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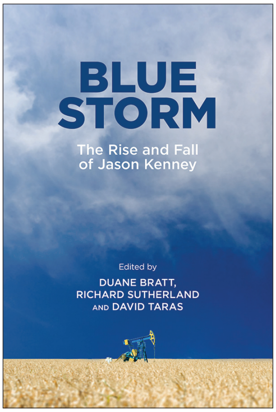

BLUE STORM: THE RISE AND FALL OF JASON KENNEY

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Cultural Industries Under the United Conservative Party

Richard Sutherland

It may seem that in the policy world of Alberta, the word culture has not been conspicuously present, unless accompanied by "agri" as a prefix. When it is mentioned, it often seems perfunctory, without any of the passion and commitment that accompanies discussion of oil and gas, or beef. The Fair Deal Panel's call to affirm Alberta's cultural (alongside its political and economic) uniqueness is a case in point.[1] There is no elaboration in the report of what this cultural uniqueness amounts to, although there is plenty of discussion of the ways in which the province is economically and politically distinct. Likewise, the Arts Professionals Recognition Act, announced by Culture Minister Ron Orr in October 2021, which claims to "promote greater economic security, freedom of expression and professional recognition for Alberta's artists,"[2] seems largely symbolic with no commitment to spending in these areas (the United Conservative Party [UCP] has reduced arts funding by $3 million during its time in office). In fact, Alberta was amongst the first provinces to develop generous funding programs for the arts, dating back to the early years of the Lougheed government in the 1970s. But the (generally comparatively good) support for the arts in this province has tended to position them as an accoutrement, rather than a driver, of prosperity—nice to have but not necessary. Amongst other things, this chapter looks at how this discourse has shifted in recent years, not only under Rachel Notley's New Democratic Party (NDP), but at least as much under the current UCP government, as each has turned to culture, more specifically cultural industries, as a possible site for economic diversification. The timing of this shift in policy towards a more favourable view of the cultural industries' economic potential is strongly related to a prolonged downturn in Alberta's economy, primarily in the energy sector, as well as, more recently, the considerable impact of the pandemic on employment. In particular, the sharp increase in film production in 2020–2021 offered Kenney's UCP government one of very few bright spots on the economic front during its first two years in office.

As is not infrequently observed, Alberta's engagement with economic diversification rises and falls in inverse proportion to the price of oil and gas. When energy prices are low, the benefits of a more diverse economy become obvious; when they are high, diversification seems unnecessary. Of course, low energy prices also impact provincial government revenues (see Trevor Tombe's analysis in this book), hampering the government's ability to mobilize policies that would assist with the process. Not surprisingly, calls for economic diversification in Alberta have intensified over the last several years, due to the prolonged downturn in the energy sector. The economic impact of the pandemic has only increased the sense of urgency, and even as oil and gas prices have rebounded almost to 2014 levels, there is the sense that this may not bring employment back to the levels previously enjoyed. Much of the diversification pursued by Alberta's provincial governments over the years has not been so much away from oil and gas, but within it, finding new ways to add value and employment, building on the strengths of the sector. Other attempts at diversification, such as transportation or the telecommunications industry have a mixed track record, and in a province where conservative views often prevail, government attempts at "picking winners" have been frequently criticized.[3] Ralph Klein's government was lauded for reversing many of the attempts of his predecessors, Peter Lougheed and Don Getty along these lines, stating that the Alberta government should not be in the "business of business."

Such thinking, along with the prosperity that the energy industry has usually meant for the province have stymied attempts at diversification beyond the energy sector, and it is hard to imagine a set of industries more distantly removed from oil and gas than the cultural industries (which include sectors such as film and television production, music industries, publishing, and digital media). The Lougheed government was a pioneer in provincial arts policy, but this did not result in any coherent strategy for cultural industries. While grants for some of these industries were available, many of these were drawn from the same programs as arts funding, and these were not industrially focused. Seemingly, the economic potential of these sectors may not have been as pressing a concern for a government overseeing a thriving energy-based economy. Nonetheless, as this chapter shows, cultural industries have gradually attracted more attention from provincial governments as calls for diversification intensify. Two sectors in particular form the focus for this chapter—film and television production and video game development. Not only have they attracted notice for their potential to contribute to economic growth and employment, but they are also the two cultural industries that have seen significant policy developments under the UCP government, even if, in one case, that is simply a case of repealing the previous NDP policies.

Alberta's Recovery Plan, released in June 2020 offers some insight into where cultural industries fit in the UCP's vision for the Alberta economy.[4] Cultural industries and technology featured in the Diversifying section. If the order of topics is any indication, diversification was hardly at the top of the government's agenda, which emphasized more general economic measures, such as low corporate taxes and investment in infrastructure. Even within the Diversifying section, pride of place was given to the energy sector, followed by agriculture and forestry, and tourism. Culture was fourth on the list. Film and television production was certainly prominent within that category, but much of what was discussed here was aspirational, with little reference to concrete measures, beyond the tax credit. To the extent that video game production (or interactive digital media [IDM] as it is referred to in the report) featured at all in the government's plans, it was as a brief mention in the Technology category that followed Culture in the document. This reflects how the two sectors have fared under the UCP with film and television production enjoying at least some success in economic and policy terms, whereas government aspirations and policy directions for IDM remain unfulfilled.

Film and Television Production in Canada and Alberta

We hear a lot about the big Hollywood productions that have been shot in Alberta—*Legends of the Fall*, *Brokeback Mountain*, or *The Revenant* among others. These are all examples of "runaway" productions, or more formally, Foreign Service and Location Productions (FSLs), and, in fact, most of the film and television production activity in Canada is made up of such productions, shot on location here. Vancouver, in particular, has acquired the label of "Hollywood North," as a result of its burgeoning film and television industry since the 1970s. Toronto has also become a leading centre for such productions. Canada offers many attractions in this regard, among them skilled, experienced crews, and varied and accessible locations (not far from the US) that can stand in for other (usually American) places. Film commissions and offices, operating at the municipal and provincial level, promote these advantages as they try to recruit Hollywood studios to film in their cities or provinces. But, of course, economic considerations are central to Canada's viability as a location for film production for Hollywood. A favourable exchange rate is useful, but the major policy tool of governments in this regard has been incentives in the form of grants or, more often, tax breaks, which are more appealing to international producers. The federal government has offered such incentives since the 1970s,[5] and many provinces have also provided generous tax breaks along the same lines. The scope and extent of these incentives vary, but generally they are fully refundable, and they apply to spending on production (that is the actual filming of the project) within the particular jurisdiction. To be clear, the discussion in the chapter focuses on FSL productions, rather than on Canadian productions. While these policies can be used for Canadian made film and television, the largest uptake in these tax credits is from FSLs, and the discussion in Alberta has focused mainly on the presence of these kinds of productions in the province.

Alberta was amongst the first provinces to develop a policy for film production, establishing the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation in 1982. By 1994, government contributions amounted to $1.8 million, generating $18 million of direct production expenditures in the province.[6] However, all of this was dismantled early in the Klein

Table 14.1. Total Volume of Film and Television Production, Alberta and Canada

($millions)	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Share of Total 2019/20
Alberta	148	167	155	274	254	231	246	226	254	220	2%
Canada	5560	5963	5830	5962	7092	6831	8352	8866	9425	9322	100%

Sources: Canadian Media Producers Association, *2020 Profile: Economic Report on the Screen-based Media Production Industry in Canada*, p. 12.

Table 14.2. Volume of Foreign Location and Service Production, Alberta and Canada

($millions)	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Share of Total 2019/20
Alberta	4	13	4	88	92	34	54	31	86	0	0%
Canada	1874	1687	1740	1826	2600	2644	3779	4707	4858	5248	100%

Sources: Canadian Media Producers Association, *2020 Profile: Economic Report on the Screen-based Media Production Industry in Canada*, p. 64.

era, just as other provinces were introducing or increasing incentives. The Alberta Film Development Program, introduced in 1998 under the administration of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (AFA), offered grants reimbursing 20 per cent of production expenditures in the province. The inclusion of the program under AFA positioned film in terms of arts rather than in terms of industry. More recently, the creation of Alberta Film under Alberta Economic Development may have signalled a renewed awareness of the economic potential of film production but did not come with any notable increase in support. The exception to this trend was Ralph Klein's 2005 decision to provide $5.5 million in funding for *Passchendaele*, a film shot near Calgary, produced by and starring Canadian actor Paul Gross and about Canadian troops fighting in the eponymous First World War battle.[7]

Generally, however, Alberta support for the sector remained low, relative to other provinces in Canada. Subsequent Progressive Conservative governments did little to improve Alberta's policies for attracting productions. Another ingredient that has helped to consolidate the success of Vancouver and Toronto has been creating the necessary infrastructure, such as studio facilities. Alberta's investment in this area has been low, and subject to cutbacks, again suggesting a limited commitment to supporting the sector. In 2009, the provincial government announced that it was planning to build the Alberta Creative Hub in Calgary. But in 2013, it backed out on its funding commitment to provide $13.2 million of the $32 million total.[8] The scaled-back project eventually did go ahead, with the Alberta government contributing $5 million of $22.8 million. It was the City of Calgary that played a much larger role in the project, contributing $10 million in funding, alongside a further $6.8 million from Calgary Economic Development, which took over the studio in 2018, two years after it opened.[9]

In some respects, the 2019 provincial election was a watershed moment for the film and television sector in Alberta. For the first time, all the major parties contesting the election included policy for the sector in their platforms. The incumbent NDP government had revised the province's film policy in 2017, replacing the Alberta Production Grant with the Screen-Based Production Grant, increasing both the funding cap on individual projects from $5 million to $7.5 million and the overall annual funding from $30 million to $45 million.[10] In the 2019 campaign, the Alberta Party promised to substantially enhance incentives to the sector with a tax credit of up to 65 per cent for eligible salaries, and 35 per cent for eligible expenses within the province.[11] This announcement was matched by the provincial Liberals. Shortly after this, the UCP likewise announced that it would replace the current program with a tax credit. The NDP was vague in its promises for the future, simply announcing that it would "work with the film and television industry to determine the right policy levers."[12]

The First Year: Freezes, Cuts, and Delays

The UCP government's victory signalled that Alberta's film and television policy would change again for the second time in two years. The change to a tax credit was certainly in line with industry demands, but the UCP's new policies did not get off to a promising start. No changes were announced until the fall. The uncertainty itself was problematic, as producers planning projects had no clear idea about how and when the government would proceed, leading some to move projects elsewhere.[13] The government's announcement in September that it was suspending the Screen-Based Production Grant, claiming that it had been mismanaged and was oversubscribed, did little to help matters. There was no word on a replacement, and the lack of any clarity on how a tax credit would be structured or when it would be introduced caused considerable distress in the province's film sector.

The October 2019 provincial budget officially cancelled the program, announcing a tax credit as a replacement. The value of the tax credit was less than the grant had been—22 per cent of eligible expenditures as opposed to 30 per cent, although the project cap of $10 million was an increase on the previous $7.5 million.[14] However, the biggest issue was the overall cap on funding. The UCP announced that there would be a limit of $15 million for the entire program in 2020–2021, down from $45 million. This would rise to $30 million the next year and reach $45 million in 2022–2023. These amounts meant that incentives would be limited to $90 million over the next three years, in contrast to other provinces, which had no such cap. All in all, the UCP's policies seemed set to shrink rather than grow film production in the province for the next several years. As

Calgary Economic Development's film, television, and creative industries commissioner Luke Azevedo pointed out, Alberta's position as a location was already far behind that of British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec, and Manitoba was threatening to overtake Alberta for fourth place.[15] Figures from the Canadian Media Producers Association show that Manitoba did, in fact, overtake Alberta in 2019–2020, with $242 million in total production volume, as compared to $220 million in Alberta.[16] There were no foreign service or location projects in Alberta that year, down from eighty-six in 2018–2019.[17] While there was a sharp decline in British Columbia's number of projects and spending during that year, the province still saw 2,800 projects filmed on location there, and 30 per cent of Canada's total production spending, whereas Alberta's film industry appeared to be in danger of disappearing altogether.

Early into the new year, the government began to outline the details of the new tax credit. In January, these were finally announced, consisting of two streams. One offered a tax credit of 22 per cent on eligible production expenditures in the province by producers not based in Alberta. The other stream offered Alberta-based productions a tax credit of 30 per cent.[18] In February, the government budget for 2021–2022 raised overall funding for the coming year to $22 million.[19] While this was certainly an improvement, it still left Alberta's incentives well behind those of other jurisdictions. The new tax credit seemed underwhelming as a policy intended to grow the sector, and the local production sector continued to express its concerns that the caps on spending would see Alberta lose out to other provinces (see Table 14.2).[20] On top of this, the pandemic resulted in border controls and quarantine measures that discouraged many productions from locating in Canada. Later in the year, there was hope that Alberta would benefit from the Calgary International Airport's selection by the federal government to pilot a program allowing travellers with negative tests for COVID to quarantine for two days rather than two weeks.[21] It was hoped this would strengthen Alberta's advantage as a viable location for production, but this advantage did not last very long, as the pilot was discontinued in early 2020. Moreover, as cases rose in Alberta, tighter restrictions on social distancing were introduced in early December.

The Turnaround: Out of COVID

All in all, 2020 saw a significant drop in Alberta's production numbers, particularly for foreign productions. However, as the year wore on, it appeared that the Alberta government was actively pursuing ways to enhance the province's appeal as a filming location, speaking with large producers in Hollywood, including streaming platforms such as Netflix.[22] The UCP also appears to have listened to the voices of organized labour in the sector, including locals of the International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), and ACTRA, a notable exception in a government that has not enjoyed good relations with labour overall (see Lori Williams' chapter on labour relations under the UCP). Already in January 2021, the coming year looked extremely promising for film production in the province, with Damian Petti, president of IATSE local 212 suggesting that it could be the biggest year ever for the province.[23] Petti pointed to a number of factors, including high COVID rates in Los Angeles, a favourable exchange rate, as well as federal and provincial tax incentives. He said he hoped that the industry would do $400 million in production in 2021.[24]

On 26 March 2021, Jobs and Economic Development Minister Doug Schweitzer announced that the government was dropping the $10 million cap on individual projects, while also announcing a $19 million increase in the tax credit program to $52 million for the coming year. Indeed, 2021 turned out as Petti and Schweitzer hoped and saw a tremendous increase in the number and value of productions taking place in Alberta. As of July, production spending in the province was projected to be $482 million for the year,[25] well in excess of the previous high of $274 million in 2013–2014.[26] One production alone, the HBO television series "The Last of Us" (a drama based on a video game set in a post-apocalyptic United States scoured by a pandemic), accounted for over $200 million in spending in the province.[27] Dropping the cap in per project funding was clearly instrumental for this production to go ahead in Alberta, as a $10 million maximum tax credit was much less than the production might have got in other jurisdictions. While this level of production may not be sustained every year, Alberta still appears to be better positioned than previously to compete with other provinces for a share of foreign service location spending. In a sign of improving times, the City of Calgary was able to announce in June 2021 that, thanks to new investment, it was divesting its share of the Calgary Film Centre it had bailed out in 2018.[28]

The conspicuous rise in film production in the province has been one of the few bright spots in the government's efforts at diversifying the economy. The film production tax credit represents a positive change in policy during the UCP's time in office, and it appears to have provided a more attractive climate for international productions. However, the UCP cannot take all the credit for this increase. The global film and television production industry has also experienced considerable growth over the past two years. Even in a year beset by delays and cancellations due to COVID, the global industry grew by over 16 per cent.[29] And while Canada's overall production numbers fell slightly in 2020, the value of FSLs still grew by 8 per cent that year (off the average annual growth rate of 11.3 per cent over the past decade).[30] At the time of writing, 2021 was equally notable for increased activity across the country, supported by strict COVID testing protocols on sets, government-backed insurance, and government policies allowing for foreign principals to continue to work in Canada.[31]

Still, Alberta's 2021 growth in the sector remained extraordinary, bouncing back from the nadir of 2019–2020. There are a number of ways to assess the UCP government's track record here. The best that might be said is that the UCP showed itself willing to listen to voices from the industry both within and outside of the province, to recognize the opportunities for growth, and to adjust its policies to take advantage of these. On the other hand, the sharp drop-off in film and television activity in the province in 2019–2020, compared to other provinces, suggests that it was a wasted year for the sector, a result of the incoming government's hasty termination of the NDP's incentives, delays in implementing a tax credit to replace them, and inadequate funding of the tax credit in its initial formulation. Nonetheless, from an inconspicuous start in 2019, the government can now boast that Alberta's film and television production sector is larger and more prosperous than it has ever been, one of the very few industries of any kind in the province for which this claim could be made. Minister Schweitzer continued to tout the success of the government's tax incentives to the point of suggesting that the government will lift the $50 million dollar cap on funding for 2022 year, should it be necessary.[32] This was confirmed in the 2022 provincial budget, which set aside $71 million for the program in 2022, as part of an increase of $81 million over three years.[33]

Interactive Digital Media in Canada and Alberta

Alberta, and in particular Edmonton as the location of Bioware, have some history of participation in video game production, producing titles such as *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*. However, Alberta's overall share of the industry remains very small, accounting for 4 per cent of total expenditure in the sector and employing 1,300 (a distant fourth place amongst provinces).[34] The video gaming or IDM sector has become one of the largest cultural industries globally, experiencing tremendous growth in recent years. Global revenues for the industry in 2021 were US$176 billion, 21 per cent higher than in 2019.[35] Canada's industry saw similar growth over that time, with revenues estimated at US$3.4 billion.[36] These kinds of figures have generated a good deal of interest in the sector on the part of several Canadian provinces and municipalities, and a number of them have developed incentives and programs to attract and develop the industry in their locales such that by 2009, Canada had emerged as the third largest site worldwide for employment in the sector,[37] primarily in British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec.

Alberta's relatively small industry notwithstanding, municipal governments in both Calgary and Edmonton, as well as the previous NDP provincial government, have demonstrated interest in growing the sector. Calgary Economic Development commissioned Nordicity Group to develop a strategy for "nurturing Calgary's . . . emerging video games development and immersive media industries.[38] Edmonton Global (and previously Edmonton Economic Development Corporation) have a long history of support for the sector. Under the NDP, Alberta introduced a targeted tax incentive for IDM in 2018, replacing an earlier grant-based pilot program from 2017.[39] The tax incentive, the first of its kind in Alberta, offered a 25 per cent refundable tax credit for labour costs associated with the production of IDM products.[40] This was relatively low compared to similar incentives offered by other provinces, but was well above that for British Columbia (17.5 per cent).[41]

Initially, the trajectory of policy for video games was very similar to that for film and television production. In its 2019 budget the UCP removed the targeted tax incentives developed under the NDP, including the Interactive Digital Media Tax Credit. Instead, the government suggested that its more general lowering of corporate tax rates would help all businesses, by creating a more favourable economic climate. However, as a number of parties observed, small start-ups did not generally benefit from a wholesale reduction in corporate taxes.[42] The reaction from the industry was similar to the dismay of the film and television production sector, but here there was even less reason for optimism, as there was nothing yet proposed to take the place of the incentive. Instead, in December 2019 the government set up an advisory council, the Innovation Capital Working Group to propose what policies could be used to grow the technology sector in the province. The report from the group was expected for the end of February 2020, but it was pushed back to the spring. In the meantime, the 2020 provincial budget offered nothing to the sector, with Economic Development Minister Tanya Fir repeating its position that the tax cuts announced in 2019, along with a reduction in red tape would provide benefits to the sector without having to pick "winners and losers."[43] The treatment of the sector contrasted sharply with that received by the oil and gas sector, particularly the establishment of the Canadian Energy Center (the "war room"—see Brad Clark's chapter) with a $30 million annual budget.[44]

The Innovation Capital Working Group finally released the report in May 2020. It noted that Alberta was the only Canadian province that offered no tax incentive support to technology entrepreneurs, and as a result Alberta was missing out on new investment in this sector.[45] The report also called for fourteen measures aimed at the technology sector. Video gaming was not singled out in the report, which was more focused on other areas of the technology sector, especially Scientific Research and Development. In July 2020 the provincial government responded to some of the recommendations, with the Innovation Employment Grant for small and medium enterprises, as well as adding $175 million to Alberta Enterprise Corp. to help with the process of accessing venture capital.[46] As the government announced these measures, Minister Fir said "Maybe there was a bit of time between ending the [NDP] programs and introducing ours, but we wanted to take the time to do it right."[47] But more time would continue to elapse. The 2021 provincial budget saw increases to this funding, but there was still nothing specific for the video gaming sector.

In contrast to film and television policy, there has been no sign of the UCP government changing course from its initial round of cutbacks. As noted above, Alberta's video gaming sector remains disproportionately small within Canada. The province has been able to point to growth in the number of technology companies in Alberta over the past few years, with annual growth of 27 per cent in the number of firms. However, most of this growth seems to have occurred before 2020,[48] and both the NDP opposition, and many in the technology sector have suggested that this growth could have been much greater had Alberta continued to offer tax incentives. Calgary Economic Development's report likewise suggested that the lack of any incentive programs at the provincial level represented a major stumbling block to building an electronic gaming industry in the city.[49] In November 2021, Fir's replacement in the portfolio, Doug Schweitzer, was apparently still in listening mode as he responded to continued calls for the government to take action.[50] However, the 2022 provincial budget offered no targeted programs or incentives for the sector.[51]

Comparisons: Low Hanging Fruit versus Playing the Long Game

The contrast in the government's treatment of the two sectors is perhaps down to more than the vagaries of provincial politics. For a start, the voices advocating for the film and television production sector have been stronger than those for IDM, which has had some disruptions in sector representation.[52] Moreover, while both sectors have focused on tax incentives as their policy instrument of choice, there are some important differences between these sectors in terms of risk, as well as how the foregone tax revenues can be recovered by the province. One of the key characteristics of most cultural markets is the relative uncertainty in demand for any given product. In fact, most of the films, television shows, recordings, or video games produced fail to make back their costs. This, however, is not a problem where tax incentives for film and television production are concerned. The benefit to the province is seen relatively quickly as the spending on any given production occurs over a relatively short period of time, to be replaced by new projects. Regardless of whether or not the film or television series is ultimately successful, the spending has already taken place in the province. By the government's own estimate, every $1 in tax credits creates $4 in spending in the province.[53] In this regard, tax incentives in this sector are relatively risk-free. From this perspective it becomes easier to see why the provincial government would reverse course and remove many of the initial constraints it had placed on the program; the only question is why it took them so long to realize this.

Video game production is structured somewhat differently. Production timelines are often much longer, and tax breaks and grants are not project-based but are targeted at firms with an ongoing presence in the province. Nurturing a video game production must target locally based firms or branches, whose viability depends on achieving success in a very competitive and uncertain market. This requires much more of a long-term commitment with much less certainty of benefits to the provincial economy. Spending on labour still takes place, but the profits that would sustain a firm and contribute to provincial taxes may be a long time coming, if they come at all. Bearing this in mind, government contributions to this sector may carry more risk, notwithstanding the overall growth of the sector, and developing a viable policy becomes more difficult. That said, prior to introducing its Interactive Digital Media Tax Credit, the NDP had already engaged in extensive consultations and study, all of which counted for very little with the incoming UCP government.

In fact, the need to dismantle the previous government's legacy (or at least appear to do so) seems to be one of the forces driving UCP policy in both sectors, amongst many others (see Duane Bratt's chapter on climate policy, as well as Graham Thomson's chapter on the 2019 campaign and its aftermath). The termination of the programs for both film and television production and IDM in the October 2019 budget was in this sense a continuation of the "Summer of Repeal" that reversed many of the NDP's signature policies—the carbon tax, minimum wage increase, and agricultural labour reform. This may also help to explain the way in which the trajectory of policies for both sectors diverged after the budget. With the film and television production tax credit, the UCP had already articulated an alternative to the NDP's Screen-Based Production Grant. Reversing the reduction in funding and project caps of the initial policy did not have to mean reinstating NDP policy, the UCP could continue to claim that a tax credit was substantively different from, and even an improvement on, a grant. No such alternative was in place for the Interactive Digital Media Tax Credit and there have been no targeted measures for the sector. Introducing the tax incentives that the industry appears to want would amount to admitting that the NDP was, after all, on the right track. Whether or not this precludes the incentives ever being reinstated, is far from certain, but the sector might be justified in viewing the delay as simply a needlessly missed opportunity.

Conclusion

There is another development that is common to both film and television production and IDM in the province, but perhaps one that sees more continuity between the UCP and the NDP, where digital media fell under the purview of Economic Development Minister Deron Bilous. The UCP government has extended this, choosing to frame policies for film production in terms of economic development rather than culture as well. It is the economic development ministers, Tanya Fir and her successor Doug Schweitzer that have been the voice of government for these policies throughout the UCP's time in office. This suggests that the government is now viewing these particular sectors in terms of their economic potential rather than as culture, a process which has been slowly taking shape over successive governments. Film and television production and, to some extent, digital media appear to have carved out a status that stands apart from the arts, although other cultural industries such as music or publishing have yet to make that transition, there is now the acknowledgement that some cultural industries are indeed industries. In this respect at least, Alberta has fallen more into line with other governments in Canada, both provincial and federal.

These industries are not going to displace oil and gas (or indeed any of Alberta's leading industries) as the main contributor to the province's economy any time soon. They remain relatively minor players. At $482 million, the spending brought by film and television production in 2021, would amount to less than 0.16 per cent of GDP as it was calculated for 2020.[54] The 9,000 jobs this activity represented is likewise small, at less than 0.4 per cent of total employment in the province.[55] The digital media sector's numbers are even more insignificant. Although the UCP have been keen to tout the jobs and spending that the film sector brings, its importance to them is still more symbolic (even if it is couched in economic terms). The UCP government's focus on the province's energy sector is clear both in the amount of attention and spending it attracts (see Duane Bratt's, Jean-Sébastien Rioux's, and Brad Clark's chapters). Given that, it is not surprising that the Alberta government's commitment to cultural industries will likely remain limited. However, the disproportionately large symbolic value of these industries means that governments will likely continue to highlight them.

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