



CPAC has partnered with the Royal Canadian Geographical Society to produce a set of giant floor maps similar to the one above. CPAC's Route 338 map will tour schools across the country, helping students learn about our democracy. *Photo: Troye Fleece/Canadian Geographic*

## CPAC at 25: The Channel of Record

Catherine Cano

*For the past quarter-century, Canada's Cable Public Affairs Channel has brought the daily workings of Canadian democracy first into the living rooms, then onto the desktops and handhelds of viewers across the country. While CPAC's role in Ottawa and provincial capitals as the daily platform for the proceedings of the House of Commons is indispensable, CPAC President Catherine Cano writes that its national footprint is much bigger than question period.*

**I**t is the middle of a beautiful March day in Ottawa. The sun is out, the House of Commons is sitting, CPAC's crews have been at work since 7 or 8 o'clock planning the editorial content for the day for our TV, web and social media channels. Coffees in hand, my team and I are sitting in silence in our board room, looking at a blank page on a giant screen. On the other side of the table, the team from the Royal Canadian Geographical Society looks at us with a smile. Chris, the cartographer breaks the silence: "So, tell me more about this Route 338 microsite you are developing..."

I was born in beautiful Chicoutimi, Quebec—now Saguenay, an area known as the “*berceau indépendantiste*”. My parents thought me to be curious and at 10 years old, I was allowed to watch the late-night news. At that age, and throughout my teenage years, I had a certain understanding of Canada but to be totally honest, my country was more of an abstract concept. It was difficult to relate or feel really connected to what we called “*le Canada anglais*”. I did not even speak the language, let alone understand its cultural references until I was fortunate enough to have two incredible experiences: At 16, I was selected to participate in the *Forum for Young Canadians*, where I would get to spend a week in Ottawa learning about our democratic institutions. And three years later, I was selected to be part of the Page program in the House of Commons.

I was fortunate enough to have great opportunities like these, which both increased my interest in our democracy and inspired me to learn more about how it works. What better way to gain a comprehensive understanding of Canada’s political culture than to be immersed in it at such a young age.

If these experiences taught me anything, it’s that for democracy to be inclusive, it must be accessible.

**D**emocracies have always been fragile. But the last few years have taught us that this isn’t just true of emerging democracies in faraway places, but also mature democracies closer to home, including Canada. The disconnect between politicians and a public fed up with the elite has grown deeper in an era of mistrust. We live in a world of confusion between real and fake news, where the public is disengaged from the media. The impact of this reality can only be worrisome as ill-informed masses put democracies at risk.

I strongly believe that the earlier we study and learn about our democ-

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racy, the better our chance to have a society that is curious, knowledgeable and engaged. The more citizens appreciate how important it is to know the issues, comprehend the impact of policy decisions on day-to-day life, and understand the role and work of their representatives and the accountability that goes with it, the better chance they will participate in the process. Unfortunately, politics is seen as partisan and not surprisingly, there is more demand for transparency.

That’s why, in the current geopolitical climate, I believe that access to an objective source like CPAC is more important than ever.

While Canada is celebrating its 150th, CPAC turns 25 this year. For a quarter century, it has provided the most comprehensive and balanced coverage of Parliament, politics and public affairs. It has chronicled the elections that set the country’s direction. It has covered the conventions that produce our leaders-in-waiting. It has explored the debates that reflect our values. It has carried the commissions and inquiries that enforce those values. And every day, CPAC shines a light on the institutions that form the backbone of Canadian democracy.

We like to think of CPAC as your unobstructed window on Canada’s democratic process, your eyes and ears on the ground. It’s a unique role we take very seriously.

CPAC was created to allow Canadians to observe their democracy in action, born out of a desire to ensure that Canadians from coast to coast to coast could access the work of Parliament.

**B**ut it emerged from humble beginnings. Canada was one of the first countries in the world to televise live parliamentary proceedings, starting with coverage of Queen Elizabeth’s Speech from the Throne in October 1977. Initially, the national public broadcaster provided parliamentary broadcasts. In those days, the coverage was quite rudimentary, with footage from the House when it was convened and bulletin board-style announcements after hours. In the early 1990s, when the costs of providing this service became unsustainable, the CBC discontinued its involvement.

In 1992, a consortium of 27 privately-owned cable companies stepped to the plate, establishing the Cable Parliamentary Channel, a non-partisan, non-profit, bilingual, independent corporation that would give Canadians free and timely access to the workings of Parliament. The channel was subsequently renamed CPAC and is now owned by six cable companies—Rogers, Shaw, Videotron, Cogeco, Access and Eastlink—who have invested more than \$50 million to provide this important service.

Today, Canadians count on us not only for coverage of House of Commons proceedings and Parliamentary committees, but also for our coverage of royal commissions, inquiries and Supreme Court hearings. We also produce up to 30 hours a week of original content, including daily political roundup and analysis, interviews, conferences, public debates and foreign affairs.

In the quarter-century since our founding, we have covered eight federal elections, six prime ministers, 40 political conventions and tens of



thousands of hours of Parliamentary proceedings and committees. And we've done it all in CPAC's signature long-form style.

Along the way, we've been a leader in the digital media space, too. We were the first Canadian network to stream our programming live 24/7, and we've built an extensive digital archive with more than 30,000 hours of content, available for free, on-demand. We also foster an active social media community which becomes seemingly more and more engaged every year.

No matter the platform, CPAC has always been—and always will be—committed to providing unfiltered coverage of politics and public affairs. For 25 years, CPAC has shone a light on the path of that democracy—the twists, the turns, the delays and the breakthroughs—it is the complete story, without spin, so Canadians can make up their own minds.

But it's looking to the next 25 years that excites me the most. CPAC is a shimmering jewel providing independent, balanced and unbiased content. It's a very special media organization with a very unique mission to

advance Canadian democracy. There is not a day when the team and I do not appreciate how noble and important this cause is.

The CPAC Route 338 adventure started 10 months ago with a simple idea: How can we contribute more actively to Canadians' understanding of their democracy? Can we become an even better partner for educators, other organizations with like-minded missions, and the media to ensure that democratic literacy and media literacy are front and centre?

This fall, the vision becomes a reality and students and teachers alike will be able to find a wealth of information on Canada's 338 ridings. This microsite is a virtual road trip aimed at helping students better understand the diversities and particularities of our political system. This site will also host in-depth sections on the issues and the institutions.

We've also partnered with the Royal Canadian Geographical Society—that's where Chris and his talented colleagues came into the picture—to produce a series of giant floor maps and develop lesson plans themed

around Canadian democracy. These giant floor maps will tour schools across the country, helping educators make democratic literacy an interactive classroom experience.

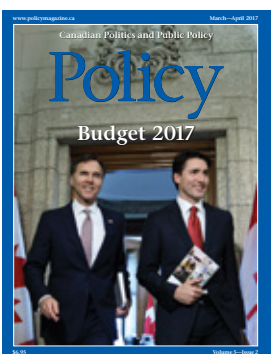
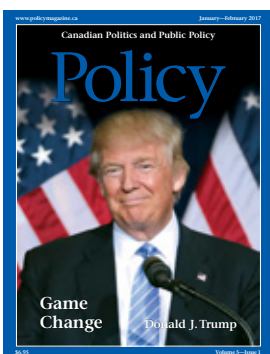
Through these educational initiatives, the team at CPAC is reaching out to the next generation to pique their political interests. Our goal: To help them understand Canada's rich political history, how Parliament works and the importance of political participation.

Democracy shouldn't exist behind a curtain. Democracy *can't* exist behind a curtain. For a quarter century, CPAC has held the curtain open, inviting Canadians to observe and engage with the institutions and the people that define their country. And now, we are doubling our efforts to allow more Canadians access via Route 338. This is our legacy, CPAC's legacy for future generations and ultimately, all Canadians. **P**

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# Policy

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