OPINION

Is Carney coming for the soul and budget of Canadian foreign aid?



Prime Minister Mark Carney arrives for the Liberal caucus meeting in West Block on Sept. 19, 2026. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

There are many Canadians inside and outside government who believe in the principles of the ODA Accountability Act—and who will fight for it. The world is complicated and challenging enough. This is not a battle the prime minister needs.

Edward Jackson

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"We can't only be for ourselves," former ambassador Bob Rae said recently of Canada's foreign-aid policy. "We can't just join the festival of self-interest."

Prime Minister Mark Carney's government seems to have other ideas. His new security strategy pledges to: "Reorient Canada's international assistance to advance our national interests and values, and to build deeper relationships." Earlier this year, Global Affairs Canada had already committed to "recalibrate its international assistance to better align it with economic and security priorities."

This summer, Carney, along with other G7 leaders, signed on to a new approach to international cooperation driven by "mutually beneficial partnerships, that take into account our strategic interests and those of our partners." These donor countries want to use aid explicitly to open markets for their own companies.

Around the same time, Carney also eliminated the post of the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise, which had the mandate to investigate human rights and ethics violations by major corporations in the mining, petroleum, and garment sectors, but was hampered by its inability to compel companies to provide evidence or interested persons to give testimony. Civil society protested the decision and instead called for strengthening this ombud's function.

What could go wrong? Unchecked, egregious human rights abuses and environmental devastation have been too common among Canadian and other corporations in the extractive industries.

It would be a gratuitous, tawdry move to use Global Affairs Canada's already modest Official Development Assistance (ODA) and international assistance budget as an ATM for wealthy Canadian executives and investors. There are other tools and funds to torque trade and incentivize investment. The Carney team is smart and accomplished; they should know better.

It would also be illegal. Nearly 20 years ago, after intense lobbying by civil society and with solid parliamentary support, then-prime minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government passed the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act. The act specifies that: "Official development assistance may be provided only if the competent minister is of the opinion that it (a) contributes to poverty reduction; (b) takes into account the perspectives of the poor; and (c) is consistent with international human rights standards."

True, the act has no enforcement mechanism. But its proponents could prosecute the government in the court of public opinion for violating the act. If required, they could also mount a lawsuit whose coverage would be embarrassing to Carney and whose outcome could go either way.

There are two other factors. First, although developing-country governments certainly seek more trade, their needs for ODA partnerships are more complex. Nigeria, for example, a regional economic powerhouse, must address widespread poverty, endemic corruption, and the effects of a brutal insurgency by Boko Haram. By targeting its aid, Canada can and should assist in all those spheres.

Second, while Carney is currently riding high in the polls, his popularity will dissipate as his term proceeds, tariffs and other forces inflict more economic pain on Canadians, and Trumpism recedes. By governing from the centre-right with a pro-business/weak regulation approach, he has already alienated many citizens on the centre-left for his abandonment of environmental policies and his extreme militarization of the federal budget. His flouting of the ODA Act would deepen resentment among these voters, whom he will undoubtedly need to re-recruit to win the next election.

There is a better way. Drawing on research on Canada's aid and exports to 155 countries, Cooperation Canada (our leading NGO network) and Carleton University find that "international assistance can contribute to stronger economic relationships over time, but it is not a short-term or automatic export-promotion tool." Further: "Canada should protect poverty-focused and humanitarian assistance while exploring additional, targeted approaches that strengthen local productive capacity, respond to partner-country priorities and support more equitable, long-term economic partnerships."

Rae's take on the limits of an aid policy driven by self interest matters. He's the incoming chair of Canada's International Development Research Centre, a Crown corporation whose support of brilliant local researchers in the Global South enhances our nation's influence abroad, a benefit worth orders of magnitude beyond the Centre's own limited funding.

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