



AUSTRALIA-CANADA ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP FORUM

Rapporteur Report **2025 Australia-Canada Economic Leadership Forum**

Sydney, Australia, February 16-18, 2025



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Rapporteur Report:

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Executive Summary

The 2025 Australia-Canada Economic Leadership Forum, held at the Four Seasons Hotel in Sydney 16-18 February, brought together more than 150 of the sharpest minds in business, government, and academia to dissect the economic, technological, and geopolitical realities confronting both countries. This was no polite exchange of pleasantries but a frank, clear-eyed and at times frightening assessment of the risks and opportunities in an increasingly volatile world. Addressing risks associated with trade and security policies of the new Trump Administration permeated discussions on stage and in the hallways. The discussions raised alarming concerns among participants from both countries. The Forum, operating under the Chatham House Rule, encouraged open and unvarnished dialogue on the pressing issues of the day.

Central to the discussions was the fundamental challenge of sustaining prosperity in an era of rapid technological disruption, shifting security alliances, and deepening economic competition. How should Australia and Canada position themselves in the artificial intelligence revolution? Can they lead on decarbonization without wrecking their economic base? What must be done to safeguard national security in a world where adversaries are growing more aggressive and where the US security role is more ambiguous? How is deglobalization straining and breaking supply and value chains? The cross-cutting needs for more sustainable smart infrastructure, better cultivated talent for the innovation economy and economic policy that can be better deployed were also analyzed through a comparative lens. Learning from each other in respective efforts for greater economic engagement with Indigenous communities in the mutual interest was a theme throughout the two days of discussions.

These were the questions that animated debate throughout the Forum, as participants sought practical solutions rooted in realism rather than idealism. That realism was brought into sharper focus by the fact that simultaneous with the Forum, Canadian Minister Mary Ng was leading a large Team Canada Trade Mission to Australia numbering more than 200 as part of Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy to diversify business links and to become less dependent on the US market. The heightened relevance of the CPTPP (which does not include the US but does now include the UK), whose chairmanship had just shifted from Canada to Australia was on peoples' minds. So was this year's G7 meetings chaired by Canada at a time when US relations with other members. As a follow up to the 9th AusCan Forum summarized in this Rapporteur's Report and the participant feedback survey, a workplan focused on specific areas warranting further inter-sessional examination is being developed and will be communicated.



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WELCOME RECEPTION AT MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART (MCA)

On the eve of the Forum, Chair of the Board and CEO, Mark Romoff, hosted a welcome reception for participants at the stunning Museum of Contemporary Art just steps from the Four Seasons Hotel overlooking Sydney harbour. As Forum attendees networked and got to know each other, Mark Romoff introduced the Chair of the Forum's Under Forty Leadership Award Committee, Caitlin Gill of Egon Zehnder, who announced the two winners this year. They were Amanda Brain who leads the Creative Destruction Lab at the University of Melbourne and Jahanzaib Ansari, CEO of Knockri, a Canadian tech company. This year's two winners were invited to the stage to accept their awards of recognition, introduce themselves as new Forum participants and to share their thoughts.

DAY ONE FORUM OPENING REMARKS

Yvonne Weldon, a City of Sydney Councillor, delivered the Land Acknowledgement Message. Yvonne introduced herself as a Wiradjuri woman born in Gadigal country with ancestral connections to the Wiradjuri people. On behalf of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Council, she paid respects to Elders past and present of all First Nations peoples particularly in her case the Eora Nation. She referred to the local culture comprising more than 250 languages which is the world's oldest continuous culture. It was vital to keep local stories going back thousands of years alive. She concluded with the following message for the Forum participants: "As you connect, learn and share - today, tomorrow and beyond – we must bring my people, your people and all peoples together. What you share is part of you."

The Forum followed with a solemn tribute to the late Niilo Edwards, former CEO of the First Nations Major Projects Coalition (FNMPC) initiated by Mark Romoff and led by Sharleen Gale, Executive Chair of the Coalition, and with remarks from Florence Drummond, Executive Director of the Development Partner Institute in Australia. Following a moment of silence, invited colleagues of Niilo Edwards spoke in celebration of the life and legacy of a great Canadian who died on 16 December at the early age of 37. Sharleen Gale spoke of Niilo in a short lifespan "moving mountains, being wise beyond his years with a heart of gold." She commented that his relentless advocacy transformed Indigenous economic engagement in Canada through the federal Indigenous Loan Guarantee program for First Nations initiated projects. Florence Drummond added that the FNPC Conference Neil led on, and which she attended, continues to be the "Lighthouse to First Nations Peoples globally." His vision, she said, was to build a better future through an unwavering selfless commitment against all odds. Niilo's achievements were a model for others in Canada and in Australia. This pause in the program set the tone for a serious and pragmatic discussion on the economic and strategic realities facing Australia and Canada.



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Bran Black, Australian Co-Chair, in his call to action emphasized the deep historical and geopolitical ties between the two countries, commenting that Canada is at the top of the ranking of closest partners despite the distance. Both are middle powers by market size and global influence, Commonwealth members, resource-rich, and heavily trade-dependent. Both are connected to Indigenous and multicultural diaspora culture and heritage. Yet, neither can afford to be complacent. He pointed to growing instability—rising trade barriers, war in Ukraine, tensions in the Middle East and Taiwan Strait—as evidence that stronger middle-power alignment is necessary to navigate these uncertainties. He singled out areas where the two countries can cooperate and learn from each other: technological change, ways to decarbonize, and domestic uncertainties such as aging societies and regulatory burdens on industry.

In a video message, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese reaffirmed the strength of governmental ties between the two countries, while Goldy Hyder, Canadian Co-Chair, underscored the inextricable link between economic and national security. He warned that capital is ideologically agnostic—it will go where conditions are most favourable—urging democracies to remain competitive and investment-friendly. He highlighted the importance of ongoing cooperation in security, energy and resources, and global trade including resilient supply chains. There is urgency in business, government and civil society, he said, to find more ways to share best practices and solve problems together.

In his video message, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau echoed these concerns, citing climate change, economic security, and increasing natural disasters as shared challenges requiring deeper cooperation. He stressed that democracies must forge stronger alliances to maintain stability in an increasingly unpredictable world.

In his Scene-Setting Presentation, Mark Barrenechea, CEO, CTO and Vice Chair of OpenText, brought a technology-driven perspective, arguing that innovation is the primary force shaping economic progress. He began by remarking that expectations have never been higher, and CEOs have never been as stretched seeking growth in a low growth world. Many challenges present themselves: attracting and developing the next generation, the relentless drumbeat of digitalization, de-risking supply chains, building cyber defenses, and re-imagining business at the speed of AI. The new US Administration, he said, was introducing compounding risks caused by what French President Macron called “daily electroshock therapy”.

Our scene setter argued that we needed to still focus on long-term priorities, leveraging Australian-Canadian stability and trust anchored in high living standards, quality education and our multicultural societies. Describing himself as a techno-optimist, he commented that “as technology goes, so goes the world – disruptive technology always wins because it drives radical advancements, liberating human potential.” He cautioned against the risks posed by AI and cybersecurity threats. By fuelling progress, technology breaks the cycle of poverty. Today we live in an Industry 4.0 world of mass computing power, AI, gene editing, robotics and soon quantum computing. He reminded the audience that today there are more integrated circuits



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than human cells on the planet. He encouraged the audience to ready itself for fusion energy, AI and biotech combining to extend lifespans, a brain-computer interface that will drive up global IQ levels and digital AI workers who will raise productivity to much higher levels. It was our responsibility, he concluded, to help create, define, structure and shape this exciting future.

In her Keynote Address, New South Wales Finance and Resources Minister Courtney Houssos welcomed participants on behalf of Premier Minns. She provided a grounded economic outlook on Australia's largest and most internationally linked state with an economy comparable to that of Ontario. She highlighted Australia's reliance on trade and the crucial role the mining industry including production of thermal coal. While acknowledging the push for renewable energy, she emphasized that coal remains vital for energy security and supports 125,000 jobs in NSW. She also pointed to Australia's wealth of critical minerals, arguing that neither Canada nor Australia can meet global demand alone. She called for increased cooperation in securing critical mineral supply chains, with 12 NSW-based mines ready for investment.

The opening session established key themes that would resonate throughout the forum: the urgency of economic and security alignment, the need for pragmatic energy policy, the impact of technology on global competition, and the necessity of regulatory stability. The rise of President Trump and his Administration determined to disrupt both traditional economic and security arrangements added many unpredictable risk factors into participant thinking, thereby casting a shadow across the Forum. It was not a session for vague aspirations but a call to confront the hard economic and geopolitical realities shaping the years ahead.

SESSION 1: Geopolitical Risk to Economic Security

Moderator: Hon John Manley PC OC, Chair of Jefferies, Canada and former Deputy Prime Minister of Canada

Panelists:

- Prof Rory Medcalf, Head, National Security College, Australian National University
- Gareth Meyer, First Assistant Director General, Office of National Intelligence
- Sarah Wilshaw, Assistant Deputy Minister for International Trade and Chief Trade Commissioner, Global Affairs Canada
- Todd Winterhalt, Senior Vice President, Export Development Canada (EDC)

The panel laid bare the hard realities of geopolitical risk. For Canada and Australia, economic security is no longer distinct from broader strategic concerns. Both middle powers, bound by history and military ties, now navigate an Indo-Pacific shaped by intensifying great-power competition and uncertainty over America's role. China's practice of coercive trade is now being emulated by the US, a G7 country, against other G7 countries. While Australia has managed to



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“stabilize” its trading relationship with China, that relationship is not trust-based so the challenge of protecting Australia from China risk persists.

Trade conflicts have expanded beyond tariffs to cyber threats, supply chain vulnerabilities, and foreign influence campaigns targeting democratic institutions. We are already in a cyber war with China. An AI arms race is also beginning to brew. Governments, once wary of interfering in markets, are now working directly with businesses to shore up economic resilience—an unprecedented shift in the intelligence and security landscape. Federations like Australia and Canada are more vulnerable to external threats to critical infrastructure assets often governed largely at the sub-national level. They must therefore adopt more “whole of country” responses including in applying defensive intelligence.

The debate turned to the fundamental challenge of a more transactional, less multilateral world: balancing economic openness with security. Canada, locked into the U.S. market with 76% of its merchandise exports heading south, faces limited options for diversification. Canada has to shift economically more nationally east to west inter-provincially and less north to south. Australia, for decades comfortable compartmentalizing trade and security, was rudely awakened when Beijing weaponized trade during COVID-19. Both countries now grapple with a changing global order that demands hard choices.

Supply chain fragility emerged as a dominant concern. Firms are stockpiling critical materials, scouting alternative suppliers, and reassessing exposure to China and the U.S. The panel agreed: economic realignment must be pragmatic, not ideological. Nationalist-driven policies threaten long-term stability, but diversification must be more than rhetoric—it requires viable alternatives.

The discussion ended with a clear imperative: Canada and Australia must deepen economic and security cooperation. Their shared history, economic ties, and strategic interests demand nothing less. In a world where trade is now a battleground, resilience will come not from isolation, but from forging alliances that serve both prosperity and national security.

SESSION 2: The Digital Economy: AI and Cybersecurity

Moderator: Jeff Nankivell, President & CEO, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada

Panelists:

- Mark Barrenechea, CEO, CTO, & Vice-Chair, OpenText
- John Paitaridis, CEO, CyberCX
- Mark Schaan, Deputy Secretary (Artificial Intelligence), Privy Council Office
- Stela Solar, Managing Director, Data & AI, Accenture ANZ



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The digital economy is no longer a theoretical construct—it is the dominant force reshaping industry, national security, and public life. It is developing fast with a rapid shift from generative AI over the past year to AI agents this year. Discussions explored how AI was now assessed not as an abstract technology but as a decisive factor in global economic and strategic competition. Canada has established itself as a leader in AI research, particularly in ethical AI governance and safety, providing valuable lessons for Australia, which is still finding its footing in this domain.

However, participants did not shy away from AI's darker implications. The rise of disinformation, deepfakes, and AI-driven cyber threats poses a profound risk to democratic societies. The discussion highlighted a growing public distrust of technology, reminiscent of the skepticism surrounding vaccines during the pandemic. This distrust, if left unaddressed, could derail AI adoption and innovation.

At the same time, the deployment of AI for defensive purposes can and must be part of a successful response to such threats. Tools for defence and attack are being developed rapidly. To attain productivity gains, investments need to be made in skills development, computer capacity and cloud security.

A major challenge identified was the lack of regulatory coherence. Fragmented approaches to AI governance risk entrenching the power of the largest technology companies while stifling competition and innovation. Only the largest global players such as the EU and US have the resources to set up under different regulatory regimes in various markets. The session ended with a call to develop AI policies that strike a balance between harnessing economic potential and mitigating security risks. Canada and Australia, both middle powers with strong research capabilities, must move quickly or risk being left behind. The US and EU are moving ahead with legislation and regulatory frameworks, so Canada and Australia need to keep up with these new realities to carefully balance the potential and the peril of such revolutionary technology.

In conclusion, there was consensus that further discussion of regulatory cooperation on AI between Canada and Australia – involving corporate leaders as well as government officials and academics – would be an appropriate field of follow up exploration by the Forum. It was also noteworthy in this session that the CEO of CyberCX announced that the company was soon to establish a Canadian presence.

FIRESIDE CHAT: Tourism Industry

Moderator: Karen Jones, Acting CEO, Destinations NSW

Speakers:

- Geoff Culbert, President, Business Council of Australia and former CEO, Sydney Airport



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- Billy Kyriakopoulos, Director, Corporate Sales, Air Canada

Discussion centred on strengthening tourism links after COVID's setback to travel. The December 2024 announcement of Open Skies arrangements between the two countries will mean unlimited flights for Australian and Canadian airlines from 2026. This coincides with increasing interest from Canadians and Australians in more frequent and longer visits to each other's country – and increasing interest from US travellers in faster connections and immigration clearance in flying through Vancouver versus US airports. Streamlining customs and immigration processes is a big factor in making international travel more appealing.

A major constraint on growth remains aircraft availability. Current tourist traffic is dominated by Australians visiting Canadian ski and snowboard resorts. The industry is therefore looking to broaden to two-way multi-season traffic. Innovation in long-haul flight offerings, including more business class and premium economy seating, is boosting aviation revenue. Direct flights between Toronto and Australia's east coast loom as a near-term possibility. Future planning includes efforts to shift to more sustainable aviation fuel as well as fuel economy to reduce the upper atmosphere carbon footprint of long-haul travel.

Panellists discussed the importance of events in driving tourism traffic and encouraging business travellers to extend their visits with some leisure experiences. The Australian Open Tennis Tournament, Vivid illumination festival, Formula 1 Grand Prix in both countries, Canada's joint hosting of 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2032 Brisbane Olympics are all set to drive traffic.

Tourism promotion, which offers an important vehicle to boost interest with an emphasis on younger travellers and potential repeat visitations, remains critical.

FIRESIDE CHAT: Trade Ministers

Moderator: Michael Stutchbury, Editor-at-Large, Australian Financial Review

Speakers:

- Senator the Hon Tim Ayres, Australia's Assistant Minister for Trade and Assistant Minister for a Future Made in Australia
- Hon Mary Ng, Canada's Minister of Export Promotion, International Trade & Economic Development

Trade promotion and trade diversification are more important than ever, given the challenges posed by the new US Administration. Canada – which sends three-quarters of its exports to the US – is still uncertain about a proposed but paused 25 per cent tariff on all imported goods. Energy products from Canada, such as oil and natural gas, would be taxed at a lower rate of 10 per cent. The tariff increase has been paused after Canada both threatened retaliatory tariffs on



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the US and made concessions to strengthen border controls over the Trump Administration's unreasonable concerns about illegal migrants and fentanyl being trafficked into the US.

Australia also faces a proposed 25 per cent tariff on its steel and aluminium exports to the US. While Australia has a long-running trade deficit with the US, the market is important to Australia's own trade diversification efforts. One third of all Australian exports go to China, which in turn supplies over 20% of Australia's imports.

Ministers discussed the possibility of the US Administration targeting domestic economic policies it deemed to be trade distorting, such as consumption taxes and domestic trade incentives.

Minister Ng highlighted a Team Canada approach with the federal and provincial governments working with industry to leverage broad connections with counterparts in the US and arguing "tariffs on Canada are taxes on Americans."

Assistant Minister Ayres outlined the history of aluminium exports being constrained during the first Trump Administration, and the importance of maintaining open dialogue with long-standing trading partners.

Both ministers highlighted the importance of strengthening a rules-based global trading system that gave all countries and industries predictability and extending that benefit to growing regions such as ASEAN. The CPTPP was highlighted as a model in that regard. It includes four ASEAN countries. The UK has just acceded to the CPTPP. Ministers said there was a need for ongoing reform to keep WTO relevant and authoritative.

Before the departure of Ministers, Chair and CEO Mark Romoff took the opportunity to highlight one of the latest developments in the bilateral economic relationship – a new MOU agreement to cooperate on geonomics. He recognized in the Forum audience the CEO of Geonomics Australia, Tiffany Broughtwood, and the CEO of Genome Canada, Rob Annan. The new MOU signed in Sydney facilitates cooperation on Indigenous geonomics for health, precision health economics, and the commercialization of geonomics data. This involves collaboration on AI applications and data sharing networks drawing on complementary expertise. The Forum audience were made aware of yet another example of heightened cooperation in a strategic sector between the two countries.

SESSION 3: Pathways to Lower Carbon Emissions

Moderator: Jill Schnarr, Chief Social Innovation, Communications & Brand Officer, TELUS

Panelists:

- Kate George, Co-Lead, First Nations Clean Energy Advisory Committee
- John Ivulich, CEO & Country Chair, ATCO Australia
- Ian Learmonth, CEO, Clean Energy Finance Corporation



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- Dr Graham Winkelman, Group Sustainability & Social Value Officer, BHP

Decarbonization is not merely a policy choice; it is an economic and strategic imperative. Yet, the transition to a low-carbon economy must be managed with pragmatism rather than with ideological fervor. Participants in this session examined how Australia and Canada, both resource-rich nations, can achieve emissions reductions without crippling their industries.

Industry leaders outlined their ambitious net-zero commitments, emphasizing that corporate sustainability is not only a corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative but rather a strategic business imperative. The conversation tackled head-on the role of hydrogen energy, carbon capture technology, and AI-driven industrial efficiency. Indigenous engagement emerged as a particularly critical factor, with much of Australia's critical minerals located on Indigenous lands. If the clean energy transition is to succeed, Indigenous communities in both countries must be active partners, not passive stakeholders. Intensifying Indigenous procurement and project equity were seen as an important way forward.

The discussion turned to the obstacles standing in the way of a rapid transition. Policy inconsistency—particularly in Australia—was singled out as a major roadblock to innovation and progress. Investment will not flow unless businesses have confidence in long-term regulatory settings. The consensus was clear: Canada and Australia can lead in clean energy innovation, but only if policymakers embrace stability, technological realism, and international cooperation.

Two areas stood out for further investigation: The first is the role of Indigenous communities in accelerating the clean energy transition: Building on Kate George's insights about successful models of Indigenous engagement in both countries, there could be an opportunity to more thoroughly explore models of Indigenous partnership in both Canada and Australia, share learnings and promote collaboration as both countries seek to accelerate the clean energy transition. Key to this discussion would be a greater focus on how traditional knowledge can inform sustainable resource development, as well as how indigenous communities must be engaged as active partners to accelerate the transition to low-carbon energy systems.

A second aspect that the panel surfaced was policy stability and clean energy investment. The panel demonstrated that there is a clear appetite for more discussion about clean energy policy stability, addressing the concerns raised about inconsistency. For Australian audiences, there might be some interest in a further discussion on policy frameworks that provide long-term certainty for clean energy investments. This could include a comparison of Canadian and Australian approaches to energy policy, and a deeper look at policy options such as carbon pricing and industry incentives.

EVENING RECEPTION AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE

Forum participants were invited to join Canadian Minister Ng at a welcome reception hosted by the New South Wales Governor, Her Excellency the Hon Margaret Beazley AC KC. In her welcome remarks, the Governor traced the history of trade relations between the two countries



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starting with the arrival at nearby Canada Bay in the late 1830s of Canadian convicts deported by the British. She then turned to pivotal events in 1893-1895 – the Colonial Conference in Ottawa and visit to Australia by Canada’s Trade Minister and future PM Mackenzie Bowell, the start of a Canadian subsidized Vancouver to Sydney steamship service and the arrival in Sydney of Canada’s first trade commissioner John Larke. This activity resulted in a tenfold increase in Canadian exports of mainly timber, canned salmon and farm implements which by 1911 made Australia Canada’s fourth largest export market. The Governor highlighted the complementary Commonwealth and security links more recently embellished by the CPTPP trade agreement opening even more business potential between the two countries.

Minister Ng thanked the Governor for her welcome remarks, referring to the 220 members of the Team Canada Trade Mission she was leading to Australia to build on the past foundations well described by the Governor. The Minister underscored the centrality of the Forum to the bilateral relationship over the past 15 years, commenting that the first Forum in 2010 was hosted by one of the Governor’s predecessors. She thanked the Forum for “the unwavering pursuit of building bridges between our countries, our communities and our industries.”

Referring to the Canadian Prime Minister’s remarks at the 2023 Forum on enduring bilateral connections, the Minister commented that “the Canada-Australia partnership has never been more critical in the face of common challenges such as climate change, economic security and the need to build resilient and reliable supply chains in an uncertain world.” In this context, Minister Ng referenced Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy objectives, the CPTPP and the Sustainable Critical Minerals Alliance. Regarding the latter, the example of Australian company Sayona’s lithium and graphite production in Canada was cited. Minister Ng concluded that in a world of increasing uncertainty, the bi-national partnership “stands as a beacon of stability, shared values, and mutual prosperity.”

JOINT DINNER HOSTED BY CANADIAN MINISTER MARY NG IN HONOUR OF THE TEAM CANADA TRADE MISSION AND AUSCAN FORUM PARTICIPANTS

Canadian Minister Ng hosted a seated dinner of 350 in the company of Australian Minister of Trade and Tourism Hon Don Farrell and NSW Minister of Industry and Science Hon Anoullack Chanthivong. The dinner, set in the iconic Art Gallery of New South Wales, was held in honour of the AusCan Forum and Team Canada participants. The Forum and its Co-Chairs were recognized in remarks delivered by both Ministers as was one of our participants Jack Cowin, a long-time Australian Canadian entrepreneur who, as Executive Chair of Competitive Foods Australia, epitomizes the strong economic cooperation that is possible through enhanced people-to-people linkages. The dinner allowed for excellent networking and information sharing between and among Forum and Trade Mission participants.

SESSION 4: Building Smart and Sustainable Infrastructure

Moderator: Jean-Étienne Leroux, Managing Director, Australia and New Zealand, CDPQ



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Panelists:

- Paul Bernath, Managing Director, Australia, CPP Investments
- Cath Bowtell, Chair, IFM Investors
- Sharleen Gale, Executive Chair, First Nations Major Projects Coalition
- Tom Hasker, CEO, Australia and New Zealand, AtkinsRéalis

Infrastructure is the bedrock of national prosperity, yet both Australia and Canada face urgent questions about how to build for the future without locking in outdated models of economic development. This session focused on leveraging cutting-edge technologies to create infrastructure that is both economically viable and environmentally responsible.

One of the most compelling discussions centered on Canada's First Nations Major Projects Coalition, which offers a successful model for integrating First Nations leadership into large-scale infrastructure planning. There was strong agreement that Australia must do more to ensure Indigenous communities are not sidelined in infrastructure development but are actively shaping projects from the outset.

The role of pension funds in infrastructure investment was also scrutinized. Canadian traditional pension fund investment in sectors such as transport and power are now extending to digital infrastructure such as data centres and associated networks. The 2024 AirTrunk acquisition with the involvement of CPPIB was cited as an example. Australian superannuation funds are also becoming significant investors in Canadian infrastructure, highlighting the growing financial interconnectedness between the two countries. However, regulatory inefficiencies continue to obstruct smarter investment decisions. The safeguard mechanism in Australia, originally designed to curb greenhouse emissions from the largest industrial facilities to below a legislated baseline, was criticized for inadvertently discouraging rail investment—despite rail being a far more carbon-efficient mode of transport than road freight. The session reinforced the need for better regulatory alignment and market-driven solutions to infrastructure challenges. The discussion appeared to identify greater scope for interaction between pension funds of both countries and Indigenous business leaders when undertaking infrastructure planning.

SESSION 5: National Defense and Security

Moderator: Paul Maddison, former Royal Canadian Navy Commander & former High Commissioner to Australia

Panelists:

- Stefanie Beck, Deputy Minister, Department of National Defence
- Spencer Fraser, Founder & CEO, Landing Zones Canada



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- Racheal Kuczma, First Assistant Secretary (Defence Commercial), Department of Defence
- Jonathan Sadleir AM, Chief Strategy Officer, CEA Technologies

Geopolitical turbulence is the defining feature of the current era. Canada and Australia, historically reliant on larger allies for security, now face the uncomfortable reality that they must take greater responsibility for their own defense. National defence readiness has to be based now on whole of government, whole of country resilience which must include supply chain agility. This session examined how both countries are adapting to the deteriorating global security landscape. Examples of bilateral cooperation cited included joint naval exercises in the Pacific and South China Sea, a recent agreement on joint missile defence research and Australian participation in the Halifax International Security Forum.

Previously stable and predictable threats have recently completely changed. This challenges earlier policies set in Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper and 2023 National Defence Strategy. The same can be said for Canada's 2017 Strong, Secure, engaged approach focused on the continent including the Arctic. Disinformation and misinformation are being deployed by adversaries at scale. Cyber attacks are serious and ongoing. It is no longer only kinetic threats that planners must anticipate. The deepening Russia-China partnership which includes joint exercises is also new.

Defense procurement was a major point of contention, particularly in Australia, where cumbersome processes and bureaucratic inertia have hampered military modernization. It is outdated systems rather than people that hamper progress. An entrenched suspicion of the defence industry also does not help. There is a need for a greater trust of industry as a prerequisite for streamlined oversight that allows necessary sole-sourcing backed up by accountability, vision and alignment.

The impacts of excessive risk aversion were underscored — if defense planners continue to prioritize avoiding mistakes over achieving outcomes, strategic vulnerabilities will only deepen. Procurement and domestic defence industry are having to be re-thought with the realization that only exporting can make domestic defence companies sustainable. This will require a cultural and mindset change right across both governments. Weapons can be delivered faster by tolerating a higher degree of risk.

The session also highlighted a growing personnel crisis in defense and intelligence services. A clear need was identified for specialized recruitment pathways and stronger industry-government partnerships to build a resilient security workforce. The military need better remuneration, housing, and logistics to maintain readiness morale.

The overarching message was unambiguous: Australia and Canada must take defense and intelligence capabilities more seriously, and that means making hard funded decisions immediately rather than deferring them. In future, there could be scope to explore more



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cooperation between the two countries in the capacity to undertake surveillance and defence across large expanses of land and along ocean coastal environments.

SESSION 6: Regulation's Role in Economic Policy Delivery

Moderator: Gladys Berejiklian, Managing Director, Enterprises & Business, Optus

Panelists:

- Michael Brennan, CEO, e61 Institute & former Chair, Australian Productivity Commission
- Melinda Cilentio, CEO, Committee for Economic Development of Australia
- Fred Dermarkar, President & CEO, AECL
- Marcus Freeman, CEO, Canaccord Genuity Asia Pacific

Economic policy is meant to drive prosperity, yet in an increasingly fractured global economy, regulatory frameworks can either enhance competitiveness or stifle innovation. The panel examined how Australia and Canada, as two advanced economies reliant on trade and investment, must strike a delicate balance between fostering growth and ensuring long-term stability.

The conversation opened with a blunt assessment: policy swings have become a major impediment to innovation. Investment decisions in energy, technology, and industry require stability, yet rapid shifts in regulatory direction undermine confidence. Over the past 15 years there has been a reversal of Australian firms once raising capital in North America with Canadian firms now turning to Australia's deep capital pools for financing. Canadian policy choices had encouraged more Canadian mining companies to list on the ASX and otherwise raise funds in Australia. One panellist pointed to the energy sector, where a lack of bipartisan commitment to decarbonization strategies has hindered investment in emerging technologies. The challenge, they argued, is not just enacting policy but ensuring it has longevity beyond election cycles.

A recurring theme was the importance of bipartisan cooperation. While political rhetoric often calls for it, true bipartisanship demands compromise—an approach that has become increasingly rare. Panellists noted that businesses must take a more vocal role in shaping policy, rather than merely reacting to government decisions. Regulatory bodies, too, must embrace a greater public presence, ensuring their work is not overshadowed by shifting political priorities.

The energy debate underscored how policy affects investment flows. Canada's nuclear sector, once controversial, now enjoys broad bipartisan support due to a long-term, fact-based discussion on its role in energy security. In contrast, Australia's outright prohibition on nuclear energy remains a barrier to serious debate, illustrating how outdated regulations can stifle progress.



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The session concluded with a call for smarter regulation that attracts capital while maintaining necessary oversight. Both federations face the common challenge of a decentralized economy and sub-national authorities that can make the overall regulatory environment more complex. The key lesson: if Australia and Canada want to remain competitive, they must create predictable, nationally harmonized, long-term policy settings that provide certainty for investors and industry alike.

FIRESIDE CHAT: Elections Landscape – The Business Perspective

Moderator: Chris Tulloch, CEO, Custom Fleet

Speakers:

- Bran Black, Chief Executive, Business Council of Australia
- Goldy Hyder, President & CEO, Business Council of Canada

This Fireside Chat provided a compelling analysis of the evolving electoral landscapes in Canada and Australia, with a distinct focus on their implications for the business community.

In Canada, the resignation of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has set the stage for a political shakeup. With a leadership election scheduled for March 9th, frontrunner Mark Carney is poised to reshape the campaign narrative. An election previously defined by affordability concerns—particularly regarding carbon taxes—the ballot question is now shifting towards international leadership, specifically the capacity to navigate relations with a re-elected President Trump. A swift call for a general election would provide Carney an opportunity to secure a fresh mandate without facing immediate parliamentary scrutiny. This presents a strategic challenge for Conservative opposition leader, Peirre Poilievre, who must balance driving his existing economic narrative, while finding a new message to assert Canada's economic sovereignty.

In Australia, anticipation centers on a likely April election – though it could be as late as May 17th. This will be a cost-of-living election, and Australians will support a party that has a strong agenda focussed on their biggest issues. It was stated that Australia has an incumbent Government that has had challenges to get through, an Opposition that has pulled itself together amid a backdrop of declining support for the major parties and mixed results from independent candidates. Both Labor and the Coalition face mounting pressure to present robust economic policies. The Queensland election underscored voters' preference for structural reforms over short-term subsidies, a lesson both major parties must heed. The Reserve Bank's interest rate cut could further influence the election's timing, with an earlier date favoring the incumbent government. Panellists lamented how key economic discussions around the nation's ageing population, which is curbing productivity and straining social services, has not yet become part of the public debate. In Australia, we are now at 4 working Australians for every 1 retiree (down from 6), and this number is expected to further decline to 2.



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Both speakers underscored the necessity for sustained economic competitiveness. In Canada, this means capitalizing on its 15 free trade agreements while maintaining fiscal discipline to support long-term growth. In Australia, addressing productivity declines is paramount. Across both countries, the corporate sector's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) remains essential—not merely as a moral imperative but as a driver of shareholder returns and community engagement. Ultimately, both electorates will weigh leadership competence in safeguarding national interests amid shifting global dynamics.

SESSION 7: Finding and Fostering Talent for Innovation

Moderator: Hon Lisa Raitt, Vice-Chair & Managing Director, Global Investment Banking, CIBC

Panelists:

- John Baker, Founder & CEO, D2L
- Amit Chakma, Vice-Chancellor, University of Western Australia
- Barney Glover AO, Commissioner of Jobs and Skills Australia
- Peter Stoicheff, President & Vice-Chancellor, University of Saskatchewan

The battle for talent is no longer a domestic issue—it's a global race. Both Australia and Canada face the pressing challenge of cultivating a workforce that can drive innovation, productivity, and long-term economic growth. The panel debated how universities, businesses, and governments must break down institutional barriers and embrace more dynamic strategies to best leverage the 21st-century economy.

The discussion opened with a blunt reality check: traditional educational models are failing to keep pace with industry needs. The workforce of the future requires more than traditional knowledge but rather also the skills that many universities are not delivering. Business leaders emphasized the need for universities to move beyond rigid curricula and engage directly with industry to identify and develop the most in-demand capabilities. STEM education, skilled trades, and R&D commercialization were highlighted as critical areas needing urgent reform.

Immigration was another key theme. With ageing populations and skill shortages, both countries rely on foreign workers and international students to fill gaps in their labour markets. However, restrictive immigration policies foreign student caps in both countries and political debates over temporary foreign workers have slowed progress. Panellists argued that Canada and Australia must create clearer, more agile pathways for skilled migration while ensuring that foreign students are given meaningful employment opportunities post-graduation.

The governance of universities also came under scrutiny. Panellists noted that while Australian universities operate with more corporate-style governance structures, Canadian institutions are burdened by excessive regulations that hinder their ability to adapt quickly to economic shifts. There was consensus that universities must become more entrepreneurial, fostering innovation



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beyond research grants and into real-world commercialization. The private sector now offers online micro-MBAs and a full range of other subjects that can be leveraged for continuous learning and skills accreditation for the new economy as labour market needs diversify. The university and college sector can learn from, and even partner with, what such private firms are offering.

The session ended with a challenge: universities, businesses, and policymakers must work together to create a more responsive and globally competitive workforce. Without bold reform, both countries risk being left behind in the fight for the next generation of talent. There appeared to be scope emerging from this panel for more exploration of how the two countries compare in university and college governance and how reforms could connect them more with the private sector.

FIRESIDE CHAT: The New US Administration

Moderator: Martha Hall Findlay, Director, School of Public Policy, University of Calgary

Speakers:

- Hon Perrin Beatty PC OC, former President & CEO, Canadian Chamber of Commerce & former Minister of Foreign Affairs
- Hon Arthur Sinodinos AO, former Australian Ambassador to the US & former Australian Minister of Industry, Innovation & Science

The speakers both described dramatic changes which have taken place in less than a month since Donald Trump commenced his 2nd term as US President. They identified pressures on the global trading system and international geopolitics which were “uncertain and dangerous.”

The Ministers also outlined their views on the uncertain impact of Trump’s “America First” approach on multilateral organisations such as NATO and the G7 – which is due to meet in Kananaskis, Alberta in June. That concern extended to multilateral security arrangements involving the US such as NORAD, Five Eyes, AUKUS and ANZUS. They saw a geopolitical world where the United States is moving from being an anchor of international law and order to a self-interested superpower competing for influence with China and Russia. This was already highlighted in the approach the US was taking to Ukraine and to Gaza, and in demands to determine the sovereignty of Greenland and Panama.

Both saw challenges for Canada and Australia as middle powers “who can’t dictate terms” in their international relations. They agreed that such countries “need to reassess our agenda and focus on productivity and market access.” Furthermore, they argued that trading partners such as Australia and Canada need a functioning international system and would have to devote considerable diplomatic effort to defending and promoting the architecture of that system which has been built up over the last 50 years or more. The near-term political uncertainty for Australia and Canada was elevated by the fact that both face federal elections in coming months.



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CLOSING DINNER AT NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM

Forum networking continued at one of Sydney's leading museums situated on Darling Harbour among an impressive collection of historic vessels. The venue was appropriate considering the proud maritime history Australia shares with Canada centred on long seacoasts which spawned industries such as fishing, offshore energy, coastal and trans-oceanic transport and tourism. Chair Mark Romoff took the opportunity to present an achievement award to Bob Onyschuk QC to commemorate his key role in the founding of the Forum 15 years ago and Bob's enormous leadership role in the Forum over many years since founding. Also recognized was the former Australian High Commissioner to Canada, Justin Brown, who is credited with first developing the initial concept of such a Forum when he was based in Ottawa. The Chair also singled out in the audience Hon Scott Ryan, the recent Australian High Commissioner to Canada, who played an important advisory role in recent years helping guide the Forum.

The Forum's Co-Chairs Bran Black and (acting for Goldy Hyder that evening) Mark Barrenechea delivered closing comments. The final say was accorded to the two new High Commissioners to the respective countries HE Kate Logan and HE Julie Sunday. The Chair brought the Forum to a close with an announcement that the next Forum was scheduled for Vancouver, Canada from 25-27 May 2026. He also thanked Executive Director Peter MacArthur, Director of Events and Communications Tannis Wengel, Administrative Assistant Katherine Starr and other members of the Forum delivery team including volunteers organized by the Business Council of Australia.

CONCLUSION

The 2025 Australia-Canada Economic Leadership Forum was a forum of realism. While optimism remains about the future of both countries, the discussions were rooted in an acknowledgment of the immense challenges ahead.

If Canada and Australia are to maintain their economic and strategic standing, they must act decisively – embracing innovation, strengthening security, and pursuing regulatory coherence. The time for complacency is over. A stronger, broader relationship among the two trusted partners to work together on common challenges now makes more sense than ever.

NEXT FORUM

It was announced by the Chair and CEO Mark Romoff that the next Forum will be held from 25-27 May 2026 in Vancouver, Canada. Our 10th Forum will build on this year's thematic discussions and on participant feedback.



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