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# CANADIAN ICONS

CBC/Radio-Canada, a trusted Canadian symbol during a unique moment in our history:  
Focus group research findings

Trish Hennessy



CANADIAN CENTRE  
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES  
CENTRE CANADIEN  
de POLITIQUES ALTERNATIVES

## **Canadian icons**

CBC/Radio-Canada, a trusted Canadian symbol during a unique moment in our history: Focus group research findings

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About this project **3**

Key findings **4**

Perspectives on defunding the CBC **6**

Case against defunding **7**

Top six messages in defence of the CBC/Radio-Canada **8**

Note: A complicated information environment **9**

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## About this project

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) commissioned Environics Research to conduct a series of focus group discussions with Canadians to better understand their perceptions of public service broadcasting in general, and CBC/Radio-Canada in specific. These interviews were conducted in the context of “defund the CBC” political slogans.

Between February 13-20, 2025, Environics conducted eight online focus groups, with participants from B.C., the Prairies, Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada. Five focus groups were conducted in English; three were conducted in French with francophone Quebeckers and non-Quebec francophones in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and New Brunswick. Focus group participants ranged in age from 18+, represented Canada’s diversity, and a representative sample of men, women, and gender-diverse people. All participants listen or watch the CBC/Radio-Canada at least occasionally.

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## Key findings

It wasn't planned this way, but we happened to conduct our focus group research during a unique moment in Canadian history: U.S. President Donald Trump's threat of tariffs, economic warfare, and annexing Canada as a "51<sup>st</sup> state" has heightened Canadians' sense of patriotic pride. The CBC/Radio-Canada readily found its way into this expression of pride. For most participants, the CBC/Radio-Canada was seen as a national icon. At a time when we as a country feel vulnerable and threatened by the U.S., participants valued the CBC-Radio Canada as a reflection of who we are and believe that it's an institution worth keeping.

In short, there is a lot of love for the CBC/Radio-Canada. The CBC/Radio Canada is a "constant companion" for many of the focus group participants.

"We had a railway 150 years ago to tie Canada together," said one focus group participant. "CBC is one of those things that ties Canada together."

"If you wanted to make Canada the 51<sup>st</sup> state, the first thing you'd have to do is destroy our cultural identity," said another, citing the CBC as being instrumental to our identity.

"It's a part of our heritage," said another. "It's been there forever and it brought so many important events in our lives."

If the CBC gets defunded, "might as well burn my books," said another.

Hockey Night in Canada. The Beachcombers. Alan Maitland on the radio telling The Shepherd story at Christmas time. Kim's Convenience. Reservation Dogs. Schitt's Creek. Radio in Inuvik. CBC Gem podcasts and documentaries. This is the background to so many Canadians' lives. It also taps into feelings of nostalgia for older people who associate the CBC with programming from their youth, such as The Beachcombers, Mr. Dressup, and The Friendly Giant.

"The content CBC has made in the last five years has been some of the best content," said one younger participant. "Amazing podcasts that people share around the world because it's so incredible. Content you won't get anywhere else. Why would you want to kill the soul of Canadian media?"

"It would be devastating to our country and to the ability to have quality content that is representative of lots of diverse voices and stories from small areas all over the country," said another.

Aside from enjoying the content, focus group participants saw the CBC/Radio-Canada as an important source of unity.

"I believe it's essential," said another younger participant. "It's cool to see older people's views on this. Its role should be to unite the country:"

"It's the one thing that everyone has access to," said another participant. "It's the keeper of Canadian culture. It unites us."

Many focus group participants also saw the CBC/Radio-Canada as a pillar of democracy and equity.

"It's a watchdog and guardian of our democratic rights," said one.

"It connects the entire country and people who don't normally have access get it," said another.

"Misinformation/disinformation is already a problem in society," said one. "[Without the CBC it] would spread more rapidly because there's no way to verify that information against an unbiased source."

Many participants also appreciated CBC coverage of Indigenous Peoples' stories and issues, as well as stories of people who never get airtime on private networks. They also appreciated how the CBC reflects the diversity of Canadian culture, arts, and music.

Canada is in a cultural moment where Canadians are feeling more patriotic, nationalistic, and vulnerable to external threats by the U.S. A political party that promises to defund the CBC could very well be viewed as unpatriotic and create a backlash.

The CBC/Radio-Canada are trusted sources of news. Most participants understood the role of the public broadcaster to be at "arm's length" to the government, to provide service to underserved communities, to provide unbiased news coverage across the country, and to ensure Canadians of all backgrounds see themselves reflected back to them.

Profit motive isn't a factor, and many participants worried a Canada without the CBC would lead to billionaire-backed media outlets with a slanted point of view that could feed disinformation. In short, they worry what's happening in the U.S. could happen here. Quebec participants talked about how all news would come from Peladeau and Desmarais if it wasn't for Radio-Canada.

"I trust what I hear from CBC news more than anyone else," said one participant. "They're in it for a different reason."

"Its #1 priority is to serve the people rather than to serve profits."

"If CBC fell apart, we would lose Canada. It holds our nation together."

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## Perspectives on defunding the CBC

Most participants had heard of the Conservative party's intention to defund the CBC. Some don't believe it will ever come to pass. Some believe it's being said to "rile up their base." Many felt that Poilievre's motive for promising this was not to save money but rather to try to control the information Canadians get. Many suspected that the Conservatives want to eliminate media that they feel is not favourable enough to them and replace it with American-style misinformation.

Overall, participants seemed to believe that the CBC presents mostly unbiased news and adheres to strong journalistic standards. They responded well to findings that CBC is the most watched/listened to and most trusted in Canada. A number of them worry about more U.S.-style news infiltrating Canadian news networks—especially if the CBC is defunded.

"I think we just have to watch what's happening in the states and the war on information and data," said one participant. "The war on information sharing is to allow you to control the narrative. If we don't hear about inequities then it doesn't happen. It's to control the narrative and to silence your critics."

Participants seemed to see through the Conservatives' promise to only cut the English CBC, not Radio Canada. Participants also saw this splintering of English-French programming as unfair and inequitable. There is a strong sense that English and French should get equal treatment and that defunding English CBC would divide Canadians. Even francophone participants reacted negatively to this proposal. They don't want to feed into resentments in English Canada that Quebec gets everything. Overall, they see a defund the CBC campaign as cynical politics—especially when pitted against Radio-Canada.

"If you don't win in Quebec, you're not winning Canada."

Once participants were informed that many CBC and Radio Canada studios share infrastructure, they quickly grasped that you could not cut one without harming the other. Some noted that there are also bilingual journalists who work in both languages who would be affected.

"Let's hope that never happens," said one.

"[The CBC is] very unifying across Canada," said another. "It does give us a bit of identity too. A loss of that part of our identity, a loss of coverage, equitable coverage for different areas and different groups of people...scary."

"You do need a voice for the smaller towns," said one. "Everyone deserves a voice."

Some participants said the CBC sets the standard for unbiased journalism in Canada and worry about a “rapid deterioration” of standards in other news outlets if the CBC were to be defunded.

“People count on CBC. The trust. It would be horrible.”

Especially given the heightened tensions between Canada and the U.S., it could backfire on the Conservatives.

“I was hoping to vote for the guy (Poilievre), now I don’t know,” said one participant. “We can’t stop funding the CBC. It played a huge role in integrating my dad into Canada when he came here after WWII.”

“Pierre is owned by billionaires,” said another. “He wants [the CBC] out so there’s more competition and more paid media influence and I disagree with that.”

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## Case against defunding

We tested the following:

*Here are some arguments some people have made about why the CBC should continue to be funded as opposed to being defunded. What is your reaction to these?*

*a. When it comes to public broadcasting, Canada is falling behind. Compared to 18 similar countries around the world, Canadian public broadcasting gets the fourth lowest amount of per capita government funding.*

*b. At a time when Donald Trump is threatening to make Canada the 51st state, we face the threat of tariffs and “big tech” such as Meta, X and Google are starting to monopolize our information sources, we need the CBC/Radio-Canada more than ever!*

*c. The money the federal government currently spends on funding public broadcasting represents only 0.12% (about one tenth of one percent) of all government spending in Canada. We should be investing more, not less, in the CBC and Radio Canada.*

*d. The CBC/Radio Canada remains the most watched, the most listened to, and the most trusted news source in Canada. Defunding the CBC is the wrong way to go.*

*e. Canada has lost 519 local news outlets (private and public) between 2008 and 2024. More and more communities are becoming what we call “news deserts” with very limited local news. With so many news outlets closing, our government needs to keep investing in public broadcasting.*

The majority of participants chose b: "At a time when Donald Trump is threatening to make Canada the 51st state, we face the threat of tariffs and "big tech" such as Meta, X and Google are starting to monopolize our information sources, we need the CBC/Radio-Canada more than ever!" This reflects our key findings, that national unity and pride in response to U.S. economic threats are making Canadians value something as uniquely Canadian as the CBC/Radio-Canada.

Participants also responded positively to the small amount of funding that public broadcasting represents, the trusted news source factoid, and the fact that Canada is losing news outlets. While "news deserts" is not a commonly known term, they understood the arguments that come with that term.

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## Top six messages in defence of the CBC/Radio-Canada

**1. We need the CBC now more than ever. In the face of U.S. tensions, the CBC/Radio-Canada should be a source of national unity and pride, reflecting the Canadian identity:** "It goes to the urgency in terms of not becoming what our neighbours are. It's really nerve wracking."

**2. Billionaire-owned media would hurt democracy and our sense of togetherness:** " It's all about who's footing the bill. If the news station is owned by a billionaire in Australia that's going to affect how issues are treated because everything goes through a filter or bias. I enjoy Canada has some kind of communal space that we all chip in to so hopefully we don't have to listen to something that's paid for by a billionaire."

**3. Everyone deserves access to the CBC-Radio Canada. Service in remote and rural communities is especially important to our own democracy:** "We risk losing a lot of relevant Canadian diversity and inclusion."

**4. Loss of media needs to be stemmed; CBC should play a role in reducing news deserts:** "Imagine a world where everyone has a version of the reality of Canada in their own head with no space, there's no public square. Why? So we could save 0.12% so they could get a tax break?"



**5. Defunding the CBC would take away jobs in communities that need local news:** “For me it’s the jobs, the artists (younger) already the job market is harder than usual. For the amount that’s spent by the government, it’s our taxes but it’s worth it.”

**6. The CBC/Radio-Canada represent value for money:** When you look at the total budget for public broadcasting, “it’s just a drop in the bucket.”

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## Note: A complicated information environment

Overall, participants were well aware of the CBC and Radio-Canada’s role in the Canadian news, education and entertainment universe. Some have been lifelong viewers/listeners of CBC/Radio-Canada. Those lifelong audience members are the most committed—it’s a part of their identity and value system. But most focus group participants don’t confine their listening/viewing to CBC/Radio-Canada. They list a range of news outlets, from CTV and Global to the BBC, CNN and some watch FOX news just to “get the other side.” They also consume news online: CBC Gem was frequently mentioned, but also places like Tik Tok and Facebook. Some are distrustful of social media sites such as Facebook for censoring Canadian news and using algorithms to push misinformation. Generally speaking, there was a generation gap between younger and older participants. They access CBC content in different ways and do not have the same nostalgic attachment to the CBC. Messaging aimed at a younger audience needs to be nuanced—they don’t have the same brand loyalty, overall, though they were influenced by stories from older participants about the value of the CBC.

As some focus group participants mentioned, gone are the days when Canadians had access to just two TV channels. There’s a lot of competition for attention. This complicated information environment made it difficult for some participants to imagine a CBC/Radio Canada with a broader mandate to produce even more Canadian content and to serve as a unifying lightning rod for Canadians. In other words, it’s ‘noisy’ out there and the role CBC originally played in unifying Canada, while valued, isn’t seen by all participants as possible in today’s world.

That said, the pressure from Trump and the U.S. made participants feel that now, more than ever, we do need media that is unifying, reflects Canadian values, and is unbiased.

This report is available free of charge at [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca). The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) is an independent policy research organization. This report has been subjected to peer review and meets the research standards of the centre. The opinions in this report, and any errors, are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CCPA or funders of the report.

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### **About the author**

Trish Hennessy is a senior strategist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA). She co-founded the CCPA's Growing Gap Project in 2006 and the CCPA's Ontario office in 2012.





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