



Concept Symposium 2026

Major Project Governance in Canada: Evolution and International Perspective



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Presentation Overview

- Major Project Governance: Canada's Framework in Context
- Governance Trajectory - Major Iterations and Instruments
- Institutionalization (Iteration V) - Institutions, Roles & Stage-Gate Model
- The Major Projects Office: A New Institution?
- International Perspective
- Discussion



Ksi Lisims LNG Terminal
(Government of Canada, 2026)

Major Project Governance: Canada's Framework in Context

Governance framework

- Systems, processes, and rules government implement to improve project delivery by defining:
 - Decision-making authority
 - Project appraisal and funding requirements
 - Oversight and institutional learning

The Canadian Case

- Canada's federal governance framework for major public projects was established in 1978
- A dynamic trajectory: the framework has evolved alongside changing political and administrative contexts
- Research question: *How has Canada's governance framework for major public projects evolved over time?*
- Based on extensive documentary research, including, including rare archival records from Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa, completed by insights from experienced federal public servants

Comparative lens

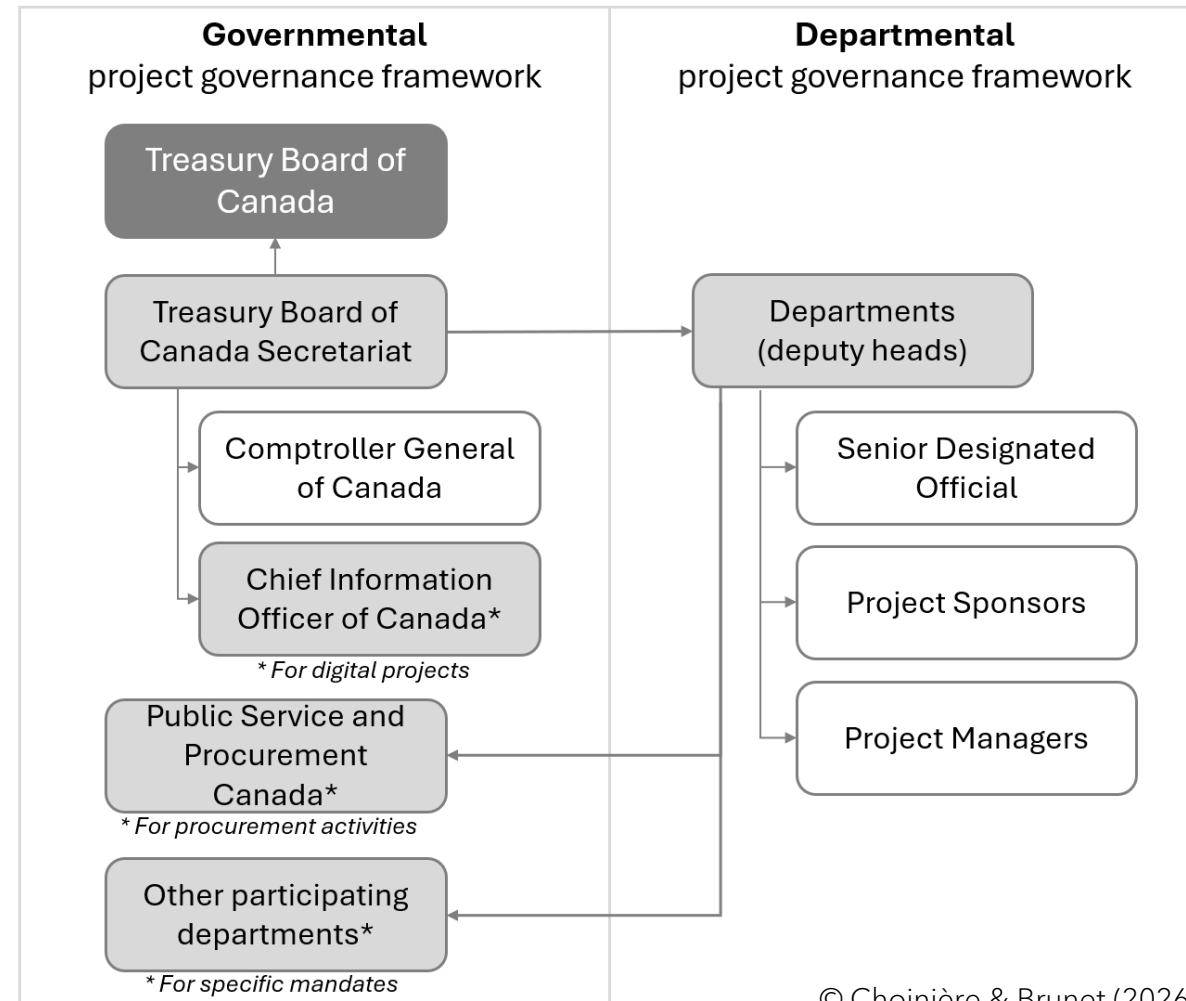
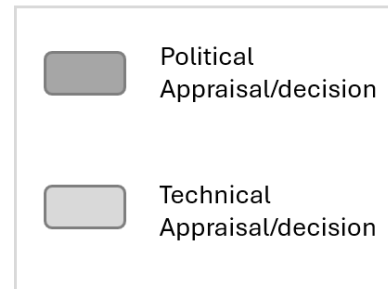
- The Canadian framework is examined alongside international governance models to identify both Canada's distinctive features of and shared governance patterns

Governance Trajectory - Major Iterations and Instruments

Iterations	I. Inception	II. Specialization	III. Expansion	IV. Consolidation	V. Institutionalization
<i>Period</i>	1978-1984	1984-1993	1993-2006	2006-2015	2015-present
<i>Government</i>	Liberal (P.E. Trudeau)	Progressive conservative (B. Mulroney)	Liberal (J. Chrétien & P. Martin)	Conservative (S. Harper)	Liberal (J. Trudeau)
<i>Main Value</i>	Standardization	Control	Effectiveness	Efficiency	Delivery
<i>Policy Instruments</i>	- Policy on the Management of Major Crown Projects - Memorandum to Cabinet	- Management & Control of Project (approvals & sanctions)	- Project Management Policy - Management of Crown Projects - Approval Policy	- Policy on the Management of Projects	- Policy on Planning & Management of Investments - Directive on the Management of Projects
<i>Technical Instruments</i>	- Guidelines - End-of-project review	- Project management tools - Training programs	- Project Profile & Risk Assessment (PPRA)	- Standard for Project Complexity & Risk - Standard for Organizational Project Management Capacity	- Guide to Project Gating - Programme management guidance
<i>Variation of Main Actors</i>	- Focused on departmental actors - Central oversight by Cabinet, Treasury Board & its Secretariat		- New committees - Expanded contracting authorities - Greater departmental involvement in specialized areas	- Discontinuation of selected advisory committees and agencies - Involvement of PPP Canada	- Creation of senior leadership roles - Involvement of specialized organizations (e.g., Comptroller General) - Withdrawal of PPP Canada

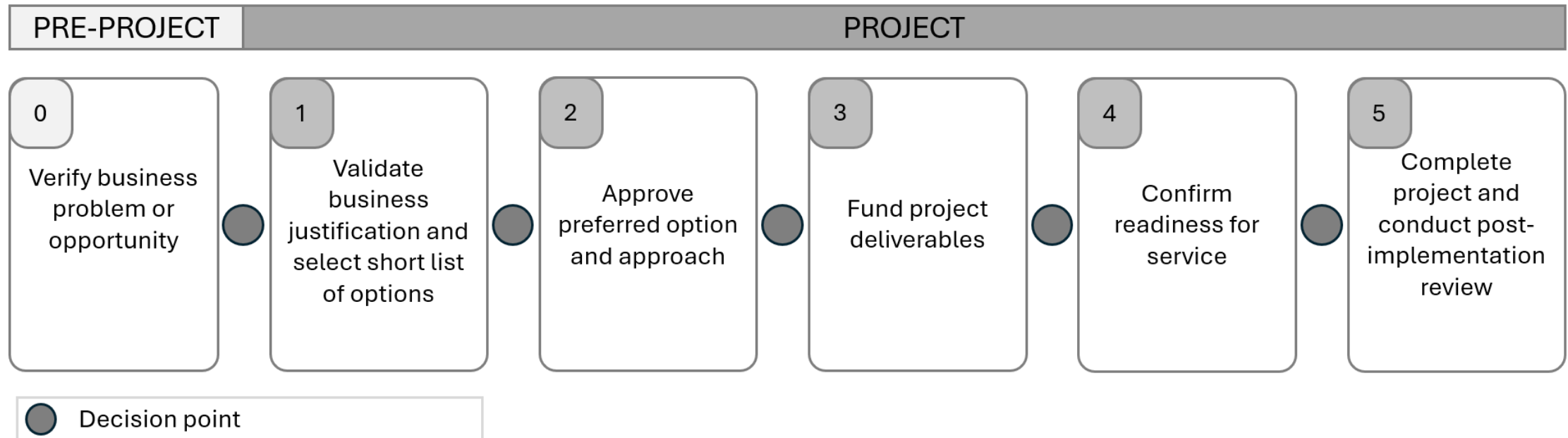
Institutionalization (Iteration V) – Institutions and Roles

- Several actors play key roles in political and technical appraisals
- Two complementary frameworks: governmental and departmental
- Actors involvement varies by project; however, specific central agencies (e.g., Treasury Board and its Secretariat) are engaged in every major project



Institutionalization (Iteration V) – Stage-Gate Model

- Updated stage-gate model (2021) to assess project viability and whether continued investment is justified
- A designated senior official accountable for gate decisions; however, consultation is required
- Possible gate decisions: continue without conditions; impose new conditions before the next gate; resolve outstanding issues before proceeding; terminate the project



The Major Projects Office: A New Institution?

A New Development Under the Carney Administration (August 2025)

Mission

- « Deliver nation-building projects faster to drive sustainable economic growth, strengthen national unity, and put Canada on a path to long-term economic prosperity»

Three-part Mandate

- Work with strategic partners (project proponents, Indigenous People, investors & governments)
- Identify and advance nation-building projects through the Building Canada Act
- Provide project proponents with a single-window service for federal regulatory processes

18 projects and 9 transformative strategies

- Projects across Energy, Industrial, Mining, and Transportation sectors
- Transformative strategies are « early-stage initiatives specific to a region or sector » (e.g., Alto High-Speed Rail)

(Government of Canada, 2026)

Discussion - Canada

- Evolution of Canada's federal governance framework provides a lens for understanding where policy originates, how it evolves over time, and why
- Governance framework has evolved from administrative control to broader public and economic value objectives
- Successive institutional layers have strengthened governance while increasing policy complexity
- Power asymmetries among actors continue to shape decision-making
- Canada follows many international governance patterns, while standing out as an early adopter of a formal framework (1978)



Contrecœur Container Terminal Project
(Government of Canada, 2026)

International Perspective

- Based on a book edited by V. Zerjav, M. Welde & G.H Volden
- Comparative analysis of governance frameworks for major public projects
- Covers 10 national and provincial governments: including Canada, Quebec, Norway, the UK, the Netherlands, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, the United States, and Australia—as well as the European Union and the World Bank
- Most countries have adopted formal governance frameworks supported by stage-gate models
- Most frameworks were introduced between 2000–2010, whereas Canada stands out as an early adopter, having established its first federal framework in 1978



Zerjav, Welde, Volden (2026)
Brunet, Choinière & Zerjav (2026)

International Perspective

Country	Established	Initial Purpose	Evolution	Key components
Canada	1978	Focus on efficiency/economy	Value for money and accountability	Stage-gate, internal QA, formal roles
Québec	2008	Improved tactical project success	Improved tactical project success	Stage-gate, QA
Denmark	2007	Improved cost control (Transport)	Building construction projects. Model for IT projects introduced in 2011	Stage-gate, external QA
Ireland	2021	Economic appraisal	risk management, assurance, and streamlined approval processes	Stage-gate, external QA, formal roles, portfolio management
Netherlands	2000	Broad participation, commitment, & legitimacy of decisions	More competition between transport modes	Stage-gate model, stakeholder representation, portfolio management
United Kingdom	2000	Improve project success and accountability	strategic project success. Several reorganizations of the central unit responsible for the scheme	Stage-gate, QA, formal roles, portfolio management

Discussion – International Perspective

Common benefits across country cases

- Improved quality of decision-making
- Streamlined key processes
- Improved cost control (though challenges remain)
- Greater discipline in political decision-making (however, tensions between politics and rational planning persist)

Lessons for governments

- Conduct rigorous project appraisal before political commitment
- Use independent quality assurance business cases, cost estimates and rationales (instead of relying solely on internal assessments)
- Strengthen accountability and institutional learning throughout project lifecycle
- Engage local stakeholders early to prevent conflict and improve solutions

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