



Liberal leadership hopeful Mark Carney scrums with reporters outside his leadership campaign event at Queen Street Fare in Ottawa on Jan. 23, 2025. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

# Carney the intellectual has a populist touch

Mark Carney is an elitist with a common touch; the banker who knows the cost of groceries. He may be that rarest of politicians: a gifted leader whose appeal lies in being anti-political.

Douglas Roche

Opinion



EDMONTON—For the 50 years I've been in public life, I have looked for a political leader who can mix vision and values with a strong dose of pragmatism, and throw in a sense of humour on the side. I have found this person in Mark Carney who is now vying to become prime minister of Canada.

Carney has leapt out in front in the Liberal Party leadership race for a good reason: he has solidity—a quality one would not ascribe to Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre, whose resumé can be presented on a short piece of paper. Carney's former posts—governor of the Bank of Canada, governor of the Bank of England, UN special envoy on climate

action and finance—testify to his weightiness in the international arena; yet he carries his gravitas lightly.

His banter with Jon Stewart, the late-night U.S. TV comic, drew audience laughter when Carney responded to the host's "welcome to our land of paradise."

Carney shot back: "There was a border when I came here, Jon ... we're not moving in with you." With an air of innocence, he then declared: "I am an outsider." That line is truly funny.

Outsider in the Liberal race, Carney definitely is not. The central banker is used to conversing with elites in salons rather than responding to the clamour of the bourgeois. I wanted to see how he would handle himself in street politics, so I attended the launch of his leadership campaign in Edmonton on Jan. 16.

A lengthy crowd lined up to get into a nondescript community field house beside a rink where Carney had played hockey in his youth.

There was no dramatic, crowd-rousing introduction: Carney entered the room through a side door and began speaking, whereupon his TelePrompTer broke down. Carney, looking like the inept Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, gamely carried on. As *Global News* reported, he promised a change from "politics as usual" to rebuild the economy in a way that works better for average Canadians: "I'm here to ask for your support. I'm here to earn your trust to lead that fight."

When he finished his speech, the crowd surged around him,

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wanting to shake his hand, to get a word in his ear, to touch him. Without any histrionics, Carney—plain-spoken and looking humble, a quality almost unknown in politics—had won these Liberals to his side.

It was plain to see: Carney the intellectual has a populist touch. I was a bit startled to witness the author of *Value(s)*—a 608-page tome arguing that the world economy and society should be based not on market values but on human values—treated as a hero.

The intellectual who cares. The elitist with the common touch. The banker who knows the cost of groceries. Carney may be that rarest of politicians: a gifted leader whose appeal lies in being anti-political. The back-up goalie on the Harvard hockey team who advises the secretary-general of the UN on global survival.

The real Carney shows up in *Value(s)*, which he wrote during the pandemic when he couldn't travel. He lambastes free-market fundamentalism for its disregard of the human condition. The growing income inequality, unemployment in much of the world, systemic racism, global pandemic crises, and the existential threat of climate change all stem from a common crisis in values, he writes.

The deep social justice values that undergird the real Carney are cloaked in economic language. He writes and—so far in his campaign—speaks pragmatically. He thinks the theology of social justice, but talks the language of the boardroom.

I don't mean to suggest that Carney hides his strong Catholic

belief. He sits on the Steering Committee of the Council for Inclusive Capitalism launched at the Vatican in 2020. Organizations with \$10.5-trillion in assets under management, \$2.1-trillion of market value, and around 200 million workers in 163 countries are participating, "under the moral guidance of His Holiness Pope Francis," the Council said in a statement. Carney said he joined because the council wants to ensure "fairness across generations."

Carney has entered the Canadian political scene at the moment of a double crisis: the collapse of multilateral cooperation has turned the world into an arena of confrontation; the government of Canada, trying to cope with President Donald Trump's erratic threats of crippling tariffs, is in a weakened condition.

Somebody has got to pull Canada together to repel Trump's assault on our integrity, and make Canada's voice heard in the chaotic international forums. Is that person Carney? From what I can discern from his writings, his stature, his outreach, I think he is.

It seems that Carney may well win the leadership of the federal Liberal Party and thus become prime minister. But is it a poisoned chalice? Looking at the Conservative lead in the polls, it would seem the coming federal election is Poilievre's to lose. Doubtless, the Conservatives will try to paint Carney as an environmental zealot.

The public generally has yet to discover the real Mark Carney. When they do, they may detect a neophyte political figure who can take on Washington.

*Douglas Roche served as a Progressive Conservative member of Parliament from 1972-84. In 1980, he defeated the Liberal candidate Bob Carney, Mark's father. The second edition of Roche's book, Keep Hope Alive: Essays for a War-free World, containing a Postscript, "Hope in the Era of Trump" (Amazon), has just been published.*

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