

OPINION

# Modern-day political gold: Mark Carney & Heated Rivalry

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Prime Minister Mark Carney poses for a photo on the red carpet with Hudson Williams, star of the TV series “Heated Rivalry” at the Prime Time screen and media industry conference gala in Ottawa, on Thursday, January 29, 2026. (Patrick Doyle/The Canadian Press)



The Prime Minister’s *Heated Rivalry* moment wasn’t just fun. It was gold in our current attention economy — a rare case of politics showing up where people actually are.

By now, you’d have to be on some type of retreat, in a medically-induced coma, or willfully blind to have missed the cultural phenomenon that is Heated Rivalry. The Canadian-made TV series has dominated both the streamers and social media since its November release. In a few numbers: within its first three weeks, Crave viewership increased by increased by 400 per cent.

Heated Rivalry is the driver of first-time viewers to HBO Max. One third of audience members have rewatched an episode, while 15 per cent have watched an episode five times or more. And across YouTube, Tiktok, Instagram, and Facebook, there have been more than dedicated videos uploaded between Nov. 15 and Jan. 12, averaging 80,000 views each.

The show’s a big deal, especially for its largely young, female, and LGBTQ audience — groups that politics usually struggle to reach.

Far from the politically extreme generation we commonly see portrayed, a lot of young people are just flat-out disengaged. In a Relay Strategies online poll of 2,376 18-34 year old Canadians conducted from November 11-26, 2025, we found that just 11 per cent of Canadians under 35 regularly read newspapers, and 10 per cent watch cable news. Nearly one in five young people actively try to avoid the news, while 36 per cent only consume the news passively.

What do they consume instead? Social media. However, only 24 per cent of young Canadians say their algorithms commonly feed them information about politics. The most pervasive type of content they receive is celebrity news and gossip (45 per cent). Appreciation of this gap is typically missing in political strategy.

We often treat politics as something sterile and rational, separate from the broader culture, but that couldn’t be further from the truth.

When doing “the leg thing” with Canada’s (the world’s?) newest superstar, Hudson Williams, Carney was able to get out of the world of politics and into the broader conversation. He hid the pill in the cheese – fed important political messaging to an infamously hard-to-reach group of voters.

The interaction reinforced Carney’s existing brand while adding new layers. He was elected in part by wrapping himself in the flag, positioning himself as the “elbows up” candidate who can deal with Trump’s economic turmoil while preserving Canadian identity. In this very Canadian show and its values, Carney reinforced his patriotism at a time when the American threat – politically, economically, and culturally – continues to loom large.

As I’ve written before, the *magic* of Carney’s brand comes from his humanity. He’s Business Carney, but he’s also the alter ego who pocketed a beer at a St Patty’s Day parade, bragged about his Spotify age, and made jokes about cabinet selections. Carney’s interaction with the Heated Rivalry story joins this series of humanizing events.

It’s politically helpful that in this case, the audience is huge and bordering on evangelical. In a January poll, Relay found that nearly three-quarters of those who have watched Heated Rivalry hope the show has a meaningful impact on LGBTQ acceptance in sports, whether by encouraging more queer athletes to come out or by making sports culture feel more welcoming.

That cultural pride spills outward. Seven in ten viewers say the show makes them proud to be Canadian, and 66 per cent believe it’s a good use of taxpayers’ money. And despite the many jokes about this being the most hockey-less hockey show imaginable, 64 per cent of viewers say it *did* make them more interested in hockey.

In interacting with the show in a joyful and respectful way, Carney positioned himself alongside these positive qualities, to be seen as someone who is inclusive, open, and proud. As part of the Canada that we are when we’re at our best.

This event shows the new reality of political communications. In our fractured media market, monocultural moments are increasingly rare. Instead, politicians are on a mission to reach new audiences and collect political capital in bits and pieces. In this case, Carney borrowed not just an audience, but warmth, joy, and cultural fluency. It’s an event that not only broke through but will be remembered.

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