National Themes and Good Policy Conversations

Dr. Jeff Collins of the Palmer Institute for Canadian Leadership on why the Institute exists, what Canadians are saying about sovereignty, and how to turn conversations into action.

Dr. Jeff Collins

Inaugural Director, Palmer Institute for Canadian Leadership

Adapted from an interview with Dr. Jeff Collins, inaugural Director of the Palmer Institute for Canadian Leadership, by Bianca McGregor, CEO of the Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce, at Speakers Corner at Confederation Court Mall on October 21, 2026. Jeff also published his own longer version of this conversation: Sovereignty, Confederation, and Getting Things Done

Why was the Palmer Institute created, and what gap does it fill?

There are two answers, one historical and one about the times we are in. The Confederation Centre opened in 1964, on the hundredth anniversary of the Charlottetown Conference, with three pillars: the theatre, the art gallery and the public library. The library has since moved to a new location across the street. When the Centre asked what could fill that gap, people across Canada kept saying the same thing: this is the birthplace of Confederation, so lean into your history and do something on Canadian leadership.

The second answer is the present. There is clearly a thirst for public policy leadership in the province, the region and the country, yet few institutions do this work, and almost none on the East Coast. A few in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto do it as part of broader programming. For us it is the sole focus.

Why sovereignty as your first-year theme?

It is both timely and enduring. Canada would not exist without a conversation about sovereignty. People met here in 1864 partly out of fear of American annexation. Today we face tariffs and annexation rhetoric, and national unity is front and centre again, with the Parti Québécois back in power and committed to another referendum and Alberta having just gone through one.

At the Palmer Institute we have intentionally not defined sovereignty. At each convening we unpack what it means with the people in the room, and in the end we will produce an analysis of the many dimensions of Canadian sovereignty in 2026.

What are you hearing so far?

Our first event was in Calgary. We brought together nine leaders from public service, business, journalism and the military, including two former premiers, CEOs, the head of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and a former commander of Canadian Special Forces. We gave each ten minutes and asked for one idea that would make the country stronger. Two things stood out. First, Canadians do not know each other as well as we think, and our misconceptions are partly a function of geography; the distance from Charlottetown to Calgary is like Paris to

Uzbekistan. Second, the founders also wanted one economic union, and we have only half built it. Interprovincial regulations have accumulated over 160 years, and unwinding them is the next national objective.

What does the Symons Medal add to the conversation?

The Medal, begun in 2004, was the first concrete step toward the civic conversation we now carry year-round. It is named for Tom Symons, a passionate Ontarian who loved Prince Edward Island and founded Trent University, which launched the country's first Canadian Studies and Indigenous Studies programs. He believed Charlottetown was the place for an annual conversation with a leader from Canadian life about the state of the country. This year's lecture was given by the Honourable Rosalie Silberman Abella, a former Supreme Court justice born to Holocaust survivors, who delivered a moving and hopeful message.

What is next?

Our next event is in January, with others we have not yet announced. One we are partnering on with the Art Gallery is called Seeing Sovereignty. A Quebec artist spent several months deployed with the Canadian military in the Arctic, and the exhibition is called Deployment. We will use that art to bring business people, military personnel and Inuit leaders together to discuss the challenges and possibilities of northern sovereignty and of doing business in the North.

Why do good policy ideas stall?

I would sum it up as two Ps: personalities and process. On personalities, senior ranks of the public service learn to be risk-averse because that is how you survive, and when things go wrong, heads are expected to roll. In a crisis such as COVID, the same institutions can pivot at lightning speed. On process, when something goes wrong the default is to add more process, more sign-offs and more eyes on it. Gatekeepers and veto players accumulate, both official and unofficial. One defence of process is that new governments sometimes bypass the public service, and a good idea then blows up because it skipped the vetting.

How much do you love your job?

I love it. It combines my two passions, public service and public policy, and teaching it. I can speak publicly and convene people with different perspectives in a room, which I really enjoy.

If the Atlantic provinces acted more like one economy, where would cooperation matter most?

In a previous life I was PEI's internal trade representative, and the mechanisms already exist. The Canadian Free Trade Agreement has a regulatory reconciliation table with annual work plans listing the barriers to tackle. The biggest obstacles are political leadership and a willingness to let competitors in. I have heard a business say it would love to sell its product into another province but also wants protection from competition here. That is not free trade. It is a cultural shift we need in Atlantic Canada, where there are two degrees of separation between government and business. It means moving beyond the village mindset to think regionally and nationally, which can also create partnerships that make us a larger player.

How can the Chamber and its members support the Institute's work?

We have a national mandate, but we are on the Island, and the Confederation Centre's new strategic plan has a regional lens. I would love to partner on a conversation about the fiscal state of PEI and Atlantic Canada: what sacrifices we make collectively, since we all pay taxes and consume government services. Public opinion polling shows Islanders rank this alongside health care as their top issue.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

We are open to ideas, pitches and topics people want to hear about. We are a two-person institute, so any helpful ideas are valued.

LEARN MORE

- Sovereignty, Confederation, and Getting Things Done (Charlottetown Dispatch)

- Palmer Institute for Canadian Leadership
- Symons Medal

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