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Trump Targets Canada With Tariffs—and Trolling

By Vipal Monga in Toronto and Alex Leary in Washington

Canada and its prime minister, Justin Trudeau, have a Donald Trump problem.

The pair had an at-times rocky relationship during Trump's first term in the White House, and the president-elect couldn't resist getting in a dig during their recent impromptu meeting over dinner at Mar-a-Lago, his Florida estate.

Trudeau was complaining about the impact tariffs would have on Canada's economy, according to people at the dinner, when Trump interjected. If Trudeau didn't like it, he said, Canada could become America's 51st state.

According to a senior Canadian government official who was at the dinner, Trudeau and his team took the ribbing in stride, but they were conscious of the deeper message: that Trump, as always, is America first—and he didn't much care what happened to Canada's economy as a consequence.

The strained personal connection between the two men stands to complicate Canada's ability to navigate a second Trump term. The incoming president wants to renegotiate a free-trade deal between the two countries, and has said he would levy tariffs of 25% on imports of all goods from Mexico and Canada. Trump has also demanded that Canada invest more in its military and to secure its borders. *

Officials from both the U.S. and Canadian sides described the back and forth at Mar-a-Lago, earlier reported by Fox News, as joking. But Trump a few days later continued to troll Trudeau. He posted on social media an AI-generated image of himself standing on a mountain range next to a Canadian flag with the caption "Oh Canada!"

"Any good joke hits a little bit of a nerve, and certainly President Trump likes to hit a nerve," said Kirsten Hillman, Canada's ambassador to the U.S., in a television interview.

John Bolton, a national security adviser to Trump during his first presidency, said the relationship between the two men took a hit following a 2018 Group of Seven industrial nations summit hosted by Canada. After leaving the summit, en route to a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Singapore, Trump watched a press conference during which Trudeau criticized U.S. tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum and said Canada would retaliate.

"Canadians, we're polite, we're reasonable, but we also will not be pushed around," Trudeau said.

Incensed, Trump fired off a tweet from Air Force One, calling Trudeau "Very dishonest & weak."

"Whatever the relationship was before, Trudeau's press conference and Trump's tearing up the G-7 statement pretty much finished it," Bolton said. "They could be courteous to one another but there is no warmth to that relationship at all."

The 2018 G-7 summit has become a touchpoint in the leaders' relationship, as was the group's meeting the following year in France. The perceived attention then-first lady Melania Trump paid to the Canadian leader set off a wave of internet memes.

According to officials close to Trump, the president delights in prodding Trudeau. Canadian officials say the jabs and insults are typical of the Trumpian style, and they try not to react.

"As most of Trump's relationships tend to be, it was tempestuous," said Gerald Butts, vice chairman of the Eurasia Group consulting firm, and a former senior adviser to Trudeau who was also at the 2018 G-7 summit. He said Trump

has made the 51st-state joke before in meetings with Trudeau during the first term, and played down the idea that lingering resentment between the leaders will complicate their continuing relationship.

“It’s all water off a duck’s back,” Butts said. Other Canadian officials minimized the idea that there is lingering tension between the leaders.

The Mar-a-Lago dinner came together after Trump on Nov. 25 posted on his Truth Social platform that he would levy tariffs of 25% on imports of all goods from Mexico and Canada. Trudeau called Trump after the post and asked for a meeting, according to a U.S. official familiar with the events. Trump then invited the Canadian leader to dine with him at Mara- Lago.

Trump posted on Truth Social that it was a “very productive meeting” and said the leaders discussed topics including fentanyl, immigration and trade “that will require both countries to work together to address.” On illegal drugs, Trump said Trudeau “made a commitment to work with us to end this terrible devastation.” Trudeau told reporters that “it was an excellent conversation” but didn’t respond to a question about tariffs.

Trump continued his trolling of Trudeau this past week, mentioning the Canadian leader’s visit during a speech at the Patriot Awards on Fox Nation. “As you know, I spoke with Canada,” he said. “Justin came flying right in because we talked about 25% tariffs. That’s just the beginning.”

—Andrew Restuccia contributed to this article.

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