

Canada's new leader faces Oval Office test after tough talk on Trump

Mark Carney, the new Canadian prime minister, rode to office with sharp rhetoric toward Washington. A meeting with Trump offers a chance to make inroads with the U.S. leader.

By Michael Birnbaum and Natalie Allison
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One week after leading Canada's Liberals to a come-from-behind victory by promising staunch resistance to President Donald Trump, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney will get his first chance to make good on that pledge in an Oval Office meeting Tuesday.

The meeting promised to be a test for the leader of the United States' northern neighbor, which Trump wants to turn into the 51st state — and for U.S. allies more generally who have struggled to manage the U.S. president's upending of relationships around the world. Canada, for generations, has staked its economy on integration with the United States. But against the backdrop of Trump's threats of annexation and import tariffs, Carney rose to power by declaring that era “over” and vowing to lead his country in a new direction.

Foreign leaders have struggled to handle their meetings with Trump, with whom a good relationship can be beneficial. Being too unyielding, as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was in February as he sought a fresh commitment of U.S. military aid, risks getting one kicked out of the White House. But too soft an approach can be ineffective or prompt blowback from constituents who bristle at Trump's approach to the world. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer tried wooing Trump with flattery and a letter from King Charles III in February but was still hit with tariffs weeks later.

“If Trump reverts to comments about a 51st state or tries to make a joke about ‘Governor Carney,’” said Fen Hampson, a professor of international affairs at Carleton University in Ottawa, “the public will say, ‘This meeting was a failure.’”

Carney isn't the only leader to seize power in recent weeks based on a backlash to Trump's policies. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese won reelection on Saturday after reviving his flagging Labor Party with a robust

defense of Australian interests in the face of U.S. tariffs. Tuesday's U.S.-Canada meeting will be a first indication whether that approach can deliver dividends to angry voters around the world.

Carney, who for seven years was the governor of the Bank of England, had a long career in finance before turning to politics. That may draw some respect from Trump, who frequently mocked Carney's predecessor, Justin Trudeau, by calling him "Governor Trudeau," a reference to Trump's stated desire to annex the country and turn it into a state. Carney has escaped the bluster, despite his unsparing summation of the situation and Canada's need to find new friends.

"Our old relationship, based on steadily increasing integration, is over," Carney told reporters Friday.

"My government will fight to get the best deal for Canada," he said. "In parallel, we will strengthen our relationships with reliable trading partners and allies," implying that Washington no longer fit that description.

"I am not pretending those discussions will be easy," Carney said of his upcoming meeting with Trump.

Carney will go into the conversation focused on sparing his country the worst of Trump's tariffs, which Canadians fear will devastate their economy. The car industry is bound tightly with the U.S. market, with Canadian factories deeply integrated into the U.S. assembly chain. Trump has vowed to reverse that at Canada's expense.

Canada is also the biggest foreign market for U.S. cars, giving it leverage if a trade war escalates.

Trump has lashed out at Canada's low defense spending, which is projected to reach 1.37 percent of its gross domestic product this year, well short of NATO pledges.

One area where the Canadian leader may seek to strike deals is critical minerals needed for high-tech production, where Washington has tried to reduce dependence on Chinese supplies. Canada has mineral deposits it could offer up to U.S. investors for development.

Neither side expects the initial encounter to delve deeply into the details of a negotiation. Trump and Carney have spoken twice since his election as prime

minister, but they don't have a deep relationship, said a senior White House official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss Trump's thinking.

Carney will host leaders of the Group of Seven major world economies in a mountain resort outside Calgary in mid-June, which would be a moment for the economic discussion to continue. Trump has not confirmed whether he will attend.

Even if neither side expects Tuesday's meetings to lead to an immediate deal, Carney still has a lot to lose from an Oval Office encounter. Should he be as tough in person with the U.S. leader as he was on the campaign trail, he could provoke Trump into a snarling response. If Trump targets him with mockery, he could face domestic consequences.

"He certainly presented himself in the election campaign as the Marvel comic hero Captain Canada, and so there are high expectations that he's going to defend Canadians' interests," said Hampson, the Canadian political expert.

White House advisers downplayed the prospect of the type of fireworks that came from the February visit with Zelensky, when Vice President JD Vance accused the Ukrainian leader of being disrespectful to Trump.

But there were warning signs that Carney would face a challenge. Heading into the meeting, White House officials said they expected Trump to pursue his effort to annex Canada, which they insist Trump views as a priority.

"The president is dead serious about the 51st state proposal," the anonymous White House official said. "He'd like to see it happen."

"I'm sure it will come up," the official added.