the most important assets of construction employers is their skilled workforce. Statistics show that as many as 1/5 of skilled trades will evaporate from the marketplace over the next 5 to 10 years, while employment demands for this critical sector continue to rise.

Alberta's Jason Kenney government understands this problem. As it works to move its 13-point "Job Skills for Alberta's Economy" plan from a campaign promise into action, employers, unions and educators should be doing all they can to get behind it.

Skilled trades have a huge role to play in Canada's changing work world. According to Skills Canada, almost 40 percent of new jobs created in the next decade will be in the skilled trades. Yet only 26 percent of young people aged 13 to 24 are even considering a career in these areas. Between 2018 and 2028, rising non-residential construction activity in Alberta will require the industry to increase employment by 12,900 workers (BuildForce Canada). To make matters worse, an aging workforce compounds the problem. About 40,000 Alberta construction workers will be retiring this decade (19 percent of workforce). To add to these major challenges, apprenticeship completion rates are abysmal. According to BuildForce Canada, of the more than 77,000 apprentices registered in Alberta's 15 largest construction programs over the past five years, only 35,000 completed the programs.

The good news is that the Alberta government is taking right approach to address these problems squarely. It starts with changing attitudes. It's high time Alberta embraced the European mentality, which puts careers in the skilled trades on equal footing with all other academic pursuits. PCA was part of fact-finding mission to Germany in 2014 with Jason Kenney, who was then federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. This initiative underscored the deep need for Canada to change the dial on skilled trades and introduce the notion of "parity of esteem" in which tradespeople and professionals are afforded the same value.

A big part of Kenney's 13-point plan is the fundamental dignity of trades work/working with hands. "Apprenticeship learning has every bit as much value as academic learning, and skilled trades have every bit as much value, merit and worth as a university degree," Kenney says.

In order to kick-start a change in attitudes and programs in Alberta, the new Alberta government's plan includes a number of highly sensible and attractive policies and programs.

The Kenney campaign platform earmarks an initial \$5.3 million commitment and a detailed plan that includes expanding the number of schools and enrollment in Registered Apprenticeship Programs, a \$1 million Trades Scholarship as well as increased funding for the Women Building Futures program. PCA has worked in partnership with WBF for many years to encourage more women to pursue skilled trades careers. Kenney's plan would also double the number of schools offering vocational training, increasing courses to 1,000 from 500 and quadrupling the number of students placed with employers.

These plans make good sense to us at PCA. We are excited and supportive of UCP's "Skills for Jobs" plan. Elevating the profile of trades training in this province is a major step in raising awareness and putting thousands of young people on an innovative, worthwhile career path – a path they might not have otherwise considered.

This is an opportunity for Alberta to show other provinces how it's done.