

The Empty Moralizing of Canada's Mark Carney

By James Kirchick

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney got a lot of attention for his speech last week at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He invoked an essay by the late Czech dissident (and later president) Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless." The essay was published in 1978 during the nadir of Czechoslovak communism. Havel tells the apocryphal story of a greengrocer who refuses to place a sign proclaiming "Workers of the world, unite!" in his shop window. The slogan is a lie whose forced invocation is meant to uphold a repressive system that is strengthened every time someone affirms it. By declining to endorse the mantra, Havel wrote, the greengrocer goes from "living within a lie" to "living within the truth."

In his speech, Mr. Carney likened the communism Havel fought, which mandated "the participation of ordinary people in rituals they privately know to be false," to the American-led "rules-based international order" that has governed the world for some 80 years. Though "American hegemony" offered some benefits—"open sea lanes, a stable financial

system, collective security and support for frameworks for resolving disputes"—it also required collective self-deception.

"We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false," Mr. Carney said, "that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient." Yet "we placed the sign in the window. We participated in the rituals."

Although he didn't name President Trump, it was clear whom Mr. Carney blamed for what he called the "rupture" in world order. Acting as the greengrocer in his analogy, Mr. Carney proclaimed that it is time for world leaders to follow his heroic example, take the proverbial signs out of their windows and speak truth to power.

The audience at Davos took up the call, offering Mr. Carney an almost unheard-of standing ovation. "Very important and very well put remarks by PM Mark Carney," enthused former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt. "It's time to take down the sign and speak up." Lionel Barber, a former editor of the Financial Times, the bible of the Davosies, tweeted that Mr. Carney's address was "the speech of a statesman." Mexican President

Claudia Sheinbaum said it was "very much in tune with the current times." A former premier of British Columbia said it was "the most important speech any Canadian Prime Minister has given in decades."

Even by that low bar, Mr. Carney's speech was muddled and incoherent. It was also oblivious to irony. Though Mr. Carney has positioned himself as the Western world's most outspoken Trump critic, he owes his job to the

He laments the decline of the world while cozying up to China and shirking responsibility for defense.

American president; it was thanks almost entirely to Mr. Trump's tariffs against Canadian exports and threats of annexation that Mr. Carney's Liberals overcame a 27% polling deficit to win last year's parliamentary election. There's also the incongruity of Mr. Carney: Before entering politics, he had a successful career in high finance and central banking, yet in his speech he disparaged the integrated

financial world where he spent decades as a "lie." Mr. Carney also engaged in hypocrisy by invoking Havel's denunciation of dictatorial communism while praising "new strategic partnerships with China and Qatar," the former an actual communist dictatorship.

The biggest problem was Mr. Carney's bungling of Havel's work. He lamented the rupture of the rules-based international order, yet he simultaneously analogized that order to Brezhnev-era Czechoslovak communism. Such a comparison is morally grotesque and objectively wrong. It's also illogical: Why should we mourn the downfall of such a system? Inappropriately invoking an overused parable might make Mr. Carney sound clever, but it shows a lack of deep thinking. That he allegedly wrote the address himself, as his aides have told the media, should be cause for concern among Canadians.

While Mr. Carney is correct that global order is breaking down, the collapse started long before Mr. Trump announced his campaign for the presidency. President Barack Obama's failure to enforce his own red line against Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical

weapons in 2013 paved the way for Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea the following year. President Joe Biden's disastrous withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021 sent a similar signal to Mr. Putin, who six months later attempted to conquer all of Ukraine.

The U.S. appeared weak in each case, but Canada hasn't exactly set the standard on strength. A longtime laggard on defense spending, it fails to spend even 2% of gross domestic product on defense, let alone the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's new goal of 5%.

A truly courageous leader—like Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who said that "Europe remains a beautiful but fragmented kaleidoscope of small and middle powers"—might have raised these uncomfortable points, both identifying others' weaknesses and acknowledging his country's own. But not Mr. Carney, who passes off conventional wisdom as bold truth-telling and mistakes empty moralizing for statesmanship.

Mr. Kirchick is author of "The End of Europe: Dictators, Demagogues, and the Coming Dark Age."