

**Meeting the moment:
Preserving Canada's promise in an age of crisis**

Halifax, April 8-9, 2025

**Saisir le moment :
préserver la promesse du Canada en temps de crise**

Halifax, les 8 et 9 avril 2025

Speaker Biographies 2025

UNIVERSITIES IN THE ERA OF TRUMP, TARIFFS AND GLOBAL TURMOIL

Robert ("RJ") Johnston

Senior Director of Research, Center on Global Energy Policy, Columbia University



Robert ("RJ") Johnston is Senior Director of Research at the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University. In this capacity, he is responsible for leading the Center's research strategy, staff, products, and operations. RJ was previously the founder and Managing Director of the Eurasia Group's Energy, Climate, and Resources practice, and served as the firm's CEO from 2013 to 2018. At the Eurasia Group, RJ worked closely with corporate and institutional investor clients in the oil and gas, mining, electric power, and clean tech sectors.

Prior to joining Eurasia Group, RJ served as managing director of equity research at Medley Global Advisors, where he was responsible for providing political and strategic insights to clients in the institutional investment community and served as the lead analyst for global energy equities. RJ, in addition, was a research director at UBS Warburg Energy, working directly in support of energy trading. And he previously directed internal research teams supporting oil, LNG, metals, and FX trading at Enron Global Markets. Earlier, at ArmorGroup, RJ directed political risk research for corporate clients in a variety of markets including China, Russia, Colombia, and Indonesia.

RJ is an independent advisor to the First Nations Climate Initiative, a Canadian initiative focused on building economic prosperity and resilient communities for Indigenous nations in a decarbonizing world. He is an advisor to the CEO of Ubiquity Solar, a US-based solar power manufacturing concern. He is also an advisor on North American energy policy to a New York-based diversified investment management firm.

Recent notable achievements include serving as a counselor for the Canada-US Trade Council. He also served as Project Director for the Aspen Institute Task Force on US Critical Minerals Policy. He has also been a featured speaker at industry and expert gatherings including the International Gas Union, the Atlantic Council Global Energy Forum Abu Dhabi, the Canadian Public Policy Forum, the CD Howe Institute Energy Dialogue, the World Petroleum Congress, and the First Nations Major Projects Coalition.

RJ is a member of the Trilateral Commission and is a member of the steering committee for the Open Minds Next Generation initiative on the dual energy/climate policy challenge. He was a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council Global Energy Center from 2017 to 2021. RJ holds a doctorate in international relations from American University, a master's degree in political science from McMaster University, and a bachelor's degree in political studies from Bishop's University.

Colin Robertson
Fellow, Canadian Global Affairs Institute



A former Canadian diplomat, Colin Robertson is a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute and host of their Global Exchange podcast. A frequent media commentator, he is a contributing writer to Policy Magazine.

He is an Honorary Captain (Royal Canadian Navy) assigned to the Strategic Communications Directorate and a member of the Department of National Defence's Defence Advisory Board.

Robertson is a member of the Alphen Group of strategists as well as Carleton University's Norman Patterson School of International Affairs Expert Group on Canada-US Relations.

He is an Executive Fellow at the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy and a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA) at Carleton University. He has taught at Carleton University, Queen's University Public Executive Program, Canadian National Defence College, the Canada School of Public Service and the Canadian Foreign Service Institute.

After retiring from Foreign Service, Robertson was a senior advisor to Dentons US LLP (formerly McKenna, Long and Aldridge LLP) working with the Business Council of Canada.

Sarah Spreitzer
Vice President and Chief of Staff, Government Relations, American Council of Education



Sarah Spreitzer represents ACE and its members on matters related to research policy and funding, federal policy, international students, immigration, and legislative issues.

Before joining ACE, Spreitzer held senior positions in higher education advocacy at the University of Missouri System, Lewis-Burke Associates LLC, and the University of Washington's Office of Federal Relations. At the University of Missouri System, she served as the director of federal relations, working to connect system and campus leadership, as well as faculty and staff, with congressional offices and key science and education agencies to influence federal policy, inform the university of

federal opportunities, and position the university within emerging federal initiatives. At Lewis-Burke, she represented an array of public and private institutions of higher education before Congress and the federal agencies, including the University of Illinois System, the University of Southern California, the University of Virginia, and the University of Cincinnati. Before coming to Lewis-Burke, Spreitzer served as the assistant director of the University of Washington's Office of Federal Relations, where she focused on federal student aid policy and funding, and advocacy efforts with federal science agencies.

Spreitzer has held leadership positions within the higher education community, including chairing working groups on higher education for the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU). In addition, she has served as the vice chair of the AAU Council on Federal Relations steering committee and the co-chair of the APLU Council of Government Affairs. Spreitzer received a bachelor's degree in anthropology from Beloit College in Wisconsin and a master's degree in medieval studies from the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. She is a founding board member of the Creative Minds International Public Charter School, a growing charter school in the Petworth neighborhood of Washington, DC.

SECURING CANADA'S FUTURE IN AN INSECURE WORLD

Honourable Jean Charest

Partner, Therrien, Couture, Joli-Cœur; Premier of Québec (2003-2012); Deputy Prime Minister of Canada (1993); Member of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada



As Deputy Prime Minister of Canada and Premier of Québec, and with a public service career spanning almost 30 years, Jean Charest is one of Canada's best known political figures.

Jean Charest was first elected to the House of Commons in 1984 and, at age 28, became Canada's youngest cabinet minister as Minister of State for Youth. In 1991, he was named Minister of the Environment and Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs and Registrar General and Deputy Prime Minister of Canada in 1993.

In 1994, Jean Charest was chosen Leader of the federal Progressive Conservative Party. He held that post until 1998 when he became Leader of the Quebec Liberal Party. Mr. Charest then broke a 50-year provincial record by winning three consecutive election campaigns in 2003, 2007 and 2008.

Furthermore, the Charest government initiated an unprecedented labour mobility agreement between France and Québec and was best known for a major initiative for the sustainable development of Northern Québec called "Plan Nord". Jean Charest is notably the initiator of the negotiation for the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement (CETA).

He is today a Partner at Canadian firm Therrien, Couture, Joli-Coeur, where he provides invaluable expertise to the firm's clients with his in-depth knowledge and experience with public policy, corporate Canada, and international matters. As a strategic advisor with a unique perspective, he supports clients on complex transactions, projects, and international mandates.

In January 2025, Jean Charest was appointed to the Council on Canada-U.S. Relations launched by the Prime Minister of Canada. He is also a member of the steering committee of the private sector Canada US Trade Council (CUSTC) to collaborate on tariff and CUSMA issues.

FRAMING THE FEDERAL ELECTION AND PLANNING FOR RESULTS

David Coletto

Founder, Chair, and CEO, Abacus Data



David Coletto is founder, Chair & CEO of Abacus Data a full-service market research and strategy firm based in Ottawa and Toronto. With twenty years experience, David founded Abacus 14 years ago and since then David has become one of Canada's most respected pollsters who sought-after to provide analysis on politics, the labour market, and consumer behaviour.

He earned a PhD in Political Science from the University of Calgary in 2010 is an adjunct professor at Carleton University. He is the host and producer of inFocus with David Coletto a podcast that explores the intersection of public opinion, politics, public policy, and consumer behaviour. This month, the Hill Times newspaper named David one of Canada's top 100 most influential people in Canadian politics.

Fraser Macdonald
Principal, Strategy Corp



Fraser is a public affairs expert, lawyer, and long-time political strategist with extensive experience helping lead municipal, provincial, and federal election campaigns.

His legal career saw him specialize in banking and finance at several large international law firms in Toronto, Australia and London, UK. In those roles, he represented some of the largest financial institutions, private equity firms, and other lenders in Canada and around the world on complex financial transactions. He has a keen understanding of the regulatory landscape for financial institutions and other industries, both within Canada and internationally, becoming a trusted advisor to businesses looking for clarity on complex issues.

Outside his legal experience, Fraser has served clients from across Canada as a senior government relations advisor. In these roles, Fraser has provided counsel to clients in a variety of fields including the education, healthcare, environment, land development and infrastructure, and financial service sectors. He is consistently sought out for his expertise in complex public policy issues and finding creative ways to align the business objectives of his clients with the policy and political goals of governments.

Fraser has been involved in politics for nearly 20 years, including managing several campaigns at the provincial and federal levels. In 2010, he acted as Deputy Communications Director on Rob Ford's winning mayoral campaign in Toronto. Most recently, he served as Policy Director on Jean Charest's Conservative Party leadership campaign.

He also serves on the board of directors of a publicly traded biotech start-up and is a graduate of the Council of Canadian Innovators Innovation Governance Program. He was also named one of The Peak's Emerging Leaders for 2023.

Fraser has also been a contributor on political and public policy issues on CBC, CP24, the Toronto Sun, The Line, and other publications. Fraser holds a B.A. (Hons) in History from Queen's University and a Juris Doctor (with distinction) from Bond University.

Marci Surkes
Chief Strategy Officer and Managing Director, Compass Rose



Marci Surkes is a 15-year political veteran who has served in the most senior roles as an advisor and public policy leader. She brings deep experience and a national lens to complicated files spanning the entirety of federal jurisdiction.

Most recently, as executive director of policy and cabinet affairs in the Prime Minister's Office from 2019-2022, Marci led a team that provided strategic advice to the Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, where she collaborated closely with officials to implement the government's mandate. Prior to serving in the Prime Minister's Office, Marci spent four years as the Chief of Staff to the Minister of Public Safety.

Marci advises multinational corporations, Canadian businesses and non-profits across a range of economic and social issues, often targeted at the C-suite level. Her ability to distill complex subject matters and offer succinct advice has led her to be a sought-after political commentator.

DELIVERING CANADA'S HIGHLY-SKILLED WORKFORCE

Michael Burt

Vice-President, The Conference Board of Canada



Michael Burt is a Vice-President at the Conference Board of Canada. In this role, he leads the Economics and Education Focus Areas, overseeing all related convening and research activities.

Michael joined The Conference Board of Canada in 2004 and has moved progressively into more senior positions since. Before joining CBoC, he worked with an economic consulting firm in the United States. Michael has more than 20 years of experience conducting and leading research activities.

Daryl Genge

President & CEO, Springboard Atlantic



Daryl manages and monitors the operations and overall sustainability of Springboard Atlantic. Sitting in our Central Office, he builds partnerships on behalf of the network that strengthen Atlantic Canada's innovation ecosystem and cultivates new opportunities for our post-secondary research community.

In conjunction with Springboard's Board of Directors, members, Central Office staff, and government partners, Daryl leads the development and execution of Springboard's organizational strategy.

Prior to his role at springboard, Daryl held Assistant Deputy Minister and Deputy Minister (acting) positions with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador's Department of Business, Tourism, Culture and Rural Development where he championed public-private investment strategies to drive the development and growth of innovative industries, and played a leadership role in international trade and foreign direct investment attraction.

Eva Reddington

Acting Vice President of Program Policy and Development, Mitacs



Eva Reddington is the Acting VP of Program Policy and Development at Mitacs, a national non-profit that bridges academia and industry. Her diverse experiences as a University lecturer and workshop facilitator with Canadian and Indonesian post-secondary institutions has enabled her to develop significant competencies in leadership, organizational behaviour, entrepreneurship and strategy. Her extensive global professional experience spans banking, insurance, academic and international development sectors.

Eva began her career as a Financial Services professional with over six years' experience in insurance and global banking. She has held various senior positions including Engagement Leader, Senior Underwriter and Financial Controller. Eva is an International MBA Graduate from the Schulich School of Business. She is a strategic thinker and leader with a global perspective having worked in Canada, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Indonesia and Luxembourg.

INSTITUTIONAL FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Nathalie Laporte

Executive Director, Canadian Association of University Business Officers (CAUBO)



Nathalie Laporte is a seasoned executive with over 25 years of leadership experience in higher education administration. A Chartered Professional Accountant (CPA), she currently serves as Executive Director of the Canadian Association of University Business Officers (CAUBO), where she leads the development and execution of national strategies, programs, and services that directly support senior administrators across Canada's universities. Under her leadership, CAUBO has grown into a collaborative hub for evidence-based decision-making, sector benchmarking, and strategic capacity building, working in partnership with national and regional associations, and academic leaders.

Nathalie leads a national team of 16 and coordinates a network of over 100 volunteers to deliver high-impact data, research, and professional development tailored to the evolving needs of the sector. She has played a critical role in positioning CAUBO as a key resource on financial sustainability and institutional effectiveness—issues that are increasingly central to universities' strategic planning efforts. She currently serves on the Board of Governors of Carleton University, where she sits on the Finance, Audit and Risk, and Building Program Committees, and is also a member of Senate. In addition, she sits on the Advisory Board of CURIE (Canadian Universities Reciprocal Insurance Exchange), a key player in institutional risk management.

To support her governance contributions, Nathalie recently completed a micro-certificate in Governance in Canadian Universities from the University of Manitoba and is currently pursuing the Corporate Director designation at Université Laval to further her expertise in public sector board governance. Deeply committed to the long-term vitality of Canada's higher education institutions, Nathalie brings a cross-sector perspective and practical insight into how institutions can adapt, collaborate, and thrive in an era of constrained resources and rising expectations.

CLOSING KEYNOTE

Alex Usher

President, Higher Education Strategy Associates



Alex Usher is the President of Higher Education Strategy Associates. He is an internationally recognized expert on a range of fields within higher education, including student financial aid, quality measurement, rankings and public financing. He also has wide experience in strategic planning at both the institutional and system level.

Alex is the lead author of the annual higher education almanac [*The State of Post-Secondary Education in Canada*](#) and the co-author of the premier statistical handbook on global tertiary education: [*World Higher Education: Institutions, Students and Funding*](#). His internationally read (and free) daily intelligence e-mail, [*One Thought to Start Your Day*](#), has over 15,000 subscribers. He also regularly engages with fans and critics alike on Twitter ([@alexusherhesa](#)).

Prior to founding Higher Education Strategy Associates in 2009, Mr. Usher served as the Director of Educational Policy Institute Canada and prior to that he was the Director of Research and Program Development at the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation. He holds degrees from McGill University and Carleton University.