



October 29, 2026

President Ursula von der Leyen's Keynote Address on EU-Canada Relations at the C.D. Howe Institute

*Edited remarks delivered by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen,
at an event hosted by the C.D. Howe Institute and McGill University's Max Bell School of
Public Policy in Montreal.*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking President and CEO Jeremy Kronick of the C.D. Howe Institute for hosting us here today. And I would also like to extend my gratitude to Director Jennifer Welsh of the Max Bell School of Public Policy for organizing this event. Let me also thank Chancellor Pierre Boivin, Ambassador Jonathan Wilkinson, and Mr. Éric Bédard.

In 1906, a young Frenchman arrived in Canada to sell cognac. He was struck by the sense of dynamism and possibility he found here. "No one thought about limits," he later wrote. "No one knew where the frontier was." That young man was Jean Monnet – one of the founding fathers of the European Union. That period in his life in Canada would influence the way he saw the world. And it could even be argued that it would later help to change the course of European history. Because it was here that Monnet discovered that people from different backgrounds and regions would cooperate where interests aligned, or where the scale of a task required it. It was here that he learnt to see how a society and markets built across borders could also build prosperity and links between people and nations. And it helped shape his later belief that Europeans could move past their old national rivalries. In the decades after his travels in Canada, he would live through the horrors of two world wars, but he would go on to imagine a radically new way for European nations to live and work together in peace. The frontiers would be different, but the spirit he found here in Canada, the willingness to move beyond familiar limits, would find a new expression in the European project. So it was the foundation of what we know today as the European Union. It is that same pioneering spirit we must embrace today. And I am delighted that we are joined today by students from the Centre Jean Monnet de Montréal who are keeping that flame alive today. And I see the students among us whose faces are now full of glee.

The years Jean Monnet spent as a young man across the Atlantic reshaped his sense of possibility, and we are following in his footsteps. But it has become clear that there is much more that we can do together bilaterally. Canada and the European Union are two complementary systems. Of course, Canada cannot become a full-fledged member of the EU because of geography, but we both want to bring our relationship to the highest level possible. This is why we are discussing the idea of Canada becoming the first associate member of the European Union. Our idea is simple: it is an "association without accession." But we can replace accession with a "common ambition and vision." We can build a partnership that comes closer to membership than anything we have done before. So how do we get there? First, it means closer

alignment on policies. We can work on everything, from AI and climate to energy and security; you just name it. Second, it means closer alignment on governance. It means more work shared by the European Commission and the Canadian government, for example. This cooperation could also entail Parliament to Parliament, between our two parliaments; and Court to Court. And third, it means closer alignment in each other's programmes.

While Monnet made his journey in one direction, many have done the reverse – and returned with new ways of seeing the world. Think of the painter Emily Carr, whose time studying in France transformed how she saw the landscapes of her native Canada. Or Dr. Joseph-Ernest Gendreau, who studied under Marie Curie and came home to found Canada's first centre for cancer research and treatment. Now, we should give a new generation the chance to make discoveries of their own. This is why we will deepen Canada's engagement in Europe's Erasmus+ programme, so that more young people have a chance to meet and learn from one another. We are also working to strengthen Canada's participation in the next generation of Horizon Europe, so that our most brilliant minds – researchers and scientists – can collaborate and innovate together. And we are working together on skills and qualifications, so that professionals can work more easily on both sides of the Atlantic. So, in a nutshell, that and much more is what associate membership is all about. Open only to our closest partners outside of Europe, who are ready to open a new frontier together – and to chart the course together, to think beyond the terms of our partnership today, towards the most ambitious version of what we can build. And I must say: I can think of no better partner than Canada to embark on this journey with us.

In the last weeks and months, many of us here in this room have been brought to reflect on the bonds between Europe and Canada. There is a beautiful story that encapsulates all of that shared history and friendship. Over 80 years ago, George

Emmerson was one of the many Canadian soldiers involved in the liberation of the Netherlands. He was posted in the Dutch town of Enschede at the end of the war. From there, he would witness thousands of released prisoners of war – making their way home on foot. And one day, he spotted a young man who was so frail, so emaciated, he could barely walk. So, he invited him into the house he was posted in to feed him and try to save his life. On parting, he was able to give the young man a lot of confidence. He did save his life. And the young man would continue his journey home. And George gave the young man – his name was Henk Metselaar – two bars of chocolate. Henk, who actually survived, spent the rest of his life wishing he could meet the Canadian soldier to thank him for saving his life. George Emmerson also asked himself whether Henk had made it through the war alive. It seemed destiny and an ocean would keep the two men apart. Then one day, almost 70 years later, George entered a furniture store near Toronto to buy a new lounge chair, and he got talking to a saleswoman who he noticed was from a Dutch background. So, he tells her the story of his encounter with the hungry young man in Enschede, the food and the two chocolate bars. On hearing the story, the young lady burst into tears. Henk was her father, and it turns out he had been living in Toronto since the 1950s. George went to visit Henk in his nursing home on several occasions before he passed away, each time bringing him a small bar of chocolate.

Those small chocolate bars, this remarkable story of fate and destiny, capture something deeper about the friendship and ties between Europe and Canada. Today, well over a century after Monnet left Cognac for Canada, we are once again called upon to work on new frontiers together. Because the current moment in history calls for it. We are witnessing a deeper decay in the international order. Alliances and assumptions that have enabled our prosperity and security are changing rapidly, and each nation and region is looking at how to secure its own interests and its own independence. We can no longer let ourselves be shackled by

the limits of the old-world order. We know the risks here, but we also see a way forward – a new frontier. We need to imagine partnerships that are built on trust and driven by common interests and beliefs. Mark Carney has said, “the international order will also be built from Europe, with Canada as part of it.” Our starting point is the same. In a world of growing rivalries, sovereignty and independence are no longer just the freedom to act alone. It is the capacity to act together. This is why we will build an Alliance for the Future, and we start with Canada. Together, we want to create a common space for growth and prosperity, resilience and economic security.

Let me give you a few examples of what this means in practice. Take the issue of chokepoints and economic security. Global supply chains have made essential goods more accessible and affordable, so far so good, but they also carry risks and chokepoints from one continent to another. The ties of one single supplier we once saw as guarantees of stability are increasingly turned into instruments of pressure. Think of energy, or semiconductors, or critical raw materials. When trade becomes a tool of economic pressure, it is the families who pay the price, from the supermarket shelf to the cost of a new car. We are seeing in real time our sovereignty being attacked. So, we have two options here. To go it alone, to see this as a zero-sum game where each country or economy focuses on building up its own leverage or its own capabilities with the result that everyone feels less secure and more isolated. Or we can take a more strategic approach with trusted partners that face the same challenges – but have different assets to respond.

This is why the European Union and Canada will build a single space for strategic supply chains. In practice, this means joint or complementary investment – including private finances on both sides. We will work on a project pipeline with investment banks, export banks and infrastructure banks on both sides. And we want to ensure that companies can access opportunities in each other’s markets. Or take the topic of critical raw materials. Canada has rich resources and

deep mining expertise. Europe brings industrial demand, technology, and investment. So, we are complementary across the whole value chain, from extracting minerals to processing them, from deploying advanced technologies and advanced materials to recycling them. This is why we established our strategic partnership on raw materials, for example. And this example is showing real results: last year, imports of Canadian critical raw materials to the European Union jumped by 62 percent in value, reaching an impressive €3.3 billion, that is CA\$5.18 billion. This includes materials like lithium, cobalt, nickel, and graphite. Materials we need for electric vehicles, for clean energy and for the industries of the future. This is driving growth on both sides of the Atlantic. Or take, for example, the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), our milestone free trade agreement. Thanks to CETA, bilateral trade has grown more than 80 percent. It has opened new doors for our businesses. From the French manufacturer winning new contracts in Canadian cities to the family business in Ontario that doubled its exports to Europe.

And we need to go further. Take artificial intelligence. Our industries increasingly depend on access to these technologies. And when that access rests on a few big companies, decisions taken elsewhere can put our businesses and essential services at risk. This is why we are teaming up. Both Canada and Europe believe this technology should serve people, so we will work together to tackle head-on the safety and security issues of runaway AI. We will develop together rules and standards – and strong global governance. We put human agency first. And this will allow us to draw greater value from AI, to develop our own capabilities together, to invest in AI infrastructure, to bring our researchers together on joint projects, to help our deep-tech start-ups compete globally. Just last month, Germany’s Aleph Alpha and Canada’s Cohere announced a merger to create a transatlantic sovereign AI company. So, we are already seeing strong appetite for teaming up.

And tomorrow, we will finalize our agreement to bring Canada into Europe's infrastructure for supercomputing. Europe is home to some of the world's best supercomputers. We have 12 state-of-the-art supercomputers located across Europe, and Canada will now become part of this network. This enables Canadian industry, start-ups, and researchers not only to access European supercomputing, but to train their models on our supercomputers. Paired with Canada's pioneering AI industry, this would allow us to develop highly competitive, innovative, and safe AI systems.

Our common vision for the future depends also on our ability to secure our homelands and our neighbourhoods. Our work on security is already a shared responsibility. Today, Canadian troops lead a multinational North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) brigade in Latvia, defending our Eastern flank. Canada was the first non-European country to participate in Security Action for Europe (SAFE), our joint defence procurement plan. And you have stood by our friends in Ukraine from the very start of Putin's war of aggression. I know that, for many Canadians, this is deeply personal. More than a million Canadians have Ukrainian roots. And since 2022, you have welcomed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians seeking safety. You have been our partner in working to support the return of Ukrainian children kidnapped by Russia. Canada knows all too well the human cost of this war, and Canada understands what is at stake. The right of people to live in peace, to decide their future freely. These are the principles we defend together in Ukraine – and they guide us wherever our shared security is at stake.

This includes also the Arctic. Earlier this month, just two weeks after Europe's Copernicus satellite was launched, it sent back a striking image of the

Canadian Arctic Archipelago. Images like these help us understand how the Arctic landscape is changing. And as the ice retreats, new routes are opening. Competition is intensifying. Here, geography brings Europe and Canada together, so do our interests. The Arctic is also part of the European Union. Three of our Member States are Arctic countries, and more than half a million European citizens live in the Arctic. So, when we see Russia rebuilding its Arctic military footprint, pursuing hybrid strategies against its neighbours, and reshaping the security of the Arctic, it impacts the European Union and Canada as a whole. We have to act and change our strategic posture and, together with like-minded partners, Canada and the European Union, stand up for these values. This is why we are developing joint projects across the region on everything you can think of – from ocean monitoring to critical raw materials or, for example, connectivity for remote communities.

This is a moment of extraordinary opportunity, but it is also a difficult moment. On both sides of the Atlantic, our citizens feel the strain. Many fear the future, what it will mean for their livelihoods, their families, and communities. But difficult moments also show us who we are, what we stand for, and who stands with us. I think of the lines of a beloved poet of Montreal, Leonard Cohen: "There is a crack in everything, that is how the light gets in." For me, this is a song about resilience. Even in uncertainty, we can choose hope. We can choose courage. We can choose a new beginning.

And therefore, long live Canada, long live Europe. And thank you very much for your attention.