THE THREE OCEANS AND THE COUNTRY BETWEEN THEM

Tidewater Access in a Changing Century

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Between the Lines

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Why Tidewater Access Defines Canada's Next Century

Canada's access to tidewater — our ability to move goods to the world through our own ocean gateways — will shape our sovereignty, our economic resilience, and our environmental future more than almost any other factor in the decades to come.

This isn't about building "more ports" or "more pipelines." It's about whether Canada can remain a self-determining nation in a world where global markets are shifting, climate pressures are intensifying, and economic coercion is becoming a tool of statecraft.

If we cannot reliably reach the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Arctic on our own terms, we become vulnerable — economically, diplomatically, and even environmentally. We cannot protect the land, water, and climate we care about if we lose the capacity to make policy decisions from a position of strength.

Tidewater access is the story behind almost every major Canadian debate: energy transition, EV metals, climate commitments, Arctic sovereignty, northern food security, trade diversification, and even the price of groceries.

This explainer takes a clear, wide-angle look at what tidewater access really means, why Canada's geography makes it uniquely challenging, how environmental and economic goals intersect, and what it will take to remain both viable and responsible in a rapidly changing world.

CHAPTER 1

A Country Framed by Oceans but Strangely Hard to Reach

You don't need to be a cartographer to notice that Canada is wrapped in oceans: the Atlantic hugging our historic east, the Pacific anchoring our gateway to Asia, and the Arctic running like a white, largely untouched crown across the north. On paper, it looks like ocean access should be one of our fundamental strengths.

And yet, when you dig even a little below the surface, you find something far more complicated — almost paradoxical.

Canada is **coastline-rich** but **corridor-poor**.
We have vast ocean frontage, but remarkably few dependable, high-capacity pathways to get our exports to tidewater. We have three oceans, but only a tiny handful of ports truly capable of handling large-scale international trade. And because of how our geography and political history evolved, much of our economy still depends on a small set of fragile, often overloaded connections to the outside world.

To understand how we got here — and what this means for our sovereignty, our environment, and our future — we need to unpack what "tidewater access" means in the first place.

What Tidewater Access *Actually* Means (and Why It Matters)

In the simplest possible language, tidewater access is **the ability to move Canadian goods to the ocean efficiently, reliably, and competitively**. Everything we export — whether it's potash, wheat, lumber, EV metals, or future clean hydrogen — ultimately depends on access to ocean shipping.

Tidewater isn't scenery.
It's the switch that turns a resource into revenue.

And for a country like Canada — one built on trade, with vast distances separating production from population — this switch is existential. Without strong access to tidewater, our exports lose value, our producers lose contracts, and our governments lose room to maneuver.

Yet "tidewater access" is also a broader concept. It includes:

- the corridors leading to ports
- the rail links, pipelines, and highways feeding them
- port capacity, efficiency, and modernity
- the geopolitical security of those marine routes
- and the environmental standards that govern how these systems operate

When all of those pieces work together, Canada can act in the world as a confident, sovereign nation. When they don't, we become vulnerable to bottlenecks, political pressure, and economic coercion.

This is where the story moves beyond infrastructure and into bigger questions about who gets to decide Canada's environmental future — us, or the pressures surrounding us.

How Geography Built the Paradox

Canada's entire economic structure has been shaped by distance. Early leaders — from Macdonald to Laurier — understood that without binding the country to its oceans, we would remain a northern extension of the United States.

The Canadian Pacific Railway wasn't only a transportation project; it was a nation-building tool to connect prairie grain to Vancouver, and Quebec timber to Atlantic shipping lanes. Our early ports, from Halifax to Vancouver, were deliberately built to give us alternatives to American routes. "East-west" trade wasn't just patriotic branding — it was a survival strategy.

But geography never fully cooperated.

Three big constraints still shape us:

1. Canada's population hugs the U.S. border.
Our producers are inland, our consumers are inland, and our ports are often remote. That means long supply chains and fragile dependence on infrastructure spanning huge distances.

2. The Rockies and Shield create natural chokepoints.
Every major rail corridor to the Pacific squeezes through narrow, high-risk valleys. A wildfire, flood, strike, or derailment can hem the entire country in.

3. Our Arctic is vast but underdeveloped.
We have the world's longest Arctic coastline — and almost no infrastructure to defend, use, or benefit from it. As the North warms and great powers eye new shipping lanes, this weakness grows more dangerous.

This combination left Canada with something no map ever shows:
the illusion of maritime abundance but the reality of maritime scarcity.

And today, that scarcity affects far more than grain shipments or container volume. It shapes our ability to protect the environment, meet climate goals, and resist foreign pressure.

Tidewater Access: The Link Between Sovereignty and Environmental Stewardship

This is where the story deepens — because environmental and national interests intersect far more tightly than public debate often acknowledges.

It's true that tidewater access has historically been used to move oil, gas, coal, and heavy materials. Environmental groups understandably fear that expanding infrastructure may enable high-emission industries. But the deeper question is this:

What happens to Canada's environmental protections if the country becomes economically or politically cornered?

The uncomfortable answer is:
We lose the ability to choose.

Sovereignty isn't an abstract concept here. It's the practical capacity to set environmental policy *from a position of strength*.

If we cannot get our goods to non-U.S. markets, we become dependent on a single buyer — one whose political and economic priorities can shift overnight.

If we cannot defend northern ocean routes, other nations will shape shipping norms in the Arctic — not us.

If we cannot move low-carbon exports (critical minerals, hydrogen, mass timber) efficiently to tidewater, we lose ground in global climate markets.

If we allow bottlenecks to weaken our economy, we become vulnerable to **economic warfare** — the modern way powerful nations control weaker ones.

Environmental integrity requires economic independence.
Economic independence requires secure tidewater access.

This is the thread that public debate often misses.

Why the Tidewater Debate Is Really a Future-of-Canada Debate

Tidewater access isn't yesterday's conversation. It's the next fifty years.

It determines:

- whether Canadian EV metals become globally competitive

- whether the Arctic becomes a Canadian-led conservation zone or a contested militarized frontier
- whether Vancouver and Prince Rupert can keep pace with global shipping
- whether Atlantic ports can handle new green energy exports
- whether Indigenous communities can benefit from — and lead — northern development
- whether climate policy is made by Canadians or shaped by external pressures

Canada can absolutely build a low-carbon future.
But we cannot build it **without** the ability to get low-carbon products to global markets — or protect the northern regions that hold most of them.

CHAPTER 2

The Economic Logic: Why Tidewater Access Determines Canada's Prosperity

There's a quiet truth that rarely gets said out loud in Canada, even among policymakers:
we do not get paid full value for what we produce.

We're a country blessed with extraordinary resources — agricultural strength, energy reserves, critical minerals, forests, fisheries, advanced manufacturing niches — yet time and again, Canadians end up watching billions slip between our fingers because we can't reliably move goods to tidewater.

This isn't inefficiency; it's structural.
It isn't new; it's inherited.
And it isn't going away on its own.

If Chapter 1 explained *why tidewater access matters* in broad terms, this chapter looks squarely at the dollars-and-cents reality: access to oceans is not merely a transportation issue — it is the economic backbone of national strength, competitiveness, and long-term sovereignty.

1. Canada's "Geography Discount": How We Lose Billions Before Products Even Leave the Country

There is a hard truth in commodity markets:
The farther your product has to travel to reach global buyers, the more you must discount its price.

This is called a *transport differential* — essentially, a penalty applied by global buyers because it costs more to get Canadian goods onto a ship. Some of this cost is geographical, but a surprising amount is political and logistical. In practice, the discount is a function of three things Canada struggles with:

1. Distance to deepwater ports

Prairie grain must travel thousands of kilometres to Vancouver or Thunder Bay. Potash takes the same route. Minerals from northern Ontario or Quebec often rely on rail networks built for 20th-century flows.

2. Limited port alternatives

With only a few high-capacity export ports, Canada's system becomes brittle. If one port backs up, gets hit by labour action, suffers a weather event, or faces capacity constraints, exporters must wait — and waiting costs money.

3. Shipping reliability issues

Global buyers want certainty. If Canada can't promise timely delivery — whether due to wildfire disruptions, rail congestion, strikes, container backlogs, or restricted harbour capacity — buyers look elsewhere.

This is how Canada ends up with a **structural discount** that affects almost every export sector:

- wheat
- canola
- lumber
- potash
- coal
- oil

- LNG (potential)
- copper, nickel, cobalt
- pulp and paper
- manufactured goods

It's not that our products are inferior.
It's that our access points are insufficient.

The conservative estimates place the annual loss from transportation bottlenecks in the **billions**. And those losses don't only hit companies — they hit governments, workers, regions, and ultimately **household affordability**.

Canada's national wealth is smaller than it could be not because of productivity myths, but because of **infrastructure constraints**.

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2. Overreliance on the U.S.: A Risk Hiding in Plain Sight

Roughly **75% of Canada's exports go to the United States**.
This is not economic sustainability — it's exposure.

For decades, Canadians were taught that proximity to the U.S. was a blessing. And it is, in many ways. But it has also created a dangerous imbalance: we depend heavily on one customer whose political environment is increasingly unstable and whose policy priorities shift depending on the administration.

The risk is not hypothetical.

CUSMA renegotiation is looming.

The United States has already signalled it will demand concessions that may affect:

- supply management
- auto rules of origin
- digital trade
- energy
- climate-related border measures

If Canada enters that negotiating room without credible alternatives — without diversified tidewater access to Asia, Europe, and the Arctic — we become a price-taker, not a negotiator.

Economic coercion is a modern tool of statecraft.

Large countries use access, tariffs, and market pressure to force weaker partners into alignment. We've seen this globally:

- China–Australia
- Russia–Europe (energy)
- U.S.–Mexico (trade threats)
- U.S.–Canada (softwood lumber, Buy American, Keystone XL)

When Canada has no viable route to global markets except through the U.S., we risk becoming **economically capturable**.

Diversification requires tidewater.

You cannot diversify trade with Asia, the EU, or emerging markets without high-capacity, reliable, climate-aligned ports.

This is why tidewater access isn't simply economic; it's strategic.
It is the foundation of self-determination.

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3. The Hidden Cost of Bottlenecks: Slowdowns Ripple Through Everyday Life

When most Canadians hear "port congestion," it sounds like a niche problem for exporters. But bottlenecks have consequences that reach all the way to kitchen tables.

Here's the chain reaction:

Port congestion → rail slowdown → inventory shortages → price increases → reduced competition → fewer affordable imports.

Examples abound:

The 2021–2022 container crisis

Container shortages and port backlogs contributed to:

- higher food prices
- delayed home-building materials
- shortages of automotive parts
- strained medical supply distribution

Wildfire disruptions in Western Canada

When railways shut due to wildfire or flood damage, prairie grain piles up. This leads to:

- lower farm incomes
- higher grocery prices
- contractual penalties for exporters
- reduced government revenue

LNG and energy chokepoints

Without tidewater access, Canada's natural gas remains landlocked — sold at discount rates — while global buyers pay premium prices elsewhere. This isn't about expanding fossil fuel consumption; it's about transitioning responsibly while maintaining economic stability during the shift.

Critical minerals and EV supply chains

The world's green economy needs:

- nickel
- cobalt
- graphite
- copper
- rare earths

Canada has them — but limited access to tidewater slows processing, shipment, and investment.

The economic logic is simple:
If we cannot move value out, we cannot bring value in.

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4. Tidewater as an Environmental Enabler

One of the most under-discussed aspects of tidewater access is its environmental benefit — not for high-emission sectors, but for climate-aligned ones.

Efficient tidewater access lowers emissions by reducing:

- idle freight
- trucking detours
- lengthened shipping routes
- rail congestion
- emergency storage usage

When ports are modernized — electrified terminals, shore power, efficient rail yards — the climate benefits are measurable.

A strong tidewater network is essential for exporting climate-positive products:

- mass timber (displacing concrete and steel)
- clean hydrogen
- green ammonia
- biofuels
- low-carbon aluminum and steel
- EV batteries and critical minerals

Canada *cannot* be a leader in decarbonization if it cannot get low-carbon products to international markets.

And if the world sees Canada as economically fragile, we risk being pressured into environmental concessions that suit other nations' priorities — not our own.

Environmental sovereignty is built on economic sovereignty.
Economic sovereignty is built on tidewater access.

5. Reliability Is the Currency of Global Markets

At the end of the day, buyers want two things:

- certainty, and
- options.

If Canada offers neither, we fall behind countries like:

- Australia (high-capacity Pacific ports)
- Norway (integrated Arctic logistics)
- the U.S. Gulf Coast (refined export corridors)

Every global investor asks the same questions:

- Can you deliver on time?
- Can you scale with demand?
- Can you route around disruptions?
- Can you access multiple oceans?

Today, Canada's honest answers are:

- "Usually."
- "Sometimes."
- "Not easily."
- "Barely."

This is the heart of the economic logic:
Tidewater access is not a luxury. It is the price of admission to global markets.

The more reliable the access, the more Canada can compete on value — not on discounts.

CHAPTER 3
The Environmental Reality: Stewardship, Sovereignty, and the Tension We Can't Ignore

There are few topics Canadians care about more deeply than the environment. It's woven into our national identity — the lakes we grew up swimming in, the forests that shade our hikes, the prairies we cross on long summer drives, the coastal wildness t1. The False Binary: "Environment vs. Tidewater Access"

Let's start by addressing the elephant in the room: environmental groups are not wrong to worry about infrastructure that could lock in fossil fuel production or harm fragile ecosystems. These risks are real, documented, and historically justified. Canada has learned painful lessons from spills, tailings failures, and poorly planned corridors.

But the deeper issue is not "environment vs. infrastructure."
The deeper issue is what kind of infrastructure, for what kind of economy, built with what standards, and under whose control.

Canada's national conversation got stuck in the wrong question:

- Should we build pipelines?
- Should we expand ports?
- Should we allow tankers in certain waters?

Those questions matter. But the larger question is the one we've avoided:

Do we want Canada to remain capable of making environmentally responsible decisions — or do we want those decisions shaped by external economic pressure because we've let our trade infrastructure erode?

Because here is the uncomfortable truth:

A weak Canada cannot protect the environment. A dependent Canada cannot protect the environment. A cornered Canada cannot protect the environment.

Environmental stewardship requires sovereignty.
Sovereignty requires economic stability.
Economic stability, in a resource-exporting nation, requires resilient access to tidewater.

This is the tension we must face with clear eyes.

2. When Environmental Vulnerability Comes From Economic Fragility

Most Canadians see environmental vulnerability as pollution, habitat loss, warming trends, or industrial risk. But there is another kind of environmental vulnerability — quieter, but more dangerous:

Economic vulnerability that undermines political independence.

If Canada cannot get its goods to global markets except through a small number of fragile pathways, we face three major risks:

A. Reliance on a single buyer (the U.S.)

This creates an asymmetric power dynamic.
If the United States decides Canadian climate policy is “uncompetitive,” or energy choices are “inconsistent,” or mineral pricing is “unfavourable,” Canada has limited leverage.

A country dependent on one export route has no negotiating power.

B. Exposure to foreign economic coercion

In the modern world, “warfare” no longer requires bullets.
It uses:

- tariffs,
- access restrictions,
- port blockades,
- market manipulation,
- sanctions,
- and investment pressure.

Countries that control their own access routes have bargaining power.
Countries that don’t get told which compromises to make.

C. Internal pressure to relax environmental standards

When the economy is weak, governments weaken too.
What happens to environmental ambition when:

- investments fall,

- unemployment rises,
- commodity prices slump,
- or regional tensions flare?

Weak economies make bad environmental decisions.
We've seen that globally — and historically at home.

This is why climate strategy cannot be divorced from economic strategy.
And economic strategy cannot be divorced from tidewater access.

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3. The Environmental Cost of Poor Tidewater Access

Paradoxically, *lack* of tidewater access also harms the environment in direct, measurable ways — even when no one is building new pipelines or ports.

A. Congestion raises emissions

When rail lines slow, ships idle, containers stack up, or trucks reroute thousands of extra kilometres, emissions rise significantly. These aren't small numbers; transportation delays can add millions of tonnes of CO_2 annually.

B. Bottlenecks push industries toward dirtier alternatives

If Canada can't move low-carbon materials —
like mass timber, green aluminum, or EV minerals — they lose competitiveness, and countries end up buying dirtier substitutes from jurisdictions with weaker environmental rules.

Global emissions rise, and Canada loses ground.

C. Fragile routes force redundancies

When one port goes down, freight shifts to longer, less efficient routes.
Example: rerouting grain from the West Coast to Thunder Bay adds:

- more rail emissions
- more handling
- more storage

- more spoilage risk

The “environmental cost” of inaction is not zero. It’s cumulative.

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4. The Case for Climate-Aligned Tidewater Infrastructure

Environmental stewardship isn’t achieved by freezing the country in place.
It’s achieved by **building the infrastructure that enables a clean economy to succeed**.

This includes:

Electrified port terminals

Modern ports can drastically cut emissions through:

- electric cranes,
- shore power for ships,
- automated yards,
- and low-emission drayage vehicles.

Dual-purpose corridors

Rail lines and pipelines built today can be designed for:

- hydrogen,
- renewable fuels,
- carbon capture transport,
- and low-carbon freight.

Marine fuel transition

Canada’s ports can anchor the shift to:

- LNG bunkering
- methanol
- ammonia

- future zero-carbon fuels

Stronger Indigenous leadership in environmental planning

Many of the most successful — and sustainable — infrastructure projects in Canada are Indigenous-led or co-governed:

- Haisla (Cedar LNG)
- Nisga'a (Ksi Lisims LNG)
- Mi'kmaq ownership in Clearwater
- Cree and Inuit leadership in northern projects

These models produce better outcomes for land, water, wildlife, and communities.

Climate-aligned export capacity

If we want Canada to lead in:

- sustainable forestry
- critical minerals
- clean hydrogen
- green building materials
- low-carbon steel
- circular manufacturing

…then we need ports that can move these products efficiently and competitively.

Canada cannot scale a green economy with 20th-century infrastructure.

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5. The Environmental Stakes in the Arctic

The Arctic is where environmental protection, climate change, and sovereignty collide. This region is warming four times faster than the global average. Melting ice is creating new shipping routes. Global powers — Russia, China, European states — are increasing presence and interest.

Canada faces a stark reality:

If we don't establish environmentally responsible infrastructure and presence in the Arctic, other nations will shape the rules instead.

This affects:

- wildlife conservation
- Indigenous food security
- marine protection
- climate research
- territorial integrity
- shipping standards

Environmental stewardship in the Arctic is impossible without sovereignty.
And sovereignty is impossible without tidewater access we control.

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6. The Path Forward: Protecting the Environment by Protecting Our Ability to Choose

The real environmental question is not:

- Should Canada build infrastructure?

The real question is:

- What kind of infrastructure allows Canada to reduce global emissions, protect ecosystems, and remain sovereign enough to make environmentally responsible choices?

If Canada becomes economically weakened, politically cornered, or dependent on a single trade route, then our environmental policies — even the best-intentioned ones — will be shaped by external pressures.

Environmental protection requires:

- diversified trade options,
- reliable ports,

- secure access to three oceans,
- strong Indigenous governance,
- climate-aligned design,
- and economic resilience to say no when it matters.

This is what tidewater access enables — not just commerce, but **choice**.

Canada cannot protect the environment if Canada cannot protect itself.

hat makes our geography feel almost mythic. Protecting the land and water is not a partisan statement in Canada; it is a cultural instinct.

And this is why the debate around tidewater access can feel so charged. To many, the phrase conjures images of tankers, pipelines, and industrial sprawl. To others, it represents the infrastructure that keeps the country running: rail yards, ports, corridors, and the hard logistics of trade.

Environmental protection and tidewater access are often framed as opposing forces. But that framing has misled us for decades.

The truth is far more complicated — and far more important.

CHAPTER 4

Three Gateways, One Country: The Coast-by-Coast Reality of Tidewater Access

Canada's relationship with its oceans is complicated. We are a country with three magnificent coastlines — each facing a different world, a different set of trading partners, and a different set of pressures. But these coasts are not equal in opportunity or infrastructure. Some are strained. Some are underused. Some are almost untouched.

Understanding Canada's tidewater challenge means understanding the distinct realities of our **Pacific**, **Atlantic**, and **Arctic** gateways — and how each one shapes our ability to remain economically independent, environmentally responsible, and geopolitically secure.

Let's take them one at a time.

1. The Pacific Gateway: Canada's Most Critical and Most Fragile Trade Lifeline

If Canada has an economic heartbeat, it pulses through the ports of **Vancouver** and **Prince Rupert**. Together, these two ports carry the majority of our containerized imports and exports, including:

- Prairie grain
- Potash
- Oil and refined products
- Forest products
- Consumer goods
- Automotive shipments
- Critical minerals
- Manufactured components

This is Canada's *primary connection to Asia* — the world's fastest-growing market and the destination for much of our future low-carbon economy.

But for all its strength, the Pacific Gateway is a single, overloaded artery with chronic vulnerabilities.

A. The Vancouver Bottleneck

The Port of Vancouver is the largest in Canada, but its geography traps it between mountains, residential neighbourhoods, and limited rail corridors. It is:

- congested
- prone to weather disruptions
- vulnerable to labour disputes
- reliant on only a few rail routes through the Rockies
- politically contested due to urban pressures

When the Fraser Valley floods, when wildfires close rail lines, or when container traffic spikes, Vancouver's port system buckles. The whole country feels it.

The lesson is painful but clear:

Too much of Canada depends on a single pathway to tidewater.

B. Prince Rupert: The Powerhouse-in-Waiting

Prince Rupert is one of the world's deepest natural harbours and one of the few ports with expansion room. Its location gives it **the shortest Asia–North America shipping route** — a strategic advantage no other Canadian port can match.

Its strengths include:

- shorter sailing times
- partnerships with Indigenous nations
- space for container and bulk expansion
- modern, efficient terminals
- strong rail connection to the Prairies

But Rupert is also remote, and dependent on:

- a single major rail corridor
- harsh northern weather
- the long-term financial health of CN's network

With adequate investment, Prince Rupert is Canada's "next-generation port." Without it, the Pacific Gateway remains dangerously narrow.

C. The Rockies: Canada's Single Most Vulnerable Trade Junction

Every rail line carrying goods from the Prairies to the Pacific crosses the Rockies. This means:

- wildfires
- floods
- avalanches
- slides
- derailments

- heat domes
- rail labour issues

…can shut down our exports overnight.

During the 2021 B.C. floods, Canada effectively lost access to the Pacific coast for weeks. The economic damage was immense.

A country with one reliable ocean route is a country with a sovereignty problem.

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2. The Atlantic Gateway: Underused Potential and a Climate Transition Opportunity

Where the Pacific struggles with congestion, the Atlantic struggles with underutilization — and with the heavy shadow of history.

Montreal, **Quebec City**, **Saint John**, **Halifax**, and **Port Hawkesbury** form the backbone of the Atlantic Gateway. Each has strengths. Each has weaknesses.

A. Montreal: The St. Lawrence Workhorse

Montreal is the gateway to Eastern Canada and the industrial heartland. Its strengths include:

- strong rail and trucking connectivity
- diversified cargo
- year-round navigation (with icebreaking)
- strategic access to the U.S. northeast

But it faces:

- land constraints
- urban encroachment
- seasonal challenges with river levels
- climate-driven water fluctuation risks

Montreal is indispensable — but cannot carry the Atlantic alone.

B. Halifax: The Atlantic Deepwater Giant

Halifax is one of the deepest, best-positioned natural ports on the Eastern Seaboard. It can handle:

- ultra-large container vessels
- naval operations
- shipping alliances
- climate-aligned marine fuel transitions

Yet Halifax remains underused for two reasons:

1. Rail bottlenecks through New Brunswick and Nova Scotia
2. Limited east-west interprovincial trade integration

A modernized Atlantic rail corridor could transform Halifax into:

- a major transshipment hub
- an EV metals cluster connector
- a green hydrogen export platform
- a European trade lifeline

But only if the corridors feeding it are strengthened.

C. The Newfoundland and Labrador Opportunity

Newfoundland and Labrador hold two emerging strengths:

1. Proximity to Europe

This places the province at a natural advantage for:

- critical minerals
- green hydrogen
- fisheries
- offshore wind
- colder-water shipping

2. Emerging offshore wind + hydrogen potential

If infrastructure is built responsibly and collaboratively with Indigenous and coastal communities, Newfoundland could become a climate-hydrogen export leader.

D. The Atlantic as Canada's Climate Gateway

As the world electrifies, the Atlantic emerges as the coast best suited for exporting:

- green ammonia
- hydrogen
- low-carbon aluminum
- clean steel
- EV battery materials

But without modern rail, expanded terminals, and integrated east-west flows, the Atlantic risks being an unrealized opportunity instead of a competitive advantage.

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3. The Arctic Gateway: The Sleeping Giant — and the Hardest to Access

Now we arrive at the coastline every Canadian map boasts about — the one that runs from Yukon through the Northwest Territories to Nunavut, touching some of the most fragile ecosystems on Earth, and increasingly, some of the most geopolitically contested waters in the world.

The Arctic is Canada's most **strategic**, most **vulnerable**, and most **underdeveloped** coastline.

And ignoring it is no longer an option.

A. Climate Change Is Opening — and Exposing — the North

As ice melts, the Northwest Passage is becoming:

- navigable for longer periods
- attractive for global shipping
- strategically valuable
- militarily vulnerable

This shift places enormous pressure on Canada, because:

If we don't establish presence and responsible infrastructure in the Arctic, other nations will shape shipping norms, environmental rules, and security realities instead.

Arctic sovereignty without Arctic tidewater infrastructure is a fiction.

B. Northern Communities Pay the Price of Isolation

The lack of tidewater access in the North affects:

- food security
- fuel costs
- housing affordability
- medical supply delivery
- emergency preparedness

Northern communities are among the most climate-vulnerable populations in Canada, yet have the least infrastructure to mitigate risk or adapt.

Improving tidewater access here is not an industrial project — it is a human one.

C. Critical Minerals and the Northern Corridor Question

The world needs:

- nickel
- cobalt
- copper
- rare earths
- graphite

Much of Canada's supply lies in the North and northern Ontario/Quebec — and almost none of it has direct access to tidewater. This slows development, scares off investors, and prevents Canada from leading in the EV transition.

Which leads to a core question:

How do we develop the North responsibly, sustainably, and in full partnership with Indigenous governments — while still ensuring a sovereign Canadian presence?

This chapter cannot answer that fully, but we can name the stakes:
Failing to connect the North to tidewater leaves it exposed — environmentally and geopolitically.

4. One Country, Three Coastlines — and a Single Strategic Imperative

Canada is unique in the world:
We face three oceans, three sets of risks, and three sets of opportunities.

But to function as a coherent nation, we need:

- the Pacific for Asia
- the Atlantic for Europe
- **the Arctic** for sovereignty, climate leadership, and northern renewal

Without strong access to all three, Canada becomes:

- economically fragile
- environmentally constrained
- geopolitically exposed
- overly dependent on the U.S.
- unable to deliver climate-aligned exports
- unable to defend its northern frontier

Tidewater access is not optional.
It is the infrastructure equivalent of oxygen.

The Pacific is our largest opportunity *and* our largest risk.
The Atlantic is our future-facing climate gateway.
The Arctic is the test of our sovereignty and our environmental principles.

Together, they form the skeleton of a viable, autonomous Canada.

CHAPTER 5

The Arctic: Canada's Final Frontier of Sovereignty, Climate Stewardship, and Tidewater Access

For most Canadians, the Arctic exists more in imagination than experience. It's a place we picture in broad strokes — ice, polar bears, northern lights — rather than the detailed, lived reality of communities who call it home. But the Arctic is not a mythical expanse above the map; it is the frontline of the most important questions facing Canada through the rest of the 21st century.

Everything we've explored so far — sovereignty, climate leadership, economic security, tidewater access — converges in the North. If Canada is to remain a self-determining nation, the Arctic is the proving ground.

This chapter lays out the truth plainly:
The Arctic is no longer remote. It is exposed. And the clock is ticking.

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1. A Region Changing Faster Than Anywhere on Earth

The Arctic is warming at four times the global average. What once provided natural protection — thick, multi-year sea ice — is thinning, breaking, and retreating. Summer seasons are longer. Shipping lanes are opening earlier. Permafrost is melting, destabilizing roads, runways, and buildings.

Climate change is not abstract in the North; it is immediate:

- coastlines are eroding,
- wildlife migrations are shifting,
- ice roads are becoming unreliable,
- and the cost of living is climbing with every logistical disruption.

This climate-driven transformation creates both urgency and vulnerability. As ice recedes, new marine corridors emerge — particularly sections of the **Northwest Passage**. The world has noticed.

Powerful nations are evaluating the Arctic not as a frozen void but as:

- a shipping shortcut,
- an energy frontier,
- a resource frontier,
- a strategic military corridor,
- and a region where environmental and geopolitical rules are up for grabs.

For Canada, the question is stark:

Will the Arctic's future be shaped by us, or shaped around us?

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2. Sovereignty in the Arctic Is a Use-It-or-Lose-It Proposition

Legally, Canada's Arctic sovereignty is strong. Politically and practically, it is fragile. International law — including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) — supports Canada's claim to the waters of the Arctic Archipelago as internal waters. But interpretation depends heavily on usage.

In international law, sovereignty weakens if presence weakens.

Right now, Canada lacks:

- deepwater ports in the High Arctic,
- year-round military bases,
- robust icebreaker fleets,
- reliable northern airstrips,
- modern satellite coverage,
- and large-scale infrastructure linking communities to tidewater.

The result is a paradox:
We have a vast Arctic coastline that we cannot fully access, defend, or utilize.

This is not an indictment of northern communities — it's an indictment of national neglect. The North has been chronically underinvested for generations.

In a warming world, that neglect is no longer merely unfair — it is dangerous.

3. The Global Power Shift: Why the Arctic Is Becoming Contested

The Arctic is no longer an out-of-sight region. Major powers see opportunity.

Russia

- Operates the world's largest icebreaker fleet
- Building military bases along its Arctic coast
- Actively developing Northern Sea Route shipping
- Increasing submarine presence

China

- Calls itself a "near-Arctic state"
- Increasing research station investments
- Seeking partnerships for mineral access
- Publishing Arctic shipping projections
- Pushing for influence in governance bodies

The United States

- Increasing military capabilities in Alaska
- Concerned about China's presence
- Eyes the Northwest Passage as an international strait
- Linking Arctic strategy to NORAD modernization

European nations (Norway, Denmark/Greenland, Finland, Sweden, Iceland)

- Intensifying climate research
- Monitoring new shipping lanes
- Expanding Arctic defence cooperation

Canada sits at the intersection of these pressures, but with a fraction of the Arctic infrastructure of its peers.

The world is preparing for the Arctic of the future. Canada cannot pretend it is still the Arctic of the past.

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4. Northern Communities: The Human Face of Tidewater Access

Amid global posturing, it is northern residents — primarily Inuit, Dene, Métis, and other Indigenous communities — who face the most direct consequences of inadequate infrastructure.

They confront:

- the highest food prices in the country,
- unreliable supply chains,
- costly energy imports,
- limited emergency response capacity,
- and a warming climate that is disrupting traditional harvesting, travel, and safety.

The lack of tidewater access compounds every one of these challenges.

Where access exists, it is often seasonal.
Where ports exist, they are often small, aging, or inaccessible during hazard conditions.
Where marine shipping is possible, it is expensive and slow.

Investing in tidewater access in the Arctic is not about extraction.
It is about dignity, affordability, and safety — about ensuring northern communities have the same baseline logistics and opportunities that southern Canadians take for granted.

This chapter must say it plainly:

Northern infrastructure is not a luxury. It is an obligation.

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5. Critical Minerals: Canada’s Future Runs Through the North

Much of the world’s appetite for batteries, EVs, and renewable energy relies on minerals Canada has in abundance:

- nickel

- cobalt
- graphite
- copper
- rare earth elements

Many of the most promising deposits lie in the North or sub-Arctic regions. But without reliable access to tidewater:

- investment slows,
- projects stall,
- communities remain isolated,
- and Canada loses ground to competitor nations with clearer pathways to export.

If Canada wants to be a leader in the clean-energy transition, we cannot ignore that the mineral backbone of that transition lies in regions with the poorest tidewater access in the country.

But — and this is critical — development must occur:

- in true partnership with Indigenous governments,
- with full environmental integrity,
- and under standards that align with the climate future we want to build.

The North cannot — and should not — become the next frontier of careless exploitation.
But nor can it be left out of national strategy.

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6. Building Arctic Tidewater Infrastructure Responsibly

The question isn't whether Canada should build in the North — it is **how**, **where**, **for whom**, and **with what goals**.

A climate-aligned Arctic tidewater strategy includes:

- Indigenous-led port design
- ice-capable, low-emission shipping

- expanded icebreaker fleet
- Arctic monitoring satellites
- environmental baselines informed by Inuit knowledge
- reliable marine resupply routes
- resilient emergency response systems
- protection of ecologically sensitive zones
- shared governance through treaties and Inuit-Crown agreements

Responsible infrastructure is not contradictory to northern protection.
It is essential to it.

Canada cannot protect the Arctic by leaving it vulnerable.
We protect it by strengthening local capacity and national presence.

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7. The Ultimate Question: What Happens If We Don't?

If Canada fails to establish responsible, climate-aligned, sovereignty-respecting tidewater access in the Arctic, several outcomes become likely:

A. Foreign powers shape shipping norms, not Canada

If the Northwest Passage is seen as an "international strait," Canada loses authority over environmental rules, vessel standards, and emergency protocols.

B. Northern communities remain economically disadvantaged

Isolation deepens. Climate risks worsen. Food insecurity grows.

C. Clean-energy supply chains go elsewhere

Canada becomes a spectator in markets it could lead.

D. The Arctic becomes militarized by others

Without Canadian presence, others will fill the vacuum.

E. Canada loses leverage in global climate negotiations

A country that cannot defend its own northern frontier cannot credibly lead on climate.

This is the national stakes boiled down:
We cannot protect the Arctic if we are not present in the Arctic.

And we cannot be present without tidewater infrastructure we control, maintain, and align with our values.

CHAPTER 6

Choosing Our Future: Tidewater Access as the Backbone of a Sovereign, Sustainable Canada

Every generation of Canadians inherits a different version of this country. Some inherit a frontier. Some inherit a railway. Some inherit a fragile federation. Some inherit prosperity. Some inherit crisis.

But your generation and mine — and your grandchildren's — are inheriting something much more complex: a Canada whose future stability depends on decisions we make now about how we access the world beyond our borders.

That is what this entire explainer has been circling toward.

Tidewater access isn't a technical debate about ports, pipelines, railways, icebreakers, or trade routes. It is a foundational question about what kind of country Canada will be in an era defined by climate change, great-power competition, resource scarcity, supply chain stress, and environmental responsibility.

Three forces — sovereignty, sustainability, and economic viability — are no longer separate policy domains. They are one conversation.

And tidewater access is the hinge.

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1. A Country at a Crossroads: Three Paths Ahead

If you boil down Canada's tidewater challenge, you find that we face three broad strategic options. Each takes us to a very different future.

Option 1: Drift, Delay, and Depend

This is the default path — the one Canada has quietly followed for decades.

We maintain aging corridors.
We react to crises instead of planning for them.
We let bottlenecks harden.
We allow Pacific access to weaken, Atlantic opportunities to wither, and Arctic gateways to remain undeveloped.

The consequence of this path is predictable:

- increasing dependence on the U.S.
- reduced diversification
- eroded sovereignty
- weakened negotiating power
- environmental degradation through inefficiency
- persistent structural discounts on Canadian goods
- vulnerability to economic coercion
- widening gaps between northern and southern Canadians

This path is the easiest politically — and the most dangerous strategically.

A country that cannot reach the world on its own terms cannot steer its own environmental or economic future.

Option 2: Expand Access Without Environmental Integrity

This is the opposite extreme — building rapidly without regard for ecology, climate, or the rights of Indigenous nations.

It is the model historically followed by empires, not partners.

This path may increase short-term economic capacity but ends in:

- ecological damage,
- mistrust,
- legal conflict,
- global reputational harm,

- and long-term climate and biodiversity costs that undermine everything Canada claims to stand for.

This is not a path Canada can — or should — take.
A sovereign country that trades away its environmental integrity loses its soul.

Option 3: Build Climate-Aligned, Sovereignty-Strengthening Tidewater Access

This is the path Canada rarely articulates clearly, but the one the country must choose if we want a viable future:

Build the infrastructure that supports a low-carbon economy, strengthens sovereignty, enhances resilience, respects Indigenous leadership, protects ecosystems, and ensures Canada remains economically independent enough to make environmentally responsible decisions.

This middle path holds the tension honestly.
It doesn't pretend that infrastructure is risk-free.
It doesn't pretend environmental protection is effortless.
It doesn't pretend sovereignty is guaranteed.

It acknowledges the complexity and chooses responsibility.

This is the strategy a mature country adopts.

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2. The Pillars of a National Tidewater Strategy

If Canada were to approach tidewater access as a nation-building project — the same way we approached the Canadian Pacific Railway, or Medicare, or the Charter — what would it require?

We can group it into six pillars.

Pillar 1: Environmental Integrity as a Non-Negotiable

Projects cannot move forward unless they:

- protect watersheds,
- safeguard biodiversity,

- mitigate emissions,
- meet the highest global standards,
- and include Indigenous guardianship in monitoring.

This is not an obstacle to infrastructure — it is the foundation of public trust.

Pillar 2: Indigenous Partnership and Leadership

The most successful tidewater projects of the last decade share the same trait:
Indigenous nations were not consulted — they were partners.

The future of tidewater access must include:

- Indigenous ownership stakes,
- joint governance,
- shared revenues,
- environmental co-management,
- and infrastructure designed with local knowledge at its core.

Nothing else is sustainable. Nothing else is just.

Pillar 3: Diversified Access to Three Oceans

A country of Canada's scale cannot rely on:

- one Pacific port corridor,
- one Atlantic rail route,
- and no Arctic deepwater ports.

We need:

- Pacific redundancy (Vancouver + Prince Rupert)
- Atlantic modernization (Halifax + Montreal + NL hydrogen ports)
- Arctic presence and infrastructure (Iqaluit, Churchill, northern deepwater access)

Diversification is not a luxury. It is resilience.

Pillar 4: Low-Carbon Trade Infrastructure

The tidewater systems we build must be designed for the future economy, not the past.
This means:

- electrified marine terminals
- green fuel bunkering (LNG, methanol, ammonia, hydrogen)
- low-carbon rail
- climate-adapted design for extreme weather
- EV-mineral and green-steel export capacity
- ports ready for circular-manufacturing supply chains

Infrastructure can be a climate accelerant, not a climate casualty.

Pillar 5: Northern Investment as a Sovereignty Imperative

The Arctic is no longer a remote region.
It is:

- a climate front,
- a geopolitical front,
- a human-security front,
- and a resource front.

Canada needs:

- year-round logistics in the North,
- expanded icebreaker fleets,
- Indigenous-led port infrastructure,
- better military and search-and-rescue presence,
- stronger northern aviation circuits,
- and climate-resilient housing and supply chains.

If we are not present in the North, we cannot protect the North.

Pillar 6: Data, Governance, and Long-Term Vision

Canada must stop treating infrastructure as episodic crisis response.

We need:

- multi-decade planning,
- integrated federal–provincial–territorial coordination,
- climate modelling embedded in infrastructure design,
- and transparency around costs, timelines, and benefits.

This is how you run a country — not year to year, but generation to generation.

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3. Why This Matters Now — Not Later

The world is reorganizing.
Climate pressure is accelerating.
Trade patterns are shifting.
The Arctic is opening.
The U.S. is becoming less predictable.
Clean-energy supply chains are becoming battlegrounds.
And the global economy is rewarding countries that can deliver value sustainably and reliably.

Canada can be one of those countries.
Or we can fall behind and watch others shape our future.

The window to choose is now.

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4. The Heart of the Matter: We Cannot Protect the Environment if We Cannot Protect Canada

This entire explainer leads back to the central truth:

Environmental responsibility and national sovereignty are not competing goals. They are interdependent.

A Canada that is weak, dependent, or cornered cannot protect ecosystems.
A Canada that lacks access to its oceans cannot shape climate rules.
A Canada that cannot move low-carbon exports cannot lead in the green economy.
A Canada that cedes northern authority cannot defend fragile Arctic environments.

We protect the environment *by protecting our ability to choose*, and tidewater access is the infrastructure that makes choice possible.

This is not about industrial ambition.
It is about national agency.
It is about future generations having a country still capable of governing itself with integrity — economically, environmentally, and morally.

Closing Reflection

Canada has faced impossible challenges before. We built a railway across mountains, stitched regions together with constitutional compromise, created universal health care, negotiated multinational agreements, and weathered crises that would have fractured less resilient nations.

We can absolutely build the tidewater strategy needed for the next century — one that upholds environmental stewardship, economic independence, and sovereign confidence.

But it requires clarity, honesty, and a willingness to look beyond the next election cycle.

Tidewater access is not a technical detail.
It is the quiet foundation of Canada's future.

The question now is simple:
Do we build that future intentionally — or do we let it be built for us?

References & Recommended Reading

A curated list of the most credible, non-partisan sources on Canadian tidewater access, Arctic sovereignty, environmental policy, logistics, and trade infrastructure. These are grouped by theme for clarity.

I. Government Reports & Official Data

Government of Canada – Transport Canada

- *State of Canada's Supply Chain* (2022, 2023)
- *Canada Port Modernization Review*
- *Arctic Marine Safety and Security Reports*

Natural Resources Canada

- *Critical Minerals Strategy* (2022)
- *Energy Futures Reports* (annual)
- *Mapping the North: Infrastructure Needs Assessments*

Global Affairs Canada

- *Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy* (2022)
- *CETA Implementation Reports*
- *CUSMA Backgrounders and Briefing Notes*

Library of Parliament Background Papers

- *Canada's Arctic Sovereignty*
- *Marine Transportation in the North*
- *Interprovincial and International Trade Barriers*

Statistics Canada

- *Canadian Freight Analysis Framework*
- *Transportation and Warehousing Supply Chain Data Tables*
- *Export and Import Trade Profiles*

II. Independent Institutes & Policy Research

Conference Board of Canada

- *The Value of Trade Infrastructure Investments*
- *Canada's Asia-Pacific Gateway: Economic Implications*

C.D. Howe Institute

- *Removing Barriers to Interprovincial Trade*
- *Infrastructure Bottlenecks & Export Competitiveness*

Fraser Institute

- *Economic Impact of Pipeline Constraints in Western Canada*

Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI)

- *Arctic Governance and Geopolitics*
- *Security and Environmental Risks in the North*

Canadian Global Affairs Institute

- *NORAD Modernization Papers*
- *Arctic Sovereignty Series*

Macdonald-Laurier Institute

- *Northern Corridor Project Papers*
- *Arctic Sovereignty in the Era of Great Power Competition*

III. Academic Works & Papers

P. Whitney Lackenbauer – Canada's preeminent Arctic scholar

- *The Canadian Rangers: A Living History*
- *Canada and Arctic Sovereignty: Old Concerns, New Challenges*
- *Eyes North: Canada's Arctic Challenges*

Heather Exner-Pirot

- Extensive writing on Arctic policy, Indigenous leadership, northern development, and global strategy.

Ken Coates & Greg Poelzer

- *The Second National Policy: Northern Development and Canada's Future*

Michael Byers

- *Who Owns the Arctic?*
- Papers on Arctic legal frameworks and sovereignty.

University of Calgary School of Public Policy

- *The Northern Corridor Project Series*
- *Market Access & Port Capacity Studies*

IV. Environmental & Climate Research

IPCC Reports – Cryosphere & Arctic Chapters

- Foundational for understanding the North's accelerated warming.

Arctic Council Working Groups

- AMAP (Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme)
- PAME (Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment)
- CAFF (Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna)

World Wildlife Fund (WWF) – Arctic Program

- *Shipping Risks in a Warming Arctic*
- *Climate Vulnerability of Northern Communities*

International Maritime Organization (IMO)

- *Polar Code*
- *Regulations on Arctic Shipping & Marine Safety*

V. Books (Highly Recommended)

- **Adam Lajeunesse**, *Lock, Stock, and Icebergs: A History of Canada's Arctic Maritime Sovereignty*
- **Barry Gough**, *The Northwest Coast: A History*
- **Maritime historians on the Pacific Gateway**, including Jean Barman
- **Ken Coates**, *Arctic Front* (with Poelzer, Exner-Pirot & Holroyd)
- **Marc Levinson**, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*
- **Jonathan Manthorpe**, *Restitution: The Struggle for Canada's Arctic*

VI. Media & Long-Form Journalism

The Narwhal

- Investigative pieces on northern infrastructure, climate change, and Indigenous governance.

CBC "Front Burner" & "What On Earth"

- Accessible explainers on Arctic security, climate impacts, and Canadian supply chains.

Globe and Mail – Report on Business

- Coverage of port capacity, LNG debates, and Pacific rail bottlenecks.

Arctic Today

- The best independent outlet on circumpolar developments.

The Economist – Arctic Special Report (2019 & 2022)

- Global frame for geopolitical shifts.

VII. Specialized Logistics & Shipping Sources

Port of Vancouver Authority

- *Economic Impact Studies*
- *Container Traffic Reports*

- *Weather/Event Disruption Summaries*

Prince Rupert Port Authority

- *Gateway Performance Indicators*
- *Future Expansion Plans (Fairview Terminal)*

Atlantic Gateway Secretariat

- Historic documentation on Halifax & Saint John modernization.

Shipping Federation of Canada

- *Annual Arctic Shipping Reports*
- *Trends in Marine Emissions Reduction*

VIII. Recommended Reading for Further Context

These aren't formal academic references, but they offer deeper insight into the themes woven through the article.

- **Danielle Smith's Alberta speech on market access** (for political framing of Pacific bottlenecks)
- **BC Floods 2021 transportation analysis** (CN & CP incident reports)
- **"Arctic Corridors and Northern Voices" project** (Inuit-led mapping and environmental stewardship)
- **"The Northern Miner"** reporting on emerging critical mineral projects
- **Royal Canadian Navy** briefings on Arctic/Atlantic maritime security
- **OECD – Arctic Regional Development Outlook**
- **UNCTAD – Maritime Transport Review** (global port competitiveness)

IX. Key Primary Source Treaties & Legal Documents

- **UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea)**
- **The Arctic Council Ottawa Declaration (1996)**

- **Inuit Nunangat Declaration and Inuit-Crown Partnership Committee Agreements**
- **Canada–US Agreements on Arctic Cooperation (1988, 2021 updates)**
- **CETA, CPTPP, and North American Arctic shipping references**

X. For Readers Who Want One Single Document Overview

If you'd like to recommend one "all-in" document to readers new to the subject, I suggest:

"Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework" (Government of Canada, 2019)
It is imperfect, but it's the most comprehensive public document linking sovereignty, climate, infrastructure, and reconciliation.

About the Author

Leni Spooner is a Canadian writer and the creator of *Between the Lines*, an independent project dedicated to Kitchen-Table Politics — the kind of clear, human-centred analysis you'd offer a neighbour over coffee. Her work explores sovereignty, trade, food systems, civic engagement, and the shifting realities of life in a country shaped by three oceans and a changing climate.

A lifelong researcher and storyteller, Leni writes to make policy understandable, contextual, and grounded in real people's lives. She lives in Ontario and works in both English and Italian.

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