

Nation-Building Narratives: AI Infrastructure in Canada

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Introduction

In June 2025, Prime Minister Mark Carney unveiled a federal plan to accelerate Canada's artificial-intelligence (AI) infrastructure, presenting it as crucial to national prosperity, productivity, and sovereignty (Office of the Prime Minister, 2025). Canada's early lead in AI research, bolstered by time-limited Trudeau-era funding, had never translated into large-scale infrastructure. Carney's mandate, therefore, signalled a decisive policy turn, framing AI infrastructure as a nation-building priority (Liberal Party of Canada, 2025).

This essay argues that the new urgency stems less from technical needs or geopolitical rivalry than from carefully crafted policy narratives that legitimize and expedite federal action. Drawing on the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), it asks: **How are policy narratives being used to secure rapid agenda-setting for AI infrastructure in Canada, and what does the NPF reveal about their persuasive power?** I argue that the Carney government deploys stories that portray AI infrastructure as a foundational public good, rally public support, justify speed and shrink the space for opposition. The NPF supplies the analytical tools to dissect these stories and trace their influence on the agenda-setting stage of the policy process. The essay unfolds in five sections: a background on Canada's AI infrastructure; a concise overview of the NPF and its link to agenda-setting; the key policy actors involved; an NPF-based analysis of the narrative elements and strategies that are used; and a conclusion on the persuasive power of these narratives and how they steer the national political agenda.

Background: AI Infrastructure in Canada

Canada hosts three internationally recognized AI research hubs: Mila in Montreal, the Vector Institute in Toronto and Amii in Edmonton. These centres have given the country a reputation for innovative and ethical AI leadership (CIFAR, 2025). Yet Canada's position on the Global AI Index slipped from fourth in 2021 to eighth in 2024, signalling a widening competitiveness gap (Deloitte, 2025). The 2025 election marked a turning point when Prime Minister Mark Carney made AI infrastructure a central part of his mandate, citing pressure from the United States, China, and the European Union (Office of the Prime Minister, 2025). The federal plan combines regulatory reform with distributive measures, including significant public investment in data centers and cloud capacity, incentives for AI adoption and commercialization, and a new Office of Digital Transformation to coordinate procurement (Liberal Party of Canada, 2025). Implementation relies heavily on provincial cooperation, especially in British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec, which offer abundant renewable power, cool climates that reduce cooling costs, and mature digital ecosystems (Climate Institute, 2025). To explain how AI infrastructure rose onto Canada's political agenda, the following section introduces the Narrative Policy Framework, a toolkit for dissecting policy stories and understanding their impact.

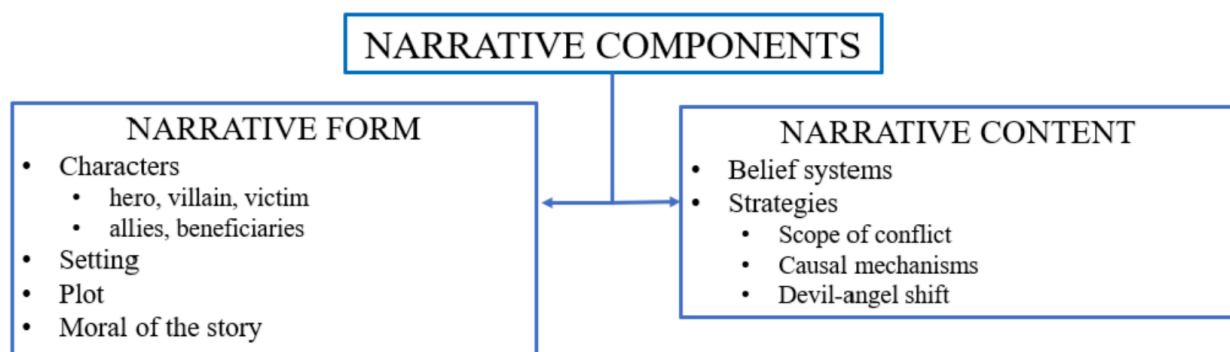
Narrative Policy Framework

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) emerged from the work of Jones and McBeth (2010), who argued that stories, long acknowledged as influential in politics, deserve the same empirical treatment as more established policy-process theories. At its core, the NPF provides a method for transforming the “soft” idea that narratives matter into testable propositions about how they influence agendas and outcomes (Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan, 2022). The framework rests on five foundational assumptions:

1. **Social construction of realities:** policy follows perception; decision makers act on shared meanings rather than on objective facts alone.
2. **Bounded relativity:** interpretations vary, yet identities, beliefs and strategic needs pattern the range of variation.
3. **Narrative generalisability:** every policy story can be decomposed into setting, characters, plot and moral, enabling systematic analysis across issues.
4. **Three interacting levels:** narratives operate simultaneously at micro (individual), meso (coalition) and macro (cultural–institutional) levels.
5. **Homo narrans:** humans process information and make choices primarily through narrative form or stories.

As listed below in Figure 1, the NPF separates narrative form (setting, characters, plot, and moral) from narrative content (issue-specific belief systems and narrative strategies such as the devil–angel shift, scope-of-conflict cues and causal mechanisms). Because these elements can be analyzed in speeches, documents and media texts, researchers can trace which stories dominate, whose voices are marginalized and how narrative configurations change over time. Recent work demonstrates that the NPF framework remains “good enough to be relevant” even in highly contentious contexts, as it couples clear concepts with testable propositions (Jones and McBeth, 2020).

Figure 1 – Narrative Components (Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan, 2022)



Agenda-setting research examines why some issues reach decision-makers while others fade (Lasswell 1956; Birkland 1998). The NPF extends these models by demonstrating how actors create urgency, heroism, and moral stakes that elevate a topic from the informal agenda to a formal institutional choice. By identifying which narrative elements the Carney government amplifies or mutes, the framework explains how its nation-building story has eclipsed competing frames and, crucially, it supplies the evidence needed to answer this essay's research question about how persuasive narratives propel AI infrastructure onto Canada's policy agenda.

Key Actors

Canada's push for national AI infrastructure is led by a coalition of federal leaders, scientific institutions, and technology firms, each advancing a complementary narrative, while Indigenous, environmental, and civil-society groups foreground counter-narratives that contest the policy's speed and scope. Prime Minister Mark Carney serves as the chief policy entrepreneur, promoting AI infrastructure as a nation-building investment in productivity, sovereignty, and security (Office of the Prime Minister, 2025). Core departments – Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, the Treasury Board Secretariat, Shared Services Canada and Public Services and Procurement Canada – echo this storyline in their mandates and statements on digital transformation (ISED, 2025). Research hubs CIFAR, Mila, Vector and Amii supply scientific legitimacy and invoke Canada's record of responsible AI (Rutka 2024). Major firms, such as Microsoft, Amazon, and Google, strengthen the narrative by announcing partnerships with the federal government, reinforcing the idea that Canada must scale its AI infrastructure or risk falling behind (Microsoft News Centre Canada, 2024; Strathern, 2021).

At the same time, Indigenous and environmental organizations have raised important critiques that challenge the dominant narrative of AI infrastructure as a purely progressive and inevitable national project. The Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation in Alberta has publicly opposed the proposed Wonder Valley data centre, citing a lack of consultation, violations of Treaty 8, and risks to local waterways and traplines (Rubayita, 2025). Nationally, the Assembly of First Nations has expressed alarm at the absence of Indigenous engagement in the development of federal AI legislation, including Bill C-27, arguing that the expansion of AI risks violating Indigenous data sovereignty and digital self-determination (Yun-Pu Tu, 2025). Environmental organizations have also raised concerns about the energy intensity, carbon emissions, and water demands of AI infrastructure (Van Der Ven, 2025; Lorinc, 2024). Some critics argue that large-scale data centres could undermine Canada's climate goals, particularly when powered by fossil fuels, and may compete with local communities for water and electricity (Lee, 2025; Valdez, Tveit and Garzon, 2025). Collectively, these critiques point to a policy landscape where corporate and state interests dominate, while environmental and Indigenous perspectives are minimized or excluded.

Applying the NPF to Canada’s AI Infrastructure Agenda

The NPF shows that AI infrastructure reached Cabinet priority not solely through technical evidence, but through a tightly scripted story. Examining each narrative element clarifies how urgency was manufactured and obstacles minimized.

Narrative Form

Heroes, Villains and Victims

Prime Minister Mark Carney is cast as the policy entrepreneur who can convert research strength into nation-building infrastructure (Cummings 2025). Federal science agencies, such as Mila, Vector, and Amii, play supporting “hero” roles, supplying expert legitimacy, while multinationals like Microsoft and Amazon appear as willing partners (ISED, 2025). The “villains” are foreign competitors that threaten Canada’s technological sovereignty and domestic regulations that slow project approvals (Labmentillo 2024). Victims are Canadian innovators and, implicitly, future generations who will inherit decline if action stalls (Scott 2024). This clear hero–villain cast simplifies the issue and channels public sympathy toward swift action.

Setting

Narratives locate Canada in a tightening global race for AI supremacy, arguing that nations now compete on sovereign compute capacity (Cummings 2025). Economic transition heightens the stakes: AI is depicted as the engine that will reshape jobs, industries and exports. The physical context reinforces the feasibility and urgency, highlighting the benefits of renewable hydro power in British Columbia and Québec, as well as the advantages of cold climates in reducing cooling costs in data centres (Climate Institute, 2025).

Plot

The storyline transitions from past leadership to present peril, culminating in a promised renewal. Once an AI pioneer, Canada is “sliding” down global rankings; only a rapid two-billion-dollar Sovereign Compute Strategy can restore its standing (ISED, 2025). Each month of delay widens the gap with the United States and China (EP&T 2025). This race-against-time structure converts policy preference into an emergency.

Moral

The narrative’s lesson is explicit: build domestic AI infrastructure now or lose economic autonomy later. Sovereign infrastructure is portrayed as a prerequisite for security, prosperity and ethical leadership (ISED, 2025; Cummings, 2025; Rutka, 2024). Linking the policy to national identity and future well-being transforms a technical expenditure into a civic duty, closing the space for incremental or precautionary alternatives.

Narrative Content

Belief systems

The dominant narrative is based on four interconnected beliefs. First, technological progress is presumed to drive prosperity; Deloitte (2025) forecasts AI could lift GDP by five to eight percent, framing compute capacity as a growth engine. Second, technological self-sufficiency is treated as a security imperative, with ISED (2025) warning that reliance on foreign clouds poses a threat to economic independence. Third, Canadian actors claim a special duty and capability to develop “responsible AI” grounded in long-standing research values (CIFAR 2025). Fourth, geography is often cast as destiny: abundant clean power and cool climates are said to give provinces like Alberta and Québec a natural advantage, a view embedded in Alberta’s AI Data Centres Strategy (Government of Alberta, 2025). These beliefs reinforce the policy case for rapid, large-scale infrastructure investment.

Strategies

Agenda builders rely on three intertwined narrative techniques to keep AI infrastructure at the top of the federal agenda. First, they manipulate scope: official briefs cast compute capacity as essential to every policy domain—health, clean energy, advanced manufacturing—thereby enlarging the issue to “all Canadians” (ISED, 2025; Accenture and CIFAR 2020). When objections arise, the frame contracts to pragmatic fixes such as the AI Compute Access Fund, shifting debate from whether to invest to how to implement (ISED, 2025). Second, they promote a linear causal chain in which global rivalry triggers infrastructure spending that secures technological sovereignty; Deloitte has warned that delay will lead to a “permanent disadvantage,” while Microsoft’s five hundred million Québec data-centre pledge is cited as proof that the federal strategy “mobilises private capital” (Deloitte 2025; Microsoft 2023). Third, they employ the devil and angel shift: research institutes like CIFAR, Mila, Vector and Amii are portrayed as ethical angels assuring “responsible AI,” whereas critics are framed as impediments to national progress. Environmental impacts are framed as solvable engineering details, and Indigenous objections, such as those from Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, receive very little narrative space. Counter-coalitions invert the script, linking data centres to treaty breaches and climate targets, yet their stories struggle to displace the tightly aligned and well-publicized government, industry and research dominant narrative.

Conclusion

The Narrative Policy Framework reveals that Canada’s AI infrastructure drive is less a response to technical inevitability than to a powerful story. Federal leaders, research institutes and cloud giants present AI infrastructure as the stage of a global race, crown Prime Minister Carney and scientific partners as heroic guardians of prosperity, and warn that hesitation will doom the country to decline. Scope is widened to promise gains for “all Canadians,” then narrowed to technical fixes

when criticism appears; a linear causal chain links investment to sovereignty; and the angel–devil strategy elevates supportive experts while casting environmental and Indigenous critics as obstacles. Placing this storyline under the NPF microscope also explains *why* it persuades. It is narratively coherent, repeated almost verbatim across speeches, budgets and press releases, which makes it memorable. It maximises emotional “transportation,” personalising threats and benefits so audiences adopt the plot as their own. By linking economic growth, national security, and ethical values in one story, the narrative attracts many supporters while pushing critics to the margins. Most powerfully, it deploys the very strategies the NPF identifies as high-leverage: scope manipulation, simple causality and the angel–devil shift, thereby converting complexity into urgent civic duty. The result is an agenda that feels inevitable and virtuous, despite unresolved questions about land rights, climate impacts and democratic oversight. Recognising these narrative mechanics will be essential for those seeking to widen debate as Canada moves from agenda setting to implementation, ensuring that nation-building ambitions are balanced with environmental stewardship and Indigenous sovereignty.

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